

SILENCE THE STIGMA

Aurora Youth Council

and

NAMI DuPage

2024

High School

Poetry & Essay Contest

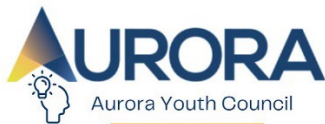


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Note from Sarah Ramos

Aurora Youth Council

Youth mental health has been on the decline over the past decade, as young people have grappled with extreme environmental and societal changes. In 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for young people between ages 10-24¹. According to the American Psychological Association, feelings of sadness and hopelessness increased by roughly 40% among young people in the 10 years leading up to the COVID pandemic². The pandemic only worsened mental health conditions, with a CDC report showing that 37% of high school students reported regular mental health struggles at that time³. Not only did the pandemic exacerbate challenges that youth were already facing, but it disproportionately impacted marginalized communities who were experiencing higher rates of poverty, poverty, discrimination, violence, trauma, dislocation, and disenfranchisement.⁴

While mental health services are starting to become more accepted and accessible, many youth still don't utilize these resources. This is due to a variety of factors, including economic inequality, lack of home support, and misconceptions about the nature of mental health services. However, one of the most prevalent issues preventing youth from receiving education and treatment about mental health topics is the stigma that surrounds them. A study reviewing barriers to adolescents seeking and accessing professional help for mental health found that the most common reasons for not seeking mental health services included: 1) Limited mental health knowledge and broader perceptions of health seeking, and 2) Societal factors of perceived social stigma and embarrassment.⁵

In light of the rising youth mental health crisis and the factors found to be discouraging youth to seek professional help, NAMI DuPage and the Aurora Youth Council formed a partnership to spread mental health awareness in Aurora. We created a forum for youth to share their stories through a writing contest called "Silence the Stigma." We believe that cultivating a safe space for youth to be open and honest about mental health issues will promote positive and productive discussion around mental wellness. By relating similar experiences with each other, young people will begin to feel less alone in

their mental health journey and more connected with their Aurora community. We hope that this contest will serve to educate our community on how to better support youth mental health.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Youth Data 2023,” Youth Data 2023 | Mental Health America, 2023, <https://mhanational.org/issues/2023/mental-health-america-youth-data>.

² Clayton, Susan, Christie Manning, Alison Nicole Hill, and Meighan Speiser. “Mental Health and Our Changing Climate Children and Youth Report 2023.” Mental Health Youth Report 2023, 2023. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/10/mental-health-youth-report-2023.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ 1. Vivek H. Murthy, “The Mental Health of Minority and Marginalized Young People: An Opportunity for Action,” Public Health Reports, June 8, 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00333549221102390>

⁵ “Why Do Children and Adolescents (Not) Seek and Access Professional Help for Their Mental Health Problems? A Systematic Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies,” National Library of Medicine, January 21, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7932953/>.



For more on NAMI DuPage Youth Department, workshops, our teen support group, or to sign up for the Youth Newsletter:



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Blame

by Torin Schroeder – Illinois Math and Science Academy

1st Place

Upon the 17th year (From the perspective of my peers) Cicada ShriII

On the withered branches

Of a weeping will-

-ow

branch falls

snaps in silence

and again

Cicada shriII

The Son (What my parents will never hear)

As a man
I am told
to stay strong
and never fold,

however, presently,

I wish to weep,
but the tears won't come.
So I stare unto
the sun

When will you all be satisfied? (A request from those who judge me)

Once Heaven and Hell decide,
Will you all be satisfied?
To cross all t's,
and dot my i's

To confidently claim my life was a lie, or will someone up
there lose their mind and cast my soul

into a gray divide?

Just so I may march my way to hell. Then will you
all be satisfied?
That I lived the lie that I

Mirror (From my own perspective)

Water splashes
Heart begins it's race
I raise my head to face
And splash back in haste

My fist landed upon the jaw
A blow is traded back
In my enemy I saw
A hairline crack

Engulfed in hate
Which, only,
they
relate

A door opens
and
Water dribbles from
A bloodied mirror
As light pours in
Upon the tile
Still dim
But brightest since a while

Given light,
I hand
Myself a
nearly withered
Lily of the Nile

Death Will Find Me Sometime, But It Won't Be Today

by Allison Vogel - Oswego High School East

2nd Place

Death will find me sometime,

But it won't be on this day.

The folding knife in my nightstand drawer calls to me,

The sleek metal edge is as appealing as anything

Following the bout of anger thrust toward me.

I run the blade across my skin,

But the canvas hardly tears.

Multiple swipes of the knife finally allow the scarlet to bloom,

A tense breath escapes me.

And while Death will find me sometime,

It won't be this day.

Red emerges from the valley of tissue,

More steadily now.

Tears mingle with the blood onto my palm,

The palate is a space for the fluids to meet.

Sorrow dances with my fury,

Mild pain is the only reprieve.

But while Death will find me sometime,

It won't be this day.

Was It Worth It?

Yisra Zeki - Oswego East High School
3rd Place

No one goes out
And criticizes the stars
For not shining as bright as the day before

No one decides to go stargazing
And looks at them in disgust
As they say that the stars look ugly
Or that they suck

But people would walk past me
As they screamed “yuck”

I took matters into my own hands
And eventually, the dizzy spells began to kick in
Food was always running around my mind
But I was told I’d dropped a few pounds
Is it worth it?

The constant phrase
“You’ll be loved if you just have a lower weight”
Engraved in my mind
It was all that defined my life

I’d suck in when I was out
But when left alone
I’d examine every part of my body
Deciding which ones I wished I could carve out

I wanted to keep losing
Until I’d finally be amusing
Someone worthy of love
And not just because of the body
Which for I was killing myself to achieve
But was it worth it?

The “you’re beautiful” that would come out of boys mouths
But only when they wanted a glimpse
Of the hips which I had spent so much time degrading

The going through multiple packs of gum
That would take my mind off of the hunger I felt
The diet cokes for dinner
And dumping all the meals
Just so I could be thinner

My mom would tell me I'm the prettiest
I'd look in the mirror
Trying to believe the promise
But all I could see
Were the ways in which she was being dishonest

I wished my hands would have known other feelings
Like the touch of another
But all they knew
Was the feeling of the back of my throat

Yet, it was my favorite part of the day
Running the shower and blasting my favorite song
As I'd sit on the rug and lift the toilet seat
Getting rid of any of the treats
That sat in my stomach

"How did you lose so much weight??"
People would constantly debate
But they'd fail to see the hurt in my face
As I promised them
The last thing they'd want is to be condemned
To this life of hate

Every night was a repeat
Going onto the anorexia inspiration pages
Having more exchanges
With people who were like me
Encouraging each other that it was guaranteed
We could lose more

It wasn't until I was admitted
That I'd realized I'd restricted myself
Of living a life without the worries
That shouldn't be felt until your thirties

It wasn't until then
That people cared
Or were truly scared
To lose me

I have never criticized the stars
Because they didn't shine as bright as the day before
Or because "they're not trying hard enough"
To shine as bright as the stars around them

So why was I criticizing my body
Comparing it to the girls around me
For a love that would be fake anyways?
Wasn't worth it.

Mindset Change

by Alicia Mathew - Metea Valley High School

4th Place

Is there anything you feel? ~~feel~~-anything Or

a pain growing numb? ~~pain~~ growing You're

doomed, says I; ~~doomed~~ I "There's so

much you don't know." ~~no~~ know Find peace

in nothing; ~~nothing~~ peace "There's more out

there." ~~out~~-more

I'd rather see stars, ~~stars~~. See



Silent Scream

by Gloria Ramos - Batavia High School

1st Place

After pressing them into my stomach, I paused, took the blades and chucked it across the kitchen. The scissors flew across the room landing in the filthy pile of dishes. A crash, and the dirty plastic bowl shattered, its blood-red pieces strewn across the kitchen counter. The metal blades of the supposed “freedom” lay there silently among the dirty pile of dishes, mocking me as I screamed and wailed. I dropped onto my knees, onto the solid, frigid, dark-wood floor.

Black swirls and scribbles filled my brain. The aroma of decaying fruits that sat upon the jet-black microwave took over the kitchen. The jagged ceiling bared its sharp fangs at me. The first of March’s winter winds crept up behind me and suffocated me, left me stranded in the confines of my dark notions. I couldn’t breathe. It stole whatever saliva was left in my mouth and replaced it with the salty taste of tears.

As the strangely dark feeling of emptiness made its way through my body, the sharp pains from the scissors lingered in the center of my stomach. I felt the crumbs of food we never swept up piercing into my palms and fingertips. When I looked around all I saw was the paint-chipped door that had been battered for years, the handle that had lost its luster, and the scratched up walls that held such joyous memories of my siblings and I running around playing games. *How could such a happy place witness my suffering and stand by, letting me destroy myself?*

Gazing at the red broken bowl my cries grew and a pool of tears swallowed me whole. I swirled and swirled around in the whirlpool of helplessness. It was so loud. The thoughts, my screams, the infuriated cars out in the busy streets honking and blaring their horns.

The floor was as cold as death itself as I sat there releasing my demons, letting my dark emotions pour out of me. *If only I could leave, if only I could stop this pain, if only, if only, if only...* In the dim kitchen light, I stared at the blurred reflection on the refrigerator and saw the face of failure.

Navigating Mental Illness in Teens

By Jillian Cameron - Waubonsie Valley High School

2nd Place

Seven years ago, I was diagnosed with OCD, and since then, I've dealt with plenty of ups and downs regarding my mental health. Something I've noticed in the pattern of recovery is that I always get significantly worse before I get better. In fact, I've noticed that I have clear signs that I'm getting worse again before experiencing episodes, periods in which I cannot function on my own anymore. The problem, however, is that I've never been encouraged to seek professional help until then.

I find it interesting how, when asked, four out of six of my friends (including me) had said they'd experienced symptoms of depression at some point in their life. However, of this group, only I had ever gone to therapy. Upon further investigation, it became very clear to me why. My friends' struggles never became debilitating. Yes, their efficiency and mood decreased alarmingly, but they were still able to get through daily life without a significant outward change or cause for action. If their performance was up to their standards, why should they seek help?

There are plenty of factors that play a role in mental illness and how it develops. Unfortunately, it's very easy for parents or friends not to notice that something's wrong until you speak up. This is because it's internal, making it much easier to store away until it's unbearable. For my friends, they never got to the point where they couldn't handle their feelings on their own. Thankfully, they've recovered, but this is sadly not always the case.

A large part of the reason my friends never sought help when they were struggling was because they felt unable to. Some of their concerns were that their parents might overreact or not understand what they were feeling, so they felt it better to just handle it on their own. To any parent, a simple analogy of mine is this: If someone breaks their arm but can still function entirely without it, that doesn't mean their arm isn't broken. They wouldn't be written off as whiny or over dramatic because they don't need two

arms. They would be treated because their arm is still broken, and getting it fixed would greatly improve their quality of life.

Sometimes, it isn't necessary to seek professional help for your mental health. However, wanting to, necessary or not, is never a bad thing. Therapy is often viewed in a negative light because it seems intimidating. It makes people feel like there's something wrong with them if they go, or that they don't have enough reason to, although this is far from true.

Therapy is not as black and white as it appears from a surface level- there are many different types to choose from for different needs. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is used to help people learn to manage their thoughts or feelings and learn problem-solving skills. While many people who have gone to CBT have a diagnosis, it can be just as effective for people looking for ways to manage stress in everyday life.

Distressingly, therapy can be costly and inaccessible. If you were interested in therapy for your child but weren't sure where to begin, I would suggest looking into peer groups in order to create a safe, supportive environment for them. NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) offers classes and support groups for people to connect with others going through similar experiences. While mental health can be a difficult topic to bring up at home, it's important to make sure your children know that they can talk about it if they need to. It's impossible to alleviate all the stress that these topics can cause, but initially removing the idea that it is or should be a taboo subject will relieve pressure and likely increase trust.

You can never fully know what's going on in a teen's life. With patience, trust, and respect, however, you can leave a positive impression on them for their future. Being an understanding parent will ultimately lead to being a role model for your children, and creating a healthy home for them to grow up in.

Making the Choice

by James Conley - Oswego East High School

3rd Place

My first impactful experience with mental health care marked a distinguishable section of my life. I was 11 at the time and had recently opened up with my therapist about struggling with suicidal ideation. I had experienced the thoughts for a while but feared the consequences and judgement for struggling, especially as a male. She urged my parents and I that I should get more help by receiving local outpatient treatment. I ended up spending my entire summer before sixth grade in outpatient and inpatient mental health facilities.

During the start of my time at the outpatient clinic, I talked about realizing that I was LGBT. I was struggling with that fact, not because I had shame, but because I had no one I could talk to about it. I barely had any friends at school—socially outcasted around the same time; I couldn't talk to my parents about it—I was convinced that they wouldn't understand; and there were no other adults, other than the clinical staff, whom I could go to for support. The therapists then gave me an ultimatum: I either tell my parents myself or they would.

I can remember that moment as if I was living it right now, when they forced me to come out to my parents. I remember how uncomfortable I felt, how nervous I was, how I was so convinced that they were going to react horribly; I can even remember the stillness in the room after telling them. My parents' reaction was nearly as bad as I expected. Repeatedly they'd say that "we'll adjust" and "we're ok with it," but there was an evident change in our house.

The day after that talk, I got into an argument with my mother about it and that was too overwhelming. I spiraled.

That day, that day I remember like no other.

That day was the first time I attempted. The fight pushed me off the edge. I didn't succeed, so I thought I should act like nothing serious had happened, yet it became so concerning to me that I ended up

telling the therapists about it. The first, and almost only, question they had was if I would attempt again after I got home. I answered them honestly and said that it was likely. That's when I went to the inpatient center.

The shift was very unwelcome to me. It felt like I had lost all of my freedom. First I couldn't choose when I came out to my family; then, I couldn't leave the hospital; and then, I couldn't use seemingly harmless things that we barely notice, choices we take for granted. I liked drawing but I wasn't allowed to even use an eraser; I couldn't take long showers; I couldn't sit with the people I wanted to at lunch; I could barely eat as I wished: the list seemed endless. Although we were told to make more friends, we were not allowed to talk to anyone that we met there after we left. During meals, they required us to sit by gender so I couldn't even sit with anyone I talked to, because they were all women. I ended up sitting alone. I felt so conflicted; the place felt like a prison, but I preferred being there compared to my house. I felt so alone and hopeless, yet more at home than my actual home. I felt silenced and that I couldn't be honest about anything. It was like the hospital was a reminder that no matter what I do, it would never make anything better and wouldn't make any difference.

After nearly a week, a week that felt longer than any other, I got to leave the inpatient hospital and resumed outpatient treatment. I left feeling changed but to a discouraged demeanor. My eyes were seeing life out of a clouded lens. After a lot of work, many years of work, it's gotten better—easier to deal with—but still I sometimes get reminded of those bitter memories and reflect on them. That episode made me more cautious when getting help and speaking of my problems. That experience changed who I am.

You'll Find Me Here

by Alicia Mathew - Metea Valley High School

4th Place

“You’ll find me here” is a phrase I’ve heard all too often. It never used to impact me like it does now, but that’s because I heard it in passing; someone was telling me where I could find them after school, my parents were telling me where they were parking while I was at the store, or I was letting someone know where our meet-up spot was. After a while, “You’ll find me here” was a phrase that quickly made me feel off balance and clammy. I would be transported back to that day, and the many days after that, where close friends of mine would be saying their final goodbyes way too soon.

People don’t acknowledge the ripple effect of the youth mental health crisis, and I wish that something as important as this was given the attention it required. Seeing my friends hurting, knowing that I couldn’t do anything about it, knowing that I would blame myself for the rest of my life if something happened to them, changed the way I lived. It harmed my mental health. It changed me.

According to the Suicide and Crisis center, there are approximately 12 youth suicides each day. Every single day, the friends, families, teachers, and communities of those students are affected, and, not to mention, the countless loved ones of youth who are struggling with their mental health in other ways. Many of these students don’t have access to support, and many of their friends who are supporting them have no idea how to properly assist in that type of situation without sacrificing their mental health. In short, our youth who are having difficulties with their mental health need trained peers and adults to support them.

One of the solutions to this pressing problem is widespread QPR training. I, personally, believe that QPR training should be provided in all schools across our area and the nation. This is vital for both youth and parents to help their peers and children get the support and help they need while adequately balancing the mental health of the person providing support.

Another route that we, as a community, can take is the creation of an anonymous support network for youth who are worried about their peers. Many of us know that we can talk to our teachers or guidance counselors, but we may be hesitant to have open conversations with them due to personal relationships or comfort levels. I believe that having something like an anonymous wellness check line for administrators and school guidance officials to check in on students would help alleviate the stress of both students who are helping a peer through a mental health crisis and youth who are going through a mental health crisis.

I hope to, one day, see the phrase “You’ll find me here” as what it is - just a phrase. I hope, with widespread QPR training and support from our local administration, that this dream comes true. Finally, since this is crucial to aiding the mental health crisis, I hope that fostering mental health for both those who are struggling and those who are offering support becomes a priority in our community and in our nation.

Ending the Silence

by Amaal Khan - Waubonsie Valley High School

4th Place

Confusion, Sweat, Tears, Panic. Hundreds of emotions all at once. My head spinning, my heart racing. These were the feelings that consumed me in my first panic attack. It was 2020, Covid took over my life. The same mindless routine every day, signing onto my computer, doing my assignments, and going to sleep. Yet somehow, my anxiety was at an all-time high. Being 12 at the time, I had little knowledge of mental health. When I would have these breakdowns, which I would later find out were panic attacks, I questioned if there was something wrong with me. Why couldn't I breathe? Why did this only happen to me? What was wrong with me?

2020 was a rough time for people all around the world. People were losing their families to Covid-19, although I did not relate to them. I thought, why was I feeling so anxious if I had not even lost anyone to Covid? But it wasn't the science, death rate, or sickness of Covid that was affecting me. It was how it affected my family and the atmosphere of my home.

My parents fought frequently, and I often felt like it was my fault. I was often blamed for things that weren't my fault which led to me always trying to please others around me. One example, my best friend. We were on call, all day, every day. She became the only person I truly cared about. I spent my days, nights, and every moment in between talking to her. However, in this process, my dependence on her grew. In fear of losing her and being stuck with no one else, I started going to great lengths to please her. Trying to fit in things that didn't work with my time, angering my parents for always being on the phone with her, not trying to make any new friends. This process went on from October of 2020 to April of 2021. After 5 long months, it had drained me. I felt depressed. My efforts of pleasing her usually had opposite effects and had us fighting a

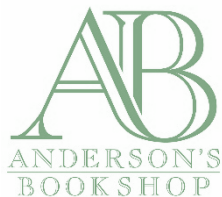
lot of the time. For me, if our friendship was gone, a chunk of my life would have been lost. I would blame myself for every argument we had and spiral into panic attacks during our fights. The amount of them was increasing, and I couldn't keep it to myself.

I finally reached out to my parents about therapy in the summer of 2021. However, due to their South Asian background and stigma regarding mental health, they didn't really believe too much in it. They thought that anxiety was something that could easily be pushed down. However, they didn't realize how my anxiety would consume me, make me tremble, make me unable to think. But, as time went on and I started my 8th grade year, I realized that I would have to try and push it down on my own. I started becoming self-aware when my anxiety would spike and developed my own methods to help push it down.

My freshman year, I assumed that my anxiety was just going to be a part of me. When I saw a posted flier of the Psychology Club at my school, something in me wanted to attend. I was excited, not just because of my interest in psychology, but because I was ready to build a community. I attended every meeting as a freshman and built a small community around me.

Now, I am a sophomore. I am almost 16. I am the treasurer of the Psychology Club at my high school. It is my goal to make sure that no one ever feels as alone as I did at the age of 12. I aspire to build a strong, tight knit community at my school, with the help of NAMI on Campus. Mental health is real. Never be afraid to reach out. Silence the stigma.

Thank You



Anderson's Bookshop for their generous donations to the first prize winners

The City of Aurora



Aurora Area High Schools

- Batavia High School
- Illinois Math and Science Academy
- Metea Valley High School
- Oswego High School
- Oswego East High School
- Waubonsie Valley High School

The students in Aurora Youth Council – especially Sarah Ramos, without whom this contest would not have happened.



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