

Brain Battle

Mental health of students creates serious concern for administration

Landon Hudson / Editor in Chief

It's the middle of December. The teacher leans back in his chair, holding his Government class list. His finger scans the row of alphabetized students. The room goes quiet, heartbeats vibrate in ears, people hold their breath hoping to not be called on.

His lips form a name, audible sighs are released. A shy girl from the back of the class meekly stands. From across the room, her hands are shaking and her face turns pale. She swallows and walks to the SmartBoard.

Silence has never been so loud.

The victim of random selection nervously speaks to her class mixed with upper and underclassmen alike. The class hears her stutter, they see her fidgeting, they can practically feel her clammy hands.

But they don't know about her doctor's note for clinically diagnosed anxiety disorder.

They don't watch her take her prescribed medication. To many, daily activities such as these may be stress free. But for those battling anxiety, everyday routines can be a mental war that often can't be conquered.

An anxiety disorder is a common form of a mental illness, yet stands on a long list of mental conditions.

Mental disorders, also known as mental illnesses, include a wide range of symptoms and conditions that affect how one thinks, feels and behaves. They typically make it difficult for someone to function properly at either home, school or work.

GHHS has seen more students dealing with these issues recently, losing three students battling depression to suicide in the past 11 months.

The school has developed a mental health initiative to educate students and staff on disorders but also on strategies to help those who are suffering, for more on this check out page eight. School social worker Emily Berry has been working closely with the program and personally with struggling individuals.

"We have seen a significant increase in students dealing with mental health issues and so it's a priority, we want to help our students and we feel you guys are asking for that education and asking for that help," Berry said. "The administration is listening and realizing it's important."

The campaign will begin this semester with an abbreviated version of the lessons all grade levels will receive next year.

Mental health issues are not unique to Grand Haven.

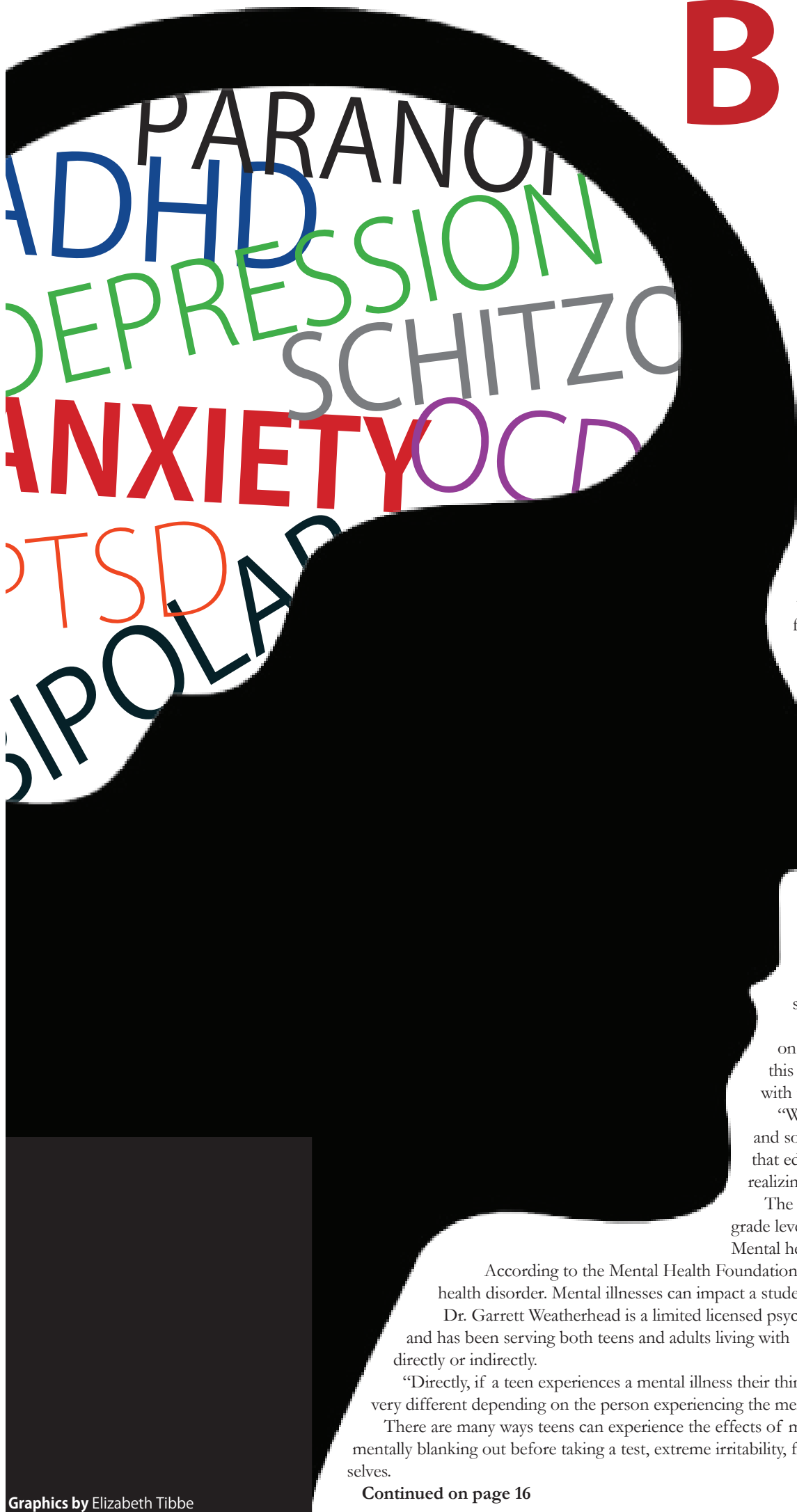
According to the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, one in five children, ages 13-18 have or will develop a mental health disorder. Mental illnesses can impact a student's education, relationships, transition to adulthood and health habits.

Dr. Garrett Weatherhead is a limited licensed psychologist who works with Integrative Health Consultants in Wyoming, Michigan and has been serving both teens and adults living with mental disorders. According to Weatherhead, mental illnesses can impact teens directly or indirectly.

"Directly, if a teen experiences a mental illness their thinking, emotions or behavior may be impacted," Weatherhead said. "This can look very different depending on the person experiencing the mental illness and the support that they have around them."

There are many ways teens can experience the effects of mental illnesses, including but not limited to low motivation with schoolwork, mentally blanking out before taking a test, extreme irritability, fear of going to school or social events and wanting to physically harm themselves.

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Students can also become indirectly impacted by mental disorders if a family member or close friend is dealing with one themselves.

“Depending on one’s relationship with someone, the greater the impact that a mental illness might have,” Weatherhead said.

According to Weatherhead, the Diathesis-Stress model is an accepted way of showing how mental health disorders are triggered. By combining a person’s biological predisposition for mental illnesses and their environment, psychologists can determine how likely a patient is to deal with a mental illness.

Environmental influences can also trigger mental disorders. Someone facing stress caused by trauma, school pressure, divorce or abuse may be more likely to develop a condition. Using drugs such as alcohol or tobacco can cause a chemical imbalance in the brain, leading to mental disorders as well.

Kandice Sloop, the Program Coordinator for the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, believes that teenagers are under more stress today than previous generations.

“From my experience in mental health, I have seen more stress, pressure and expectations put on adolescents,” Sloop said. “I also think the advancement of social media has played a factor. Nowadays you are able to stay connected with each other 24/7.”

Berry also emphasizes how much social media may be impacting adolescents’ mental health. “Pressures of society are really hard,” Berry said. “Social media plays a big role. Social media websites can be a really good thing but it can also be a slippery slope, I see that it’s really hard for some students. I think it’s a risk factor.”

Senior Kate Rutherford shared that it took her awhile to overcome the fatuation with social media attention. She now recognizes the pros and cons that come with the sites.

“Ideally I think social media should be less emphasized,” Rutherford said. “It can be a super great thing and I’m thankful for some opportunities it has given me. But it provides an additional outlet for bullying and stress that can easily impact mental health. Girls compare themselves to other girls all the time which definitely has a negative impact on body image.”

This can be the gateway to illnesses such as depression or eating disorders, common diagnoses for teens.

Depression starts with a significant change in mood that lasts at least two weeks. Those who deal with the disorder often report feelings of lengthened sadness, loss of interest in activities they usually enjoy, low self-esteem and thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in people ages 10-24 according to the national alliance on mental illness (NAMI).

Anxiety disorders, including generalized and social, are also common in teens, eight percent of youth face anxiety according to NAMI.

Generalized anxiety consists of uncontrollable, excessive worriedness. Often, this can include having a hard time relaxing, difficulty concentrating and insomnia. The anxiety can be so severe it impacts academic success. Social anxiety is simply feeling anxious about social situations, possibly causing the person to avoid interactions.

“A general indicator that someone might be struggling with a mental illness is that they are acting differently than they normally do,” Weatherhead said.

Weatherhead stresses the importance of talking to trusted adults or professionals if anyone you know or yourself are experiencing any of the mentioned conditions. Opening up to others often helps treat the problem. It is important to listen and show support to those who come to you with issues they might be facing.

“Many teens and adults keep mental illness to themselves which can give it more power,” Weatherhead said. “Talk to anyone who will listen. Many mental illnesses can be treated relatively quickly with the help of others, especially professionals, but you can’t receive help if no one knows you’re hurting.”

Mental health issues have developed a stigma, often implying that those who are battling a disorder may be ‘crazy’ or ‘looking for attention’. These phrases only make it worse for those suffering, and pose a barrier for them to receive help.

“Essentially, mental health stigma is the idea that seeking treatment for mental health difficulties sets you apart from others and is a sign that you are weak or defective,” Weatherhead said. “The truth is mental illness and seeking help for mental illness is common and normal.”

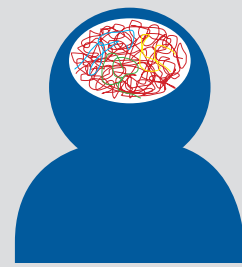
Berry strongly encourages people to ignore the stigma and hopes one day it disappears.

“My goal would be that the stigma that often accompanies the discussion of issues related to mental health would be reduced through education and more understanding,” Berry said. “I think we are getting there, but we have a long ways to go.”

To get rid of the reputation and make sure individuals get the help they need, Sloop recommends that people notice, invite, challenge and empower themselves and their peers.

“Notice signs of depression and other changes in someone’s behavior,” Sloop said. “Invite yourself to initiate a conversation. Challenge the stigma, communicate important resources. Empower yourself with the knowledge that you can have an effect on how someone thinks, acts and feels.”

Most common mental health illnesses among high school and college students



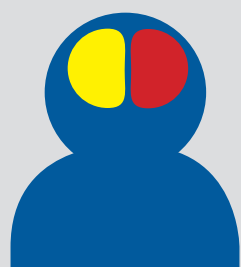
Anxiety Disorders

Characterized by excessive and abnormal fear, worry and anxiety



Eating Disorders

Obsessive concern with weight and disruptive eating disorders



Mood Disorder

Disorders such as bipolar characterized by changes in mood



Personality Disorders

Maladaptive pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that cause detriments to relationships



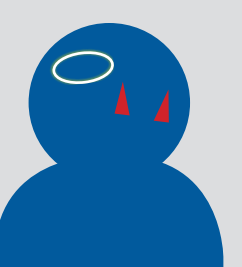
Sleep wake Disorders

An interruption in sleep patterns with a negative impact on physical and mental health



Substance Disorders

Dependence and abuse of substances such as drugs or alcohol



Impulse control Disorders

Unable to resist urges, or impulses, to perform acts that could be harmful

Graphics by Elizabeth Tibbe

Information gathered from American Psychological Association



Jonas Quirin THE BUCS' BLADE

Dried blood remains on the razor blade tucked between her mattress and spring box while the skin struggles to heal under the stress of bracelets piled on her wrist. His shorts hide intentional burn marks and his folded up Swiss Army knife keeps a secret in his pocket. She blames herself for the tension and distress in her home, punishing herself with the pain. He reroutes his emotional turmoil of being bullied for a lack of athleticism with a searing utility tool. They silently struggle with self harm along with the other 20 percent of high school students who admit to it.

“It is not the same as being suicidal, nor is it manipulative or attention-getting behavior,” Psychologist

Cynthia Rodriguez PhD said. “Instead, it is a form of coping with psychological distress in the same manner that people use other unhealthy ways to cope: overeating, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or marijuana, or developing an eating disorder”

Self harm is classified as a kind of mental health disorder however some psychologists may refer to it as a habit, a learnable behavior. Those who commit self harm inflict immediate damage to themselves such as cutting, burning or scratching without intending to die. In most cases it is done to cope with confusing or overwhelming emotions, numb oneself or the opposite, feel something in place of emptiness or detachment. The problem can range from mild and occasional to very severe, frequent and even chronic.

“Unfortunately, the sense of relief is only temporary, problems are not solved, and the use of self-injury as a coping strategy can be addictive” Rodriguez said.

Experts believe that most mental health problems, including self harm, have multiple causes possibly even including a genetic predisposition. With school being such a major part in adolescent life it is also a source of stress and pressure. Many

high schoolers report feeling fatigued, anxious, stressed and ‘not good enough’. These feelings, in conjunction with individual life experiences and family history increase student’s susceptibility to developing self harming tendencies.

“It started over a boy, stupid I know but it happened” senior Kezie Pastor said “Then it just evolved into other reasons, body image, grades and friends”

Rodriguez believes that schools are aware of and trying to address the problem with their limited ability but there are key points they should be doing that not all are.

“School systems are not designed to intervene extensively, and are under tremendous pressure to build competitive academic and athletic programs,” Rodriguez said “School counseling centers report that they are increasingly overwhelmed with the mental health needs of their students. Helpful actions schools can take include cultivating a supportive school environment, addressing bullying, keeping academic pressure from becoming excessive, and making prompt referrals to mental health professionals in the community.”

While the school has started a campaign for overall mental health, students must do their best to take their well being into their own hands and get help despite how hard it may be.

“I didn’t know what I was doing till I was already addicted to it. It only takes one time and it is all over. It is an addiction and it is so hard to stop,” Pastor said. “Find someone you trust and talk to them. It will help you through the hardest times. Not talking about it and keeping it to yourself is only hurting you more.”

Adolescent psychologist Gloria Taggett, Ph.D

warn that physical health is also a factor in mental health. “It is crucial to get adequate sleep, to eat well and become more physically active,” Taggett said. “Having said that, stay away from mood altering chemicals -that’s a short-cut that will only make it harder to find more adaptive ways of managing your moods and habits.”

Many forms of self harm therapy include finding something to reroute the habit such as drawing, sewing, photography or performing arts. This allows adolescents to develop new skills and channel their emotions into something that is no longer harmful to them. Along with the therapy comes developing a support system of those who care about you or providing services to others that need help.

“It is always helpful to find someone you can help, be of service, support a cause, volunteer,” Taggett said.”Everyone has pain & everyone suffers. You’re not alone.”

That girl keeps her blade and it’s consequences hidden. He doesn’t wear shorts and will never lend out his pocket knife. They pass each other every day in the hall but still go home feeling alone. Don’t let them be alone.

“Find someone you trust and talk to them. It will help you through the hardest times. Not talking about it and keeping it to yourself is only hurting you more”

Kenzie Pastor

