

Incorporating Mental Health issues into Boy Scouting

Thoughts for BSA National Health & Safety Committee

W. Walter Menninger, M.D. May 2009

While scouting incorporates a good many aspects of physical health maintenance and injury/crisis management in its advancement process, aspects of mental health are not. Yet there are a number of aspects of mental health and illness that could be articulated and incorporated in the scouting education and advancement program.

A colleague talked about this matter with his nephew, who was an active scout. When asked about a scouting program to assess competencies in mental health, that scout suggested it would be a “great idea” to include this in the content of a merit badge. Indeed, he thought that Boy Scouts should be asked to have the following mental health competencies:

1. Have the ability to recognize signs of good and poor mental health in oneself and others
2. Know strategies for helping others with mental health problems
3. Be able to provide first aid for acute stress (“psychological first aid”)
4. Be familiar with different types of mental disorder
5. Recognize drug and alcohol abuse and their complications

This scout agreed that knowledge of drug and alcohol abuse and prevention are important, but he thought that material presently is covered fairly well. He suggested that material about mental health could be learned through a combination of reading and meetings with a mental health professional. He thinks that competency could be demonstrated through the combination of a written test and discussion or demonstration (i.e. role playing).

To elaborate on the above suggested competencies:

#1 – The **Criteria for Emotional Maturity**, as articulated by Dr. William C. Menninger (long-time member of the BSA National Executive Board, Scoutmaster and Eagle Scout):

Having the ability to deal constructively with reality

Having the capacity to adapt to change

Having a relative freedom from symptoms that are produced by tensions and anxieties

Having the capacity to find more satisfaction in giving than receiving

Having the capacity to relate to other people in a consistent manner with mutual satisfaction and helpfulness

Having the capacity to sublimate, to direct one’s instinctive hostile energy into creative and constructive outlets

Having the capacity to love

Incorporating Mental Health issues into Boy Scouting

Thoughts for BSA National Health & Safety Committee

W. Walter Menninger, M.D. May 2009

#2 and #3 – Gain some appreciation for the concept of “psychological” injury as compared to “physical” injury, the impact of life events that leave emotional “wounds” and “scars” that are not obvious and easy to identify in the same way as physical injuries do. E.g. the physical damage caused after an auto accident may be readily apparent, but the psychological damage not. The injury or death of a fellow scout on an outing does impact the other members of the unit, and not all individuals will react in the same way psychologically.

Become aware of the signs and symptoms of mental injury or impairment as manifested in one or another aspect of mental functioning – perception (orientation, awareness of surroundings), intellection (thinking and communication patterns), emotion (mood) and behavior (agitated, diminished or irrational).

Recognize the basic drive in all persons to be in control of themselves and their life, and be aware of the normal and abnormal processes that occur when a person has had an experience where that control has been lost or taken away as in an accident, disaster, or other traumatic situation. Learn the elements of “psychological first aid” for such victims.

Recognize the value of prevention. Address the impact of physical and psychological abuse, including bullying of or demeaning peers.

#4 – Achieve an awareness of the common and most prevalent of mental illnesses, such as anxiety and mood disorders and their symptomatic expressions. Also be aware of the most serious of mental disorders.

#5 – With regards to drugs, understand the eternal search for relief from life’s pain and the use of these substances to achieve relief through an artificial high. Further, recognize the power of addiction and the degree to which certain substances can impact/compromise the rational judgment about such drugs.