

My Speaking Notes/Script

ETS Presentation for the VT House Committee on Education

Presented: 2/3/22 Time: 10 minutes

Introduction

Hi, I am Kristy Hommel, NAMI VT's Youth Outreach and Ending the Silence Program coordinator. Today I'm going to tell you about our Ending The Silence Program, which brings mental health awareness and suicide prevention into VT middle and high schools. A little about me, I have a Master's Degree in Childhood Education, was a teacher in NY state for almost 10 years, and have been a volunteer and trainer for NAMI's IOOV program where we share our mental health recovery journeys. I am really passionate about the program I'm going to tell you about today. I think you'll be able to see why we want to expand our outreach to schools, recruit more volunteers, and build the program to better serve VT.

NAMI Ending The Silence Program Overview

NAMI Ending the Silence (ETS) is a 50-minute prevention and early intervention program that engages youth in a discussion about mental health. Teens learn how to recognize the early warning signs of mental health conditions and what to do if they or someone they know is exhibiting these signs. In addition, contact with a person living well with mental health condition dispels myths, instills a message of hope and recovery and encourages teens to reduce the stigma associated with mental health. The goal of this program is to create a generation of youth who are well-positioned to end the silence and stigma surrounding mental health.

This program provides youth with the unique opportunity to learn about mental health directly from family members and people living with a mental health condition. Teens are also able to ask these people with lived experience questions directly. In addition, by engaging them in a discussion about mental health among their peers, teens dealing with mental health issues realize they're not alone.

NAMI Ending the Silence is designed for teens age 13-18. The program is typically presented in a health, science or psychology class, but may also be provided to youth groups, clubs and after-school programs. NAMI Ending the Silence can be presented to teens in any setting.

The 50 minute program is delivered by a two-person team, including a young adult who is able to relate well to teens and who shares their own journey with a diagnosable mental illness. With Covid we have transitioned to virtual presentations.

Teens are given a resource card with valuable phone numbers and websites for mental health support services along with a list of warning signs of mental health conditions. Teachers are given a Resources packet with follow up information and tools for their community.

In NAMI Ending the Silence, presenters are trained to “share” as opposed to “teach” the material. The tone that is set with that attitude is critical. Presenters talk to youth, not at them. Presenters make good eye contact, chat with young people upon entering the room and hang around after the presentation is over (when possible) to visit briefly. Teens feel that NAMI Ending the Silence presenters really care about them and view NAMI as a non-judgmental organization.

How the ETS Program Is Unique

- The funding for this program comes from the Dept. of Mental Health and the Vermont Community foundation, so we can offer the program free to schools
- ETS provides middle and high school aged youth with direct, personal contact with a young person living in recovery from a mental health condition.
- Youth are provided with information on signs of mental illness through age-appropriate content and videos featuring young people of diverse diagnoses.
- Youth are given ideas on how to support a friend who is experiencing a mental health condition and how to recognize signs of mental illness in themselves, family and friends.
- ETS encourages youth to get help for themselves and to provide healthy youth with the knowledge to help friends who may be struggling.
- ETS normalizes mental illness.
- The interactive Question & Answer segment of the presentation provides youth with an opportunity to discuss mental illness in a safe and educational setting and to directly ask individuals and family members questions about what it’s like to live with a mental illness.
- Presentations are designed to fit into a typical high-school class period, which facilitates a seamless coordination process for the teacher and school. Presentations can also be offered in other settings for 13–18-year-olds.

General Benefits of NAMI Ending the Silence

- Offered at no cost to schools and other groups.
- Reduces stigma among youth through direct, personal contact with a young person with a mental illness.
- Educates youth on mental illness signs, symptoms and recovery.
- Instills a message of hope for people with a mental illness and provides a positive role model through the young adult presenter.

- Youth walk away with materials that provide information on resources and services.

Included In an ETS Presentation

- Introductions of the presenters to the youth so that the youth are able to make an immediate connection, particularly to the young adult presenter.
- Common warning signs of mental illness., as well as suicide prevention
- Statistics on mental health in young people, reinforcing that everyone is impacted by mental illness in one way or another.
- Focus on recovery and how recovery is different for everyone.
- Youth are given a resource card with valuable phone numbers and websites for mental health agencies and youth support services along with a list of symptoms/warning signs of mental illness.
- Teachers are given a Resource packet for post presentation use

What's Next for The Program

- ETS 2.0 virtual, new videos, more teacher resources, updated language and statistics
- For VT's ETS we are developing wrap around supports after the presentation
- NAMI VT would like to create more middle and high school volunteer opportunities for those under 18 years of age
- NAMI VT would like to increase number of volunteer trained presenters so that we can start doing the staff and family versions
- We are working on creating partnerships, like working with the head of VT School Nurses.
- We want to expand our outreach throughout VT, our website is being updated, social media platforms will be used more, and we are encouraging people to contact me directly to schedule presentations (khommel@namivt.org), but we still need your help to get the word out, get Vermonters actively involved, and help to grow our program.

Finally...

I want to share just a little about why I am so passionate about this topic. At age 8 I started experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and a mood regulation disorder. I didn't have the language or know who to talk to about how I was feeling, I often felt sad, disconnected, overwhelmed, and alone. I developed unhealthy coping skills like self-harming and isolating. My core beliefs about myself and mental health were based on stigma and misinformation. I suffered in silence through my entire elementary and middle school education. I imagine that I would have felt less alone and maybe even reached out to someone if this kind of presentation was around back in the 90's.

As a former educator I like the setup of this program and believe the earlier we can give kids this information the more successful we will be in creating a future where there is less stigma, more acceptance, and more support for those struggling with a mental illness.

We hope to one day truly be able to end the silence surrounding mental illness and to decrease the gap between when a student first begins to show signs of mental illness and when they actually receive treatment. Thank you for your time today, it's been wonderful sharing with you. Feel free to contact me to set up a presentation in your local school or even volunteer!