

Student groups bring awareness about mental health

By Kate Malongowski

CENTER TWP. -- Many high school students face various mental health conditions, such as anxiety and stress, every day.

The Youth Ambassadors Program, which has grown to more than 200 students countywide over the past year, has been there to help.

The group held a mental health awareness event for student participants at the Dome at Beaver County Community College on Wednesday morning, using hands-on sessions such as boxing and yoga exercises to relieve stress and empower, as well as arts and crafts to build self-esteem.

The group had its first event last September with five school districts.

Marissa Lammie and Angel Clinkscales, ninth-graders at Freedom Area High School, were busy decorating magnetic locker mirrors with positive messages written on them.

"Beautiful." "Intelligent." "You're worth it."

"I know a lot of people with mental illnesses," said Angel, 14, sticking colorful jewels to her mirror.

The group provides great coping mechanisms for low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts for themselves and others, said Marissa, 14, who deals with mental health issues herself.

"It's a way for people to get together, learn what it represents," she said.

The Youth Ambassadors Program works with Students Against Destructive Decisions groups at many local schools, trying to provide an open and nonjudgmental environment among peers.

Opening the lines of communication is imperative. Students at Rochester Area High School have decorated a bulletin board at school, and they plan to place posters in discreet areas such as restrooms to provide a lending hand, looking both inward and outward.

"Knowing what you should know about yourself kind of gives us guidelines what other people should know about themselves and helps us know when things aren't right with another person," said Mia Anthony, 16, a junior at Rochester. "So not only are these techniques and stuff like that teaching us for our own sake and our own personal health, but it's training us on how to see somebody else in distress and know what to do about it."

Susan Smith, a program specialist at the Beaver County Rehabilitation Center and one of the Ambassador program's organizers, said the group is trying to provide a "climate of acceptance" for those who deal with mental health issues.

"We're trying to build a mental health tool kit for them," she said.

Dealing with mental health doesn't necessary mean dealing with someone who has a clinical diagnosis. Test taking, peer pressure, home and family life can all be areas of anxiety and stress.

Smith said the program is funded through a grant the county obtained from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA.

Ty'Rese Baker, a junior at Beaver Falls High School, said people talk about suicide often at his school. He and several classmates joined the Youth Ambassadors Program because they wanted to make a difference. Gage McKelvey said peer-to-peer contact can be easier than a teacher trying to approach a student.

"We can relate to them," said Gage, 17, also a Beaver Falls junior.

Brooklin Smith, 17, of Aliquippa, joined the group last year because of experiences she and close friends have had with mental health. She's been recruiting other students who might be too embarrassed to say they need help.

Being a Youth Ambassador has taught her perspective and empathy.

"It taught me how to listen to their problems ...," Brooklin said. "Having a set of ears for other students to listen."

In addition to seasonal events for students across the county, the Youth Ambassadors also hope to soon launch "YAP After Dark," a series of meetings to get parents and community members involved.