

# Communication and Mental Health

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# Let's Talk About It

- Quick Mental Health Stats
- Effective Communication
- How to talk with someone who is struggling
- A non-exhaustive list of ways people experiencing a mental health challenge communicate
- Self-Talk

# The Infinite Monkey Theorem

“The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material.” - Michelangelo

# The Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders

- 1 in 5 US Adults have a diagnosable mental health disorder in any given year
- 50% of all US adults experience a mental health challenge during their life
- 40% of individuals diagnosed with a mental health disorder sought no treatment in the previous year.
- What factors could affect these statistics?



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# Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc

- What goes into the words you say? Physically? Emotionally? Intellectually?
- Listening to understand vs listening to reply.
- Especially in challenging conversations, there's a very good chance that another's response isn't about you



# Sometimes it just “Clicks”

- Feeling like you’re “on the same wavelength”
- Often, and especially with strangers, “clicking” comes down to similar communication styles more than similar tastes or deeply-held beliefs
- “Neural homophily” - like befriends like
- Some factors of “clicking” can be controlled



# The Physiology and Psychology of Pitch

- Voice pitch, higher or lower, is determined by a variety of factors, including gender and the physical structure of one's vocal chords
- Adrenaline causes the vocal chords to tighten and pitch your voice higher
- Stress raises both heart rate and breathing rate, making most people talk more quickly
- These can be controlled to some degree with practice





# How It's Said

- Individuals coping with depression may speak more monotone, flatter and softer, at lower volume and may pause more.
- Individuals feeling heightened anxiety tend to speak faster, have difficulty catching their breath and speak at higher pitches.
- “What did I do this weekend? Well, I read a lot and I went to a dinner.”

# “I” Statements

“You look tired.”

“I noticed you looked a little tired today.”

“You seem down.”

“I’ve noticed that something seems to be troubling you.”

“You didn’t join us for lunch.”

“I didn’t see you at lunch.”

“Is everything ok at home? You seem anxious.”

“I feel like you might be dealing with some extra anxiety. Is everything ok at home?”

# Helpful vs Unhelpful

“You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“Try to get some rest. I hope tomorrow is a better day.”

“Just think happy thoughts.”

“How long have you felt this way?”

“I get it. The exact same thing happened to me.”

“I hear you. It’s rough out there.”

“Shake it off, you need to get your head in the game.”

“Is everything ok? Is there anything I can take off your plate?”

# The Whole Truth

- Don't make promises you can't keep
- Talk about how a person is feeling, not what they believe
- Reassurance - hope with relevant information
- Don't beat around the bush

# Asking the Right Questions

- When talking with someone experiencing a mental health challenge, or anyone struggling, it is very important to be direct. Ask direct questions and try to get direct answers.
- “You wouldn’t ever hurt yourself, right?”
- “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

# What's (Un)needed to Understand

- Humans are hardwired to view the world through a narrative lens - a Cinderella story of a season for an underdog team, getting caught in the rain with exact right (or wrong) person
- It's very natural to want to know the whole story
- Specifically when dealing with someone who has experienced trauma, we, the non-therapists of the world, don't need to know the whole story to help.

# Effective Listening

- Listening to understand
- Make the right amount of eye contact
- Don't make assumptions
- Not everyone is ready to get help/barriers to care
- Respect personal space
- Setting aside one's own personal beliefs, reactions and agenda
- Being mindful of expressions, tone, body language, pitch, volume



# Ineffective Communication

- Passive listening or listening only to respond
- Dismissing the views or feelings of others
- Not being clear about one's own needs or wants
- Shutting down
- Bottling up emotion until it explodes
- Yelling, screaming, verbal or physical abuse
- Interrupting
- Giving the silent treatment or other passive-aggressive behavior



# Agency and Empathy

- Living things don't like being backed into a corner. That's where the Fight, Flight or Freeze instinct kicks in
- When communicating about mental health, directness is often a virtue
  - “How can I help you?”
  - “Would you like to talk about it, do you want to go do something else or would you like some space?”
- “I'm sorry you're struggling. I want to help, if it were the other way around, wouldn't you want to help me?”

# You're Not Every Person's Person

- And that's ok. You don't have to be. It's not possible to be.
- Better to connect a struggling person with someone who has a better chance of connecting, preferably with someone they trust, than to force an interaction that just isn't working.
- Remember, we don't all "Click." Safety first, then tag out if you need to.
- What works once, isn't always going to work in the same way, even with the same person.

# Signs and Symptoms

- Extreme irritability, being annoyed frequently or easily
- Difficulty sleeping, change in sleep habits
- Lethargy, always feeling tired
- Changes in appetite or eating habits
- Withdrawing from others
- Giving away prized possessions or finances
- Saying things like “there’s no way out” or “life isn’t worth it”
- Talking or thinking about suicide or death

# Read Between the Lines

- Often, someone who is struggling is not going to say, “James, I’m struggling right now.”
- Their office/home may get messier or it may get deep cleaned.
- They may stop eating lunch or they may get take out everyday.
- They may shut down or they may come within a hair’s breadth of spilling their guts.
- They may joke around more or their jokes may get darker.
- They may feel everything or they may be completely numb.

# Read the Room

- Even healthy things may be a warning sign if it's dramatically out of character for a given individual.
- People can change, but it's almost always slow. Any overnight change in personality, day-to-day habits or general disposition can be concerning.
- Among the best things we can do for people struggling with their mental health is to notice any signs and symptoms we can, then help to our level of ability or provide resources.

# Deescalating

- Speaking slowly and confidently in a caring voice
- Do not argue, challenge or threaten
- Speak in an even, measured voice with a lower pitch if possible
- Stay calm, actively avoid nervous behavior
- Read the room, avoid behaviors/topics that may increase a person's fear or anxiety.
- Do not restrict movement
- Pause, if needed, during the conversation

# Self-Talk

- How do we talk to ourselves?
- To some degree, what we believe about the world, what we believe about ourselves, has an impact.
- Confirmation Bias
- “I’m really unlucky.” “I always get sick.” “I deserve this.”
- Your brain really likes patterns.

# Questions?

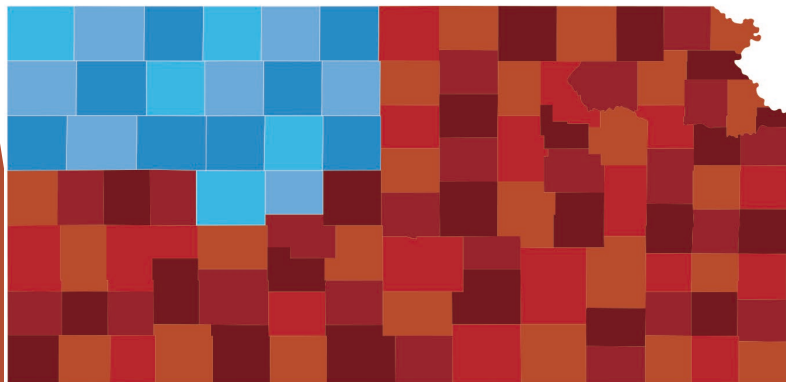
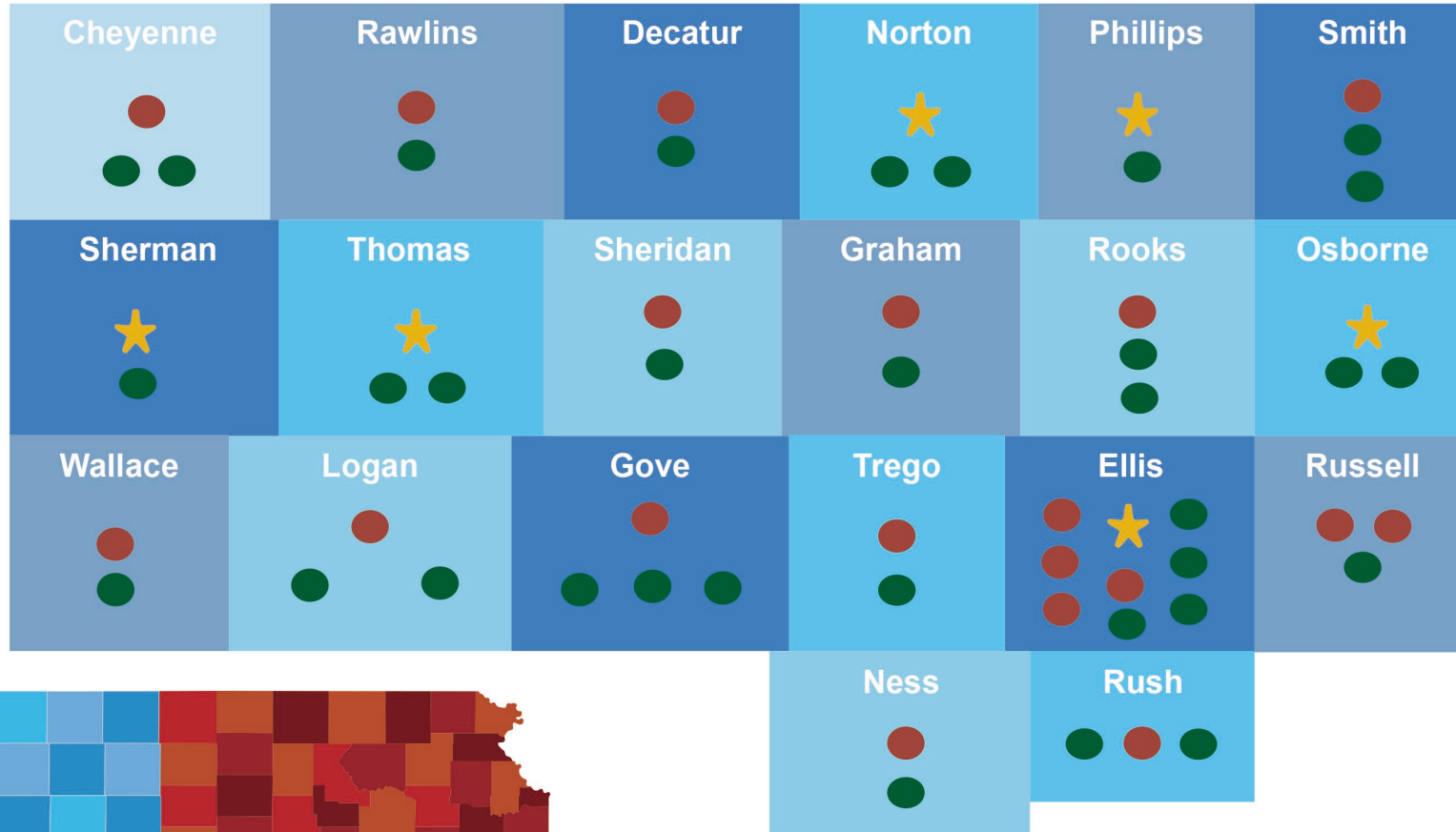
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- High Plains has six full-time offices and provides outreach services in 60 other locations in NWKS. Telehealth now available from the comfort of home!
- 24/7 crisis hotline: (800) 432-0333
- Learn more at [hpmhc.com](http://hpmhc.com), or find us on Facebook, Twitter, Linked In or Instagram
- Sliding fee scale available; no one is denied services based on ability to pay.



# Outreach Office and Service Locations

- Community Outreach Offices
- ★ Full-Time Service Locations
- School-Based Services (HOPE or MHIT)



Proudly Serving 20 Northwest Kansas Counties  
 High Plains Mental Health Center  
 208 E. 7th, Hays, KS 67601  
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# Sources

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