

# WALK IN OUR SHOES

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**Mental health challenges are more common than you may realize**, yet as educators we play a crucial role in introducing the subject of mental health to our students. You have probably dealt with students who struggle with their own mental health challenges. Consider these facts:

- One in four American adults is living with a diagnosable mental disorder.<sup>i</sup>
- Research shows that half of all mental illnesses start by age 14, and three-quarters start by age 24.
- An average of 6 to 8 years pass after the onset of mood disorder symptoms – 9 to 23 years for anxiety disorder symptoms – before young people get help.
- In addition, research shows that there is a window of opportunity lasting two to four years between the first symptom and the full-blown mental disorder, when preventive programs might be able to reduce the rate of onset of specific disorders.<sup>ii</sup>

Many people report that the stigma associated with a mental illness can be more destructive than the illness itself. **Stigma related to mental illness is one of the primary barriers that keep people from seeking and receiving treatment.** This is alarming when you consider that, with support and treatment, up to 90 percent of individuals diagnosed with a mental illness have a significant reduction in symptoms and improved quality of life.

Research indicates that attitudes of stigma develop frequently during the “tween” years of development (9-13 years old). The goal of [Walkinourshoes.org](http://Walkinourshoes.org) is to stop stigma from developing by filling gaps in knowledge about mental health and debunking myths associated with people with mental health challenges. Key learning points for this developmental stage include:

- 1. Mental health challenges are common**
- 2. There are different kinds of mental health challenges**
- 3. People with mental health challenges can manage/recover to live normal and successful lives**
- 4. The vast majority of people with mental health challenges are as predictable and non-violent as anyone else**
- 5. Young people are encouraged to speak up and ask questions about mental health**

[Walkinourshoes.org](http://Walkinourshoes.org) is part of Each Mind Matters: California's Mental Health Movement. Each Mind Matters unites the hundreds of organizations working together to create health systems that serve minds and bodies, and the millions of Californians who refuse to stay silent while untreated mental illness takes an unnecessary toll on our families and communities. Together, we are creating a California where Each Mind Matters.

**As an educator, we encourage you to join us at Each Mind Matters in creating stigma-free environments for young people.** You can [join the movement](#) by visiting the web site with your students and creating your own unique pledge at EachMindMatters.org.

#### *Sample pledges*

- As a teacher, I will create a better tomorrow for my students by supporting those of us who are living with mental health challenges today.
- I will support students who may be struggling with a mental health challenges in their families.
- I will teach my students that it's unacceptable to disrespect people just because they are living with mental health challenges.

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<sup>i</sup> Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R). *Archives of General Psychiatry*, June 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2009). *Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities*. Committee on the Prevention of Mental Disorders and Substance Abuse Among Children, Youth, and Young Adults: Research Advances and Promising Interventions. Mary Ellen O'Connell, Thomas Boat, and Kenneth E. Warner, Editors. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.