

2023

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### Recommended Citation

Gray, D. (2023). Sticky notes matter: 3 ways to promote mental health in the middle school classroom. South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal, 152-154.

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Published online: March 2023  
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# Sticky Notes Matter: 3 Ways to Promote Mental Health in the Middle School Classroom

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**Abstract:** Mental health issues continue to be a prominent concern in middle level education. Adolescence marks a crucial period for developing healthy social and emotional skills to promote mental well-being. Poor mental health can affect grades, relationships, decision-making, and students' overall health. Building positive rapport and connections with students can protect their mental health. Encouraging students to journal their thoughts and feelings helps students process and recognize their emotions. Students enjoy using bright, colored sticky notes. I recommend that teachers give students opportunities to use sticky-notes to express themselves.

**Keywords:** mental health, adolescence, relationships, expressing, journaling, sticky notes

## Introduction

Have you ever felt like no one cared? Have you ever just wished one person would ask how your day was going so you could pour your heart and mind out? Have you ever felt like your voice was silent, but your mind was very loud? Think about these 3 questions for a second, then imagine hearing an 11-12 year-old answer “yes” to all 3 questions.

“Mental health matters” is an adopted motto in many schools nowadays. Why does mental health matter now more than ever? Is this in response to the pandemic? Is this a response to the number of suicide rates increasing? Or is this a response to truly acknowledging how important mental health is for our students?

As a former caseworker for the Child Abuse & Neglect Division with the Department of Social Services, I professionally gained firsthand experience into the correlation of home environment, school, and mental health. My caseload consisted of mainly adolescents and more than 30% of my cases involved educational neglect. Working with the family to develop plans to promote safety, permanency, and well-being showed me the importance of mental health inside and outside of the classroom. After completing a 45-day investigation, we would meet with multidisciplinary teams to determine the needs for the family. Prior to closing the case, we would have to determine the cause based on investigative notes. I vividly remember a pattern with my clients: findings of educational neglect. The most common cause was negative relationships with teachers, bullying, and feeling like no one cared about them as a person. Hearing about the place where

most kids should feel the safest in a negative light through the eyes of an adolescent was saddening for me. I then realized that mental health matters more than I could ever imagine. This marked the beginning of my discovery of the type of teacher I wanted to be for my students.

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Entering the profession of education, I vowed to not only build positive relationships with my students, but to ensure every single day my students enter my classroom I check in with them, mentally. As adults, we suffer with our own mental health alone, but we have developed social and emotional skills to handle our issues (sometimes, right?). Stop and ask yourself how 11–12-year-old kids even begin to process their issues, mentally. How do we help our students discuss their mental well-being?

## Why Mental Health Matters

Students are receiving less attention to their mental health because there is a common assumption that adolescents are competent enough to discuss their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. We know what they say about assumptions, right? The majority of my students are unable to identify negative/positive traits, complete an assignment on lined paper, or inform me when they need a band-aid for a paper cut. How can I expect my students to be able to address their mental health needs? I simply cannot, and this is why it is imperative we, as teachers make explicit to students how to care for their mental health.

Why does mental health matter? Mental health matters in adolescents because it helps a child feel secure, relate well with their peers, and foster mental and emotional growth at home and at school. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), 18.8% of adolescents ages 12–17 seriously considered attempting suicide; 15.7% made a suicide plan; 8.9% attempted suicide; and 2.5% made a suicide attempt requiring medical treatment. This is part of my “why” for advocating that teachers institute mental health strategies regularly into classrooms. The Youth Development Institute (2020) offers a list of Universal Youth Needs which includes a sense of belonging and a close lasting relationship with at least one adult. Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student’s academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

Research shows that having at least one trusted adult can have a profound impact on a young person’s life (Raney, 2019). A simple “How are you feeling today?” can provide a small, daily opportunity to connect authentically with students. Here are some strategies to help.

## Quick Mental Health Check-Ins

Mental health check-ins can be used to address students' social and emotional needs. These are quick questions to guide teachers to ask students how they are feeling. Here are a few questions I ask my students:

- How are you feeling today?
- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your sleep last night?
- What is the best/worst thing that happened to you this week?
- What color fits your mood today?
- If you drew me a quick sketch of your day, what would the sketch look like?

## #MentalHealthMondays

On Mondays, in my student center, there is a stack of a bright colored sticky notes. At the beginning of the school year, we discuss why we use sticky notes in my classroom. 1) to complete #MentalHealthMondays; 2) use as bookmarks; and/or 3) write a short note/drawing to Miss Gray if any issues may arise inside or outside of school other than Mondays. My students are super excited to use sticky notes on Mondays or write me a short note/drawing. The question is the same every Monday: "Monday begins the new week. How are you feeling today? How was your weekend? Anything new with you?" While my students are working, I play jazz instrumentals and my students appear to be engaged as demonstrated by pencils moving fast and filling up the sticky note. I complete a Google form for my students to determine how mental health is viewed in my classroom using the question: How do you feel about mental health in our classroom? Some responses I have received:

Student A:

*"I feel very good about mental health in our classroom, this is something I love about your classroom."*

Student B:

*"I feel it's a nice thing to have because you get to tell what you are feeling, and it feels nice to tell someone how you feel."*

Student C:

*"I think Mental Health Monday is good for checking on us to see if we are doing well."*

Student D:

*"It feels good to share everything with someone when you do not have someone to talk to."*

Student E:

*"It feels good to check in with you. No other teachers seem to do it or appear to care about Mental Health Monday."*

Student F:

*"To be honest, I love it because we get to share our feelings."*

## "I Need a Sticky Note"

Sticky notes are used throughout the school day. When problems arise, some young adolescents may experience difficulty expressing their thoughts and emotions. My students will come to my desk and say, "I need a sticky note" and I immediately know this is a moment my student needs me. My students are aware of the classroom environment and how to ask for a sticky note without other students noticing. We have developed a classroom system in regard to the usage of sticky notes and when it is safe. My reasoning for using sticky notes is because sticky notes are 3in x 3in and it appears to students that do not have much to write. Students may have trouble gathering their thoughts, feelings, and emotions so I encourage my students to draw a picture and then briefly describe their picture using as many words as they can. After I review the sticky note, I use the same color sticky note and write back to them to ensure that I am acknowledging their feelings and I use a phrase: "xoxo, I am with you". I use this phrase with my students to promote togetherness and my hope is to let my students know their voice is heard, always. No matter what.

## Conclusion

Mental health truly matters to me. Does it matter to you? How are you using your classroom time to check-in with your students? Curriculum is embedded with standards, but what about the social and emotional well-being of our students? Think about that one student who views school as their only safe space or who views their teacher as the only human being who cares about them and loves them dearly. If we can spend 5 minutes skimming our emails or making our coffee, can we spend 5 minutes checking in on our students, mentally? We all need to somebody to lean on.

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Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Gray, D. (2023). Sticky notes matter: 3 ways to promote mental health in the middle school classroom. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 152-154.

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Published online: March 2023

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### About the Author



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