

# SEPTEMBER

## MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

### Building Relationships with Staff, Students & Families

#### A Trauma-Informed Approach

Building relationships with individuals that have experienced higher amounts trauma, is likely more difficult than building a relationship with those who have not. There are reasons for this that we will discuss below, but first, let's talk about the similarities as far as the process of building a relationship goes.

Building relationships happens through meaningful time and conversation had between two individuals. This is the same for those who have experienced trauma and those who have not. That's good news, right?! The key here is the word "meaningful." What does that mean? If we all sat and thought about that word, we could come up with a lot of words that we think could be said about the word meaningful. That's great, but does any of that really TELL us how to be "meaningful?" The goal of this Mental Health Minute is to give you easy and practical steps to having a meaningful conversation which will lead to meaningful time spent between two individuals.

#### Step 1:

##### **Initiate conversation and moving in close to the person.**

By initiating the conversation with someone, they are likely to feel that you care enough to take action to show your interest in having a conversation. Moving closer to a person creates a more personal atmosphere. Of course, you should always maintain appropriate boundaries as far as personal space goes.

#### Step 2:

##### **Use non-verbal language that encourages conversation.**

For conversations, non-verbal language includes facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. Your facial expression should always show sincerity, care and concern. A good tip, most times, is to try to match the non-verbal communication of the person with whom you are speaking. Your body language should always be saying that you are safe, unthreatening and non-judgmental. When having these intentional relationship-building conversations, you never want to cross your arms in front of your chest, put your hand on your hips or hide your hands in your pockets or behind you. All this non-verbal language can

be threatening and intimidating. It can signal that you are an unsafe person to anyone, but especially someone that has had trauma involving any type of abuse in their past experiences. Remember, even if you aren't trying to intimidate with your body language by crossing your arms (maybe you're just cold) perception is reality for everyone. So, if you are perceived that way, this conversation will no longer be a quality conversation. What do you do with your hands then? Drop them relaxed by your side.

### Step 3:

#### **Ask open-ended questions followed by statements of empathy.**

Open-ended questions encourage the person with whom you are speaking to say more than just yes or no. Obvious, right? Let's talk about why this is important. This is how we learn about each other, find our commonalities, figure out what the person's interests are and their story. Open-ended questions can be difficult for some individuals, especially students. Often, they are difficult for individuals with language deficits and for students who have experienced trauma. For those who have been neglected in their life, they may be hesitant to communicate openly. In these situations, you may need to start with yes or no questions and work your way up to open-ended questions.

Empathy statements are extremely important in building healthy, meaningful relationships. Empathy and sympathy are often confused and it's important to understand the difference because sympathy could damage a relationship. Sympathy is when you talk about how YOU feel regarding what the other person is saying in the conversation. This may divert attention away from the person and onto yourself. This isn't helpful. Empathy is when you say something to recognize how the OTHER person feels about what they are saying. It may sound something like, "That must have made you feel so proud!" or "You seem really disappointed by that." These statements help to ensure that the other person understands that you care and are listening to them.

### Step 4:

#### **Listen.**

Listening, while hard to do, is a very important step. Listening provides an opportunity to learn important characteristics about the person: their likes, dislikes, interests, fears, goals, etc. Listening may be more difficult because the person you are speaking to may not have the same level of conversational skills as you. There may be a lot of silence in between words and that can be awkward and even less reinforcing for the students in the

conversation. The goal is to eventually talk less than the person. This back and forth conversation will likely be more difficult for a person that has experienced trauma. Their experiences having conversations may have been very negative for a long time, and it will take time.

These four steps if followed should make for meaningful conversations. If these conversations are held consistently over time, relationships can become very strong. Having very strong relationships is something that will help when staff, students and families are going through difficult times. Individuals will be more likely to seek out those who they feel will listen to them and try to understand what is going on in their worlds. It's important to be patient when the conversations are difficult because of past experiences. It will take time, but it will be worth it.

Provided by the Katy ISD Office of Psychological Services

The Katy ISD Office of Psychological Services is comprised of Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs) who strive to provide excellent internal and external customer service to district and campus teams. They offer consistent, high-quality psychological services to students, parents, and campus staff. LSSPs have expertise in social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students as it pertains to educational success.