Throughout the hour-long video, teachers and students at Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, IL, share the raw details of their personal mental health struggles. Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts — nothing is off limits.

The video — which was produced as part of the health. moves. minds.™ program at Neuqua Valley — ends with suggestions on where to turn to for help. Then comes a final camera shot of faculty and staff gathered together to share one critical message: “Remember … you are not alone.”

Powerful stuff.

“I can see why this is important.”

Bill Casey, chair of the school’s Physical Education Department, volunteered to pilot health. moves. minds. in his high school back in Spring 2019, even though at that time the program was only designed for grades K-8.

For Casey, the school had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

STEP 1: SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

“I have never seen such high levels of anxiety and depression among our students,” says Casey. “Students are saying they need help and they don’t know how to get it. The health. moves. minds. program allows us to create something where we can bring advocacy back, so students can actually ask for help.”

From the start, Neuqua Valley’s administrators, social workers, guidance counselors and teachers were all on board with piloting the program. And, as Casey began giving presentations about health. moves. minds. throughout the school, he could tell that students were ready to engage as well. Because they — or people they knew — were going through social and emotional health struggles, they would tell Casey, “I can see why this is important.’

And the good news? “We are already seeing students having conversations with either their peers, their teachers, or their parents,” says Casey. “And that’s what we wanted from this program.”

STEP 2: BUILDING ON SUCCESS

When school started back up again in the fall, Neuqua Valley was ready to implement the health. moves. minds. program again, with a school-wide “Serenity Week” to be held October 21-25.

Each day of the week had a different focus, and teachers were asked to consider integrating each day’s skills and activities into their classroom lessons:

• MONDAY: KINDNESS
  Do an act of kindness and post it to social media using #healthmovesminds and #kindnesschallenge.

• TUESDAY: MINDFULNESS
  Be mindful about your screen time on your phone and other devices and get the lowest time in your phone app today.

• WEDNESDAY: EMPOWERMENT
  What makes you feel empowered? What makes you different is a strength not a weakness. Write “I Am” statements in PE today.

• THURSDAY: ADVOCACY
  Talking to someone is the best way to advocate for yourself or someone else. Get a green bracelet in the cafeteria today to show your support against stigmas.
FRIDAY: GRATITUDE

Show gratitude by thanking people.
In PE, write down someone you are thankful for and why and then post it on a gratitude tree.

Throughout the school, administrators, teachers, staff and students participated in the health. moves. minds. activities — many of which were shared on Twitter using #healthmovesminds.

But the health. moves. minds. program at Neuqua Valley is so much more than a week of lessons and activities once a year. It has been the catalyst for broader changes in school culture — and even new parent resources.

“We realized that parents need support as well when their children are struggling with mental health challenges,” says Casey. “With the help of the National Alliance on Mental Illness DuPage County, we formed a health. moves. minds. parent group, which will help give our Neuqua Valley families the support and resources they need.”

If you’ve been inspired to implement the health. moves. minds. program in your high school, watch for new educational resources coming in April! Visit https://www.shapeamerica.org for details.

Sign up for the health. moves. minds. program today and join us as we build a kinder, healthier future for our nation’s youth.

Raising Mental Health Awareness in Schools: A Student’s Perspective  By Rahael Javaid

I am a student at Neuqua Valley High School, located in the Chicago area. Last spring, Neuqua Valley was one of 20 schools across the country that piloted the health. moves. minds. program. My school also implemented the program again this fall to raise awareness for mental health issues.

Neuqua Valley has a mental health club called YouMatter that formed just last year. I joined this club when it started, hoping to help carry out this message. Our group strives to impact others by educating them about the stigma surrounding mental health.

The health. moves. minds. program has helped make an impact, and personally my experience with the program at my school has been amazing!

As a teenage girl and high school student, I know the stress that surrounds me and my friends. This is a tough time to live in and we are all trying to figure out who we are as a human being and what we strive for. This program helped ease the stress from school, family issues, or whatever anyone was going through.

Read complete article on the SHAPE America Blog.