

A critical analysis of the Mental Health First Aid educational intervention developed by the National Council for Behavioral Health to reduce the risk for suicide among the mentally ill

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Background and problem: Scientific literature points out that spiritual well-being is associated with decreased risk of mental illness. However, one in five Americans has a mental health illness. Michigan is ranked among the states with highest suicide rates due to mental illness. In Berrien County, Michigan, the priority health need among students was mental health (2016-2019 community needs assessment). Youth expressed concerns about being overwhelmed with schoolwork, social acceptance, and being bullied. Berrien County ranks 66th in health behaviors among Michigan's 83 counties. In Michigan, the rate of suicide attempts by adolescents in 9th through 12th grades increased from 2.7% to 3% between 2001 and 2013. The **objective** of this study is to critically analyze the Mental Health First Aid educational intervention developed by the National Council of Behavioral Health for family members and health professionals working with mental health victims to reduce the risk for suicide. The program introduces participants to risk factors, warning signs and common treatments for mental health. **Methods:** A validated "Youth Mental Health Opinions Quiz" survey and "Youth Mental Health First Aid" course evaluation form developed by the National Council for Behavioral Health was used to assess knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions (KAP) of health professionals and families of mental health victims. 125 subjects participated in mental health first aid educational intervention. Data was collected in Berrien County between June 2017 and February 2018. Statistical analysis was conducted using **paired T-tests. SPSS v.25** was used to analyze the data. **Results:** Spirituality was identified as a negative factor affecting mental health on the survey. In the Pre-test 59.9% disagreed that spirituality was a negative factor, however, in the post-test 74.6% agreed that spirituality was a negative factor affecting mental health. We found a significant increase of KAP in people who understood signs and symptoms of mental health between pre-intervention and post-intervention (mean Δ =1.024, SD=1.548; $p<0.001$). Similarly, knowledge of risk factors for mental illness and common treatments also improved between pre and post-intervention (mean Δ =-0.344, SD=1.403; $p<0.001$). **Conclusions:** It is important for mental health professionals to acknowledge the protective role of spirituality against mental illness. Spiritual needs of the subjects must be incorporated into conventional treatments.

References:

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