

# students share experiences to open minds

## What do you believe is the attitude toward mental health at Gunn?

"I think that generally the community is pretty open about mental health and encourages people to find help if they are having any issues."

"It seems normal to have anxiety because everyone around them has it. It should be taken seriously because this amount of stress is unhealthy."

"Even though we acknowledge mental health issues and most people are actively challenging stigmas, we fall short in terms of actual support and action."

"I think that we're shifting towards a community mentality where it is okay to get other people's help."

—Quotes from survey



## Q&A with Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS) Coordinator Pamela Garfield

ACS is a non-profit counseling system that has a partnership with the district. The program has three private, sound-proof rooms in the attendance office. Parent consent for students is encouraged, but not required.

## Hospitalization disproves common misconceptions

When most people hear "mental hospital," they think padded walls, white rooms and people held down by restraints. They never really think that they will land themselves in a place like this. When I first found out I would have to be hospitalized, I was terrified. A million questions ran through my head: "What does 51-50 mean? What do I tell my friends? What will my family think? Why is there a police officer standing outside my room? How much will this ambulance ride cost?" Let me tell you right now, I soon realized none of these questions mattered.

In the past school year, over 50 Gunn students have been hospitalized for suicidal attempts or ideation. It is not uncommon. All of the nurses tell parents that being diagnosed for mental illness is the same thing as being diagnosed and treated for any other disease.

At a mental hospital, you meet so many other kids who have gone through similar struggles as you. There are kids who have faced far worse than you have as well as those who seem to have no reason to end their lives. There are no padded walls or restraints. Although there are rules to follow, there are also people who understand you and want you to get better.

The desire to end your own life is not okay, reasonable or acceptable; however, all feelings are valid. It is so difficult to understand depression and anxiety when you have not gone through it yourself. I remember a few years ago in Living Skills, I heard about not being able to get out of bed and not wanting to go out with friends and thinking that was ridiculous. But I also remember just a few short months ago when I started skipping at least one class per day. I got extensions on every single assignment. Soon I only went to one or two classes a day, and my grades began to reflect that. I stopped going out with my friends because I was not having fun. Scary thoughts filled my head every single day. I knew I needed help.

Asking for help with a mental illness is not a sign of weakness. The demons in your head cannot be faced alone. Since my hospitalization, there have been ups and downs. There is no immediate cure or recovery for depression and anxiety, but there is help. There are so many people out there who are willing to help you. I have since met therapists, psychiatrists and dietitians who all have a common goal: to help kids just like me. Reach out to your friends, ACS, medical doctors, parents or a trusted adult and be amazed by how quickly and effectively you will receive the care you need.

If you are a friend of someone who is dealing with heavy thoughts, please support them with kind words and encourage them to get the help they need. Have an open conversation. It will show that person that they can trust you and even push your friendship to new horizons. Walking on eggshells around someone who is depressed can make that person feel awkward and uncared for. Trust me, they will make it clear if it is not a topic they want to talk about it. Try to let them know you will be there for them. Don't be that friend that says, "I'll always be there for you," but cannot pick up at 4 p.m. Do not make promises you can't keep. It is helpful to be positive and loving. They are still your friend and they still love and care for you. They want to know that you feel the same way.

To those who are feeling down, this is not to say that you need to reach rock bottom in order to find help. If you are feeling sad whatsoever, please ask for help. I encourage you to seek assistance before the demons become unmanageable. I, and so many others, are living proof that there is support and help, and that you can and will survive this.

—anonymous Gunn student

**The Oracle:** What are ways that people can ask how others are doing?

**Pamela Garfield:** Just tell them that you're thinking about them. Sometimes people do need space. Unfortunately, there's no one quick thing to say, but just to let them know you care about them and that you are there when they're ready to talk. If you feel strongly that your friend is in danger, please don't feel like you have to hold that burden and keep the secret. You may feel like you are betraying a friend, but if they are really depressed, they can't handle it by themselves. You can tell an adult. If there isn't an adult around and you feel there is imminent danger, call 911. You can also call EMQ's 24 hour crisis mobile team at: (408) 379-9085. EMQ is trained to come and do a suicide assessment on anyone 18 and under and determine what help they need.

**TO:** What are some signs that show that people are struggling?

**PG:** I would say the most obvious sign is if someone's talking about it, or if their behavior changes. If you're looking for signs of depression, more common signs are changing in eating habits: if they're eating a lot, to cover their feelings, or [if they] lose their appetite. If someone is sleeping a whole lot or they're not sleeping well, that can be a sign of depression or anxiety. If they're not able to focus and get their work done, that can be something you can ask about. But there are the obvious concrete things and then there's the feeling in your gut. You guys know your friends. You know when something is off so listen to your gut. That's something they don't write in the books; if you don't feel like someone's okay, listen to your gut and get them help.



PAMELA GARFIELD

**TO:** What about those who are nervous about therapy?

**PG:** I would recommend that they give it a try. The therapists here aren't as involved in the school, they don't get wrapped up in your transcript or your record; we're fairly separate so it's less embarrassing. We have younger therapists if people don't want to talk to an "old" person. In general, we all know how to connect with kids and don't judge. Just give it a try and have an open mind. I know one misconception here at Gunn on campus, and I think not even all the administration know this, is that you don't always need parent consent to come here. We encourage getting parent consent, but you don't actually need that. People don't need to let that be a barrier; we will work with you even if you don't want to tell your parents.

**TO:** How does the confidentiality agreement work? When are you required to report certain situations?

**PG:** We tell the person and their parents that we will not tell the parents anything without their permission about what they said in the session. The only case that it will break is if we are worried about the person's safety. If they start talking about suicidal thoughts, sometimes even then we won't break the confidentiality but if we're worried about what's going to happen that day but not enough to call the police or the hospital, we'd really like the parents to know. We have to tell the administration and we actually have to warn the person if someone makes a threat towards an individual, an adult or child. Really any safety issue, for yourself or others, is when we have to break confidentiality.

—Compiled by Ariel Pan