Mental Health Through the Eyes of Ohio’s Youth

Ohio Civil Rights Commission

May 2021
The youth of today are our leaders of tomorrow. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that our young people in Ohio are physically, emotionally, and mentally healthy. To that end, the Ohio Civil Rights Commission is launching its first publication of “Mental Health Through the Eyes of Ohio’s Youths.” This is a compilation of the artwork created by students from grades six through twelve and submitted to the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, which hosts the art, essay, and multimedia contest in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These creative works were submitted on a topic related to Dr. King’s legacy: themes such as working toward community change, speaking out against injustice, and persevering through adversity. However, despite each year’s changing theme, a separate and pervasive subject returns every year—the challenges and struggles of mental health for today’s youth. These young people courageously put their experiences and feelings into beautiful works of art which reflect the struggles that young Ohioans face daily.

The Ohio Civil Rights Commission is proud to provide this publication so that it can be shared with children, students, and for those in the mental health profession, your clients. By sharing this, we hope to accomplish two things. One, to let them know that they are not alone. Two, perhaps these depictions will help others be able to not only identify, but to articulate their feelings and experiences. If we invest in our youths, we can maintain the quality of living in Ohio that we all currently enjoy.

If this publication encourages at least one young person, we have begun doing our part and will continue to do our part to help the youths today become strong, vibrant, and productive leaders of Ohio tomorrow.

Sincerely,

Angela Phelps-White
Executive Director
Joy, 10th Grade – In my illustration, I included a wave towering over me. This represents the challenge because I struggle with my emotions and anxiety and I am working to overcome them. Waves have always been associated with overwhelming feelings and anxiety and stress in my mind. I represented this by the words going up the side and the colors shining through the middle of the wave. I wanted the painting to have a dark and slightly dreamlike feeling because it represents the thoughts in my head. [...] I am still working to overcome [my emotions] and remember that they’re just in my head.
Mazzy, 12th Grade - This [...] made me think of high school. I’ve struggled with losing friends, mental health, being in unhealthy relationships with people, and getting past my own mind. I had many outlets but none of them stopped the struggles from happening in the first place. When I altered my mind is when I found peace. Getting past yourself, your mind, your fears and worries, is what will help you move forward in life. Not only is the fist in the picture representing someone breaking through their own mind to peace, but also symbolizes the efforts
of someone breaking through a barrier from prejudice and dehumanization and the white brick to be the side where there is unity and positivity, which is why I placed the positive mantras on the white brick. The black fist is reaching the point of acceptance and inclusion from others by busting down a wall. It can also symbolize how I personally moved forward from a setback: breaking through the mental barrier.
Hannah, 10th Grade - For this assignment I focused on how words affect people and how to deal with it. [...] I myself am a very expressive person, by this I mean that I wear weird clothes, I dye my hair a lot, I do weird makeup, and I even make weird earrings to wear. My dream is to go to college and become an art teacher. People seem to have a lot to say about it, and it's not always positive. I always try to reach for my dream and stay positive, but it can be hard with all of my negative thoughts pulling me back and chaining me down.
Emily, 9th Grade – Since this year is around helping people, my drawing is related to depression. I was inspired to do it because I know someone who attempted suicide and I wanted to make it for that person. I try to help that person the best I can, and I can relate to that person. I chose to do the circles in the background to symbolize a noose, since many people with depression commit suicide. The black bubbles mixed with the circles are hard to see, but they’re there to symbolize how depression feels like your drowning. I used to quote to instill hope and inspiration into the viewer, or at least a happy feeling.
Sophia, 9th Grade – Art was always there for me when others weren’t. I don’t know where I would be without it. Over the years of my life, I’ve been backstabbed, abandoned, broken, and in pain. At this point, I feel like I’m just bones. I’ve been worn down, especially by stress and active work that my body just can’t physically handle. After awhile, everything got so bad that I did want to end my life. But someone was there to help me, and they tried to help me out of the “blue.”
never really ever found someone who actually cares about me till now. My whole life I’ve felt like I had to be a fake carbon copy of everyone else. If not, you would be stared at, bullied, or shamed for being “different.” In recent years, I realized faking it is harder on yourself. Just how I am now is fine, myself. Hopefully, I can be cured from this depressive state of mind and truly be happy. In retrospect, that’ll be awhile. This art piece is symbolizing my pain. But somehow I’m still moving.
Ivy, 11th Grade – My drawing expresses the young youth. In today’s world many kids are bullied for many different reasons. People can't be confident in themselves due to how they are treated by others. People cry and deal with the pain and stress of others. We get judged on our life without people
knowing what goes on in our lives. I get judged saying I have the best life and everything but I have juvenile diabetes and have no mom. Ya, I have an amazing life and I am happy, but on my hard days people judge without knowing my story.
Sarah, 10th Grade – My poster depicted what it’s like to face the fear, stress, and darker voices in your head, and how it feels trying to do so. The shadow monster represents those problems and thoughts, and the girl (me) holding the net represents how, although being overwhelming, it’s important to overcome those struggles. [... T]he challenges I have to combat on a regular basis. It shows that no matter how big or overwhelming those thoughts may be, you always have to try to stand up to them and keep moving forward. I always put in an effort to continue to resist that “monster” [...]

Dylan, 11th Grade – I chose my topic because I know many people who know someone who have committed suicide. I also know how big of a problem suicide is. People lose loved ones to suicide. Suicide is never the answer and people always care no matter how you feel. I chose the noose because everyone associates nooses with suicide. The holding hands are to emphasize people are not alone and people care about you no matter what. I made the letters bold and bright colors to make my words pop out and puts emphasis on them. I also put the suicide hotline for anyone who needs the hotline.
Erin, 11th Grade - In this piece, I decided to show how I usually deal with my mental health. Anxiety and depression are two things I have always struggled with as if I was prisoner trapped in my own mind. Although it is something I go through daily, I still try to keep a smile on my face so I do not worry others. I tell myself to “just keep smiling” even when I am in my worst state because I do not want my own problems projected onto someone else. The way I cope with the hardest experience of my life is to STAY SMILING and to take ONE DAY ON AT A TIME!
Natalie, 10th Grade – I wanted mine to be about mental health and how much it affects millions of people all around the world. [...] On the cage I have the word depression written on it to represent how when you are struggling with depression or anxiety or any mental illness you feel like you are locked away from everything. For me personally family, friends, and my pets all cheer me up whenever I’m struggling so I wrote that on the get out card to show how if someone is struggling, they can try and surround themselves with the people and stuff that make them happy, even if it’s just a little bit. [...] I feel like many people don’t understand the true feeling of what’s it’s like to have a mental illness.
Ray – 7th Grade The story behind my drawing is that you know how people say stuff like, “I’m fine” or “I’m happy?” Well, sometimes they’re not actually fine and they could be really depressed or upset inside. If you have a friend that you know is not “ok,” then the best thing to do is find
the reason they are upset and help it. Stand up for them if they are getting bullied or just try to be super nice and kind; little things help. Everyone’s feelings matter. And why I chose an eye, it’s what you “see” that other people are “fine.” That’s my story behind my drawing.
April, 9th Grade – When face with the challenges of life our first instinct is to give up, to find the easy way out of things. It takes effort and strength as people to move post challenge, every day people are faced with struggle, stigma, discrimination, and much more. But in the darkness of the world, the media, the people, finding strength in yourself can just be the answer. We can
go through struggle and try to ignore it, to try and not feel anything at all, but being honest and vulnerable in our lives is what makes us feel human, and feeling human is what life's all about. You need to stick by the motto, it's not a bad life, just a bad day. Showing vulnerability in your life can just be the thing that keeps you going, because at the end of the day, you'll be alright.
Teegan, 5th Grade – The meaning of my drawing is that many people doubt themselves and think about these questions. [...] You may doubt yourself, think badly of yourself, and many other things, but always pursue through these rough times and you will see that the world is a lot better than you might think. The person in the photo is no certain gender to show that anybody of any gender can think about these things. It is hard to
target one of these things because you should never doubt any of the questions. [...] everybody is perfect in their own way. Everyone has their flaws, but also their perfections. Do not judge a person by the way they look or act, but instead look below the surface and look for the kindness in their heart. If you can find that kindness then you know, they are a good person deep down.
Emma, 10th Grade – One of the biggest setbacks I have ever experienced happened last year when a girl from my school was in a fatal car wreck. While I did not know her very well (only talking to her during band), she had been very close to a lot of my friends and it hurt to see them so deeply upset. At the following band concert, you could feel the tension in the air around her open chair in the saxophone section. As we played a song in her
honor, it felt like all of that built-up gloom, sadness, and grief was released (and that is what my piece is about). It is about letting out our sorrow with music, the one thing we all have in common. You can see a bright side to the sadness, friends picking each other up on the music scale, and dark clouds in the background (because the sadness is never fully gone).
Rylee, 10th Grade – In the piece I tried to represent the challenges we overcome every day. The storm represents your thoughts and the struggles that seem to consume us every day. I included some of mine on the steps the runner is climbing such as stress which is a big one I struggle with every day. It tends to bring out the part of me that sometimes freaks out, but once I “climb my steps” it feels amazing to know that I can actually overcome these situations. The runner is drawn as one continuous line and I used this method to represent that we are connected to all our thoughts and they make us who we are, so we can control our reactions through our thoughts. In the storm, I used red and black to act as “evil” colors to show that the storm is what she is trying to escape.

...by all means, keep moving
As the girl climbs up the steps, she trips so close to the top and has to crawl up the last step. [...]. The girl finally finds her wings and is surrounded by sunlight instead of a storm along with all the little things/words that helped her get through her storm. Things maybe friends or family may have said that made her realize she or anyone can overcome their challenges. The girl at the top I also drew with angel wings because I believe that God also helps me overcome my challenges, to represent an angel reaching out to the girl on the top step. The girl with her wings is also looking back over the storm she overcame. The whole point is to show that the challenges we overcome everyday are huge accomplishments and we should be proud when we can overcome them.