
*From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

Can Efforts to Increase Mental Health Awareness also Do Harm?

A recent article in the Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition argues that while mental health awareness efforts have reduced stigma and improved access to care, they may also produce unintended negative effects – especially for young people.

See: *Why Mental Health Awareness Can Harm: Converging Explanations for a Societal Problem*
<https://www.ovid.com/journals/jarmac/abstract/10.1037/mac0000278~why-mental-health-awareness-can-harm-converging-explanations?redirectionsource=fulltextview>

The authors emphasize that efforts to increase awareness are well-intentioned and have yielded benefits. *At the same time, concern is growing about how increased awareness may inadvertently reshape how people interpret and respond to everyday stressors.*

Two key concerns are highlighted:

- A blurring between normal emotional experiences and clinical disorders, where everyday stress, sadness, or worry are increasingly interpreted as symptoms of pathology
- An over-focus on internal states that may amplify distress, as heightened monitoring of thoughts and emotions can intensify normal fluctuations and make them feel more overwhelming

A related issue involves the rapid adoption of diagnostic labels. When people take on such labels too quickly, they may begin to view themselves primarily through a lens of illness. Over time, this can lower expectations – for themselves and others – for coping, adaptation, and rebounding.

The caution is not a call to reduce mental health awareness, but to rebalance it. Awareness remains essential – but it must be paired with equal attention to strengthening people’s capacity to handle challenges.

Effective awareness efforts, therefore, should:

- Distinguish clearly between normal responses to life challenges and clinically significant conditions
- Emphasize coping skills, resilience, growth, and social supports as buffers against distress
- Warn against over-identification with diagnostic labels
- Highlight prevention and the promotion of well-being – not just the identification of problems

In short, awareness should not only identify problems – it should actively emphasize pursuing mental *health*, as well as navigating the challenges.

We look forward to hearing from you about this or any other related matters you want to share.

Best wishes and be well,

Howard & Linda

*Howard Adelman, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology & Center Co director

Linda Taylor, Ph.D., Center Co director

Dept. of Psychology, UCLA

Emails: adelman@psych.ucla.edu Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Website: <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>