

Good evening—thank you for inviting me here tonight. I have been blessed and privileged to have had the opportunity to work with both Bob Anthony and Nadja Reilly on mental health initiatives for almost 15 years. My journey into this field began when my own daughter Caroline was exhibiting signs and symptoms of depression. I have a vast family history but I don't think anything prepares you for journeying with your child suffering: That frightening, helpless feeling is something I will never forget. But tonight I am here to talk to you not as a parent but as a school nurse. I have worked as a middle school nurse for the past 18 years and have watched the acuity in mental health issues grow exponentially. I have my theories—with one of them being technology and the developing brain but regardless of what has caused the increase, what is even more concerning is that there is still a lack of education with students, parents and educators. Over the past 18 months, I have worked with NAMI and participated in presentations to educators. Each participant is given a copy of this booklet—which starts off by saying that in Jan 3, 2001, the Surgeon General of the US released a report stating that 12% of American children under the age of 18 have a diagnosable mental illness. That was 17 years ago and yet in the 18 years I have been a school nurse, there have been only a few educational opportunities for staff to learn more to support their students who are suffering. We also now know that those statistics have increased to 20% of children under the age of 18 have a diagnosable mental health illness but the most upsetting statistics are that the average delay between onset and symptoms is 8-10 years and 50% of youth do not get help for their illness. That is unacceptable.

Every day, countless students come to see me with various complaints: the major ones being stomachaches and headaches...asking the right questions gives me the opportunity to educate them on the effects of stress and anxiety on their bodies. I was at a conference once and the presenter suggested the use of 3 little words, "Tell me more"... very simple, but very effective. I have tried hard to really listen to my students. My best teacher along the way has been my daughter Caroline. She taught me that validation is critical. "I'm so sorry you feel that way" or 'I'm so sorry for what you are going through' is much more effective than anything else we can say. I learned about self-injury the hard way—when she started cutting. Admittedly, I didn't handle it the right way. But because I learned from her, I now say to my students, I am so sorry you're in that much pain that you would hurt yourself. Caroline also taught me that she needed to be heard. I think all of us want to be heard! We need to really take the time to look our children, friends, co-workers, spouses in the eye and listen to them. We need to be kind to everyone we meet b/c we don't know what may be going on in their lives. 6<sup>th</sup> graders in particular often present with major anxiety issues. It is a huge transition going from elementary school to middle school. And math class seems to trigger anxiety for many. One of my adorable 6<sup>th</sup> graders with red hair and freckles frequented my office a lot at the beginning of the school year. Math class was a trigger and in particular her teacher. My little friend would come in crying saying the teacher didn't like her and would tell me what happened.. I spoke with the teacher and relayed the story. The teacher said to me but I do like her..and my response to her was that the bottom line is she thinks you don't—so only you can fix it... I try to talk to my teachers about perception versus reality and remind them that anxious children will absolutely sense anxiety in a teacher! This young lady is doing so much better because she was also picked up for an IEP. We

have been fortunate in our district to have a wonderful team chairperson who is absolutely on board with students being picked up for social emotional concerns even if there are no learning difficulties detected in the testing! It's about time! This young lady is also in counseling and on meds and I spent a great deal of time at the beginning of the year not only supporting her but her mom as well. I have a unique perspective because I am not only the nurse in my building but I am a mom who has been on the same journey. I remember how lonely I felt especially at the beginning.

There is another 7<sup>th</sup> grader in my building who has been a concern to teachers and guidance alike since last year. A few months ago we did our SOS program for 7<sup>th</sup> graders which stands for Signs of Suicide but the biggest message is ACT- acknowledge, care and tell. Every year, we educate over 200 students and their parents. We also screen the students. This child's screening was off the charts and she indicated suicidal thoughts. Even with this knowledge, the parents still hesitated to get her help. I spoke with the mother myself and told her my story..or my daughter Caroline's story. I asked her if I could have a release of information form to speak to the pediatrician. She agreed and I had a wonderful talk with the MD. I let her know what has been going on since 6<sup>th</sup> grade with this student. This young lady is now on meds and counseling as well and is a totally different person.. It is almost as though she finally felt heard! I wish school nurses had releases to speak to all student's pediatricians. Maybe then the statistic about delay in treatment or even worse, no treatment would improve. I am a firm believer that a team approach is the best way!

I will remain hopeful that with Adolescent Wellness, individuals like Bob Anthony and Nadja Reilly and many others trying to make a difference, mental illness will be treated like any other illness. It will be identified earlier and treated earlier. And I will continue to do my part to advocate for people like my daughter Caroline...And speaking of Caroline, she is now 28 years of age, almost 29. She has her undergraduate degree from Stonehill College in early elementary education and her Master's Degree in Special Ed from Leslie in Cambridge. She is a well-loved 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in Somerville. I have had the opportunity to visit her classroom and meet her students. All over her classroom are reminders that Kindness Matters. To say I am a proud and grateful mother is an understatement....There is a sign in my clinic that I would like to end with today: Never give up on someone with a mental illness. When 'i' is replaced by we' illness becomes wellness. Thanks for listening.