



CREATE HOPE in the WORLD

Presidential Initiative:
Mental Health and Well-being

Message from 2023-24 RI President R. Gordon R. McNally

At the 2023 International Assembly, I proposed that Rotary make mental health a priority and talked about why this issue is so personal for me. I was overwhelmed by the response. In the days and months afterward, I was even more impressed with the way Rotary members freely shared with me the challenges they faced — and I was humbled by their bravery.

That made me think: This is exactly what Rotary is all about. Our clubs and our global community create opportunities for members to be their whole, authentic selves in the name of Service Above Self. We show each other comfort and care. We share with friends not just the good times and triumphs, but also the moments when nothing is going right. At our best, we create a place where we can freely ask each other: How are you? How are you *really*?

We have this unique ability to connect people and cultures — to give hope and receive it through our acts of kindness. It is who we are. And now is the time to build on this potential to expand this culture of care within Rotary and to the world.

Sadly, in many parts of the world and for some people, it is considered a weakness to discuss mental health. But it is brave to step forward and show vulnerability. Likewise, cultural barriers are an excuse Rotary has never accepted. We can help people everywhere build their resilience and get the care they need.

Doing this will benefit the communities we serve, as well as our members who engage in this service. Research shows that performing acts of kindness is the most effective step we can take to protect our own sense of well-being and to make us more resilient to the challenges of life. At Rotary, we live those findings. We know that our opportunities through Rotary are making us and our communities healthier and stronger.

We can and will create the kind of world we want to live in: one where we all have the chance to help and to seek help. We can do this by:

- ▶ Erasing the stigma associated with caring about emotional well-being
- ▶ Raising awareness about mental health needs
- ▶ Working to improve access to mental health services

I have seen someone close to me suffer through adversity in silence and be consumed by it. All of us, perhaps unknowingly, have had loved ones trying their best to endure. I have also witnessed the power of personal connections, the value of making it a priority to discuss mental well-being, and the lifesaving impact of access to preventive care and treatment.

You are never alone in Rotary. Together, we can support one another, our loved ones, our clubs, and our communities to *Create Hope in the World*.



R. Gordon R. McNally
2023-24 RI President

WHY THIS MATTERS

Mental and emotional health are essential to our overall wellness. These factors can affect our physical health as well as how we relate to our friends, family, and community. And they affect us at the individual, local, and global levels. The World Health Organization puts it this way:

Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relations, and shape the world as we live in it. Mental health is a basic human right, and it is crucial to personal, community, and socioeconomic development.

According to WHO, 1 in 8 people worldwide, or 970 million people, live with significant mental health conditions. Adequate resources to prevent and treat these conditions aren't reliably available in all parts of the world, and in low- and middle-income countries, up to 85% of people with some mental health conditions receive no treatment at all.

WHO has also compiled research that shows people with mental health issues can be more likely to have other health conditions. For example, having depression can predispose someone to having diabetes or a heart attack. Similarly, living with a chronic disease or experiencing a significant health-related challenge can put someone at a higher risk of developing depression.

A person's circumstances also can be a factor. Poverty, violence, disability, and inequality can put people at a higher risk for mental health issues.

A lack of adequate support or resources to address these issues can destabilize families and disengage people from their communities.

These interconnected factors illustrate the need to discuss mental health on a global level, and to remedy the gaps in support.

Everyone in Rotary has a role in this effort. We don't need to be mental health professionals to make a positive difference. We can treat others with care, respect, and dignity. We can ensure that people feel valued through a smile, a phone call, a visit, or another caring gesture. We can talk openly about mental health, let people know they're not alone, and encourage them to get treatment if necessary. By putting a greater focus on emotional well-being throughout the Rotary world, we can make an incredible impact.

Rotarians and Rotaractors can provide support to one another. We can help each other prioritize self-care in the ways that are most meaningful to each of us, and we can offer help when we know someone is having difficulties, is overwhelmed, or needs assistance. We can also ensure that our clubs offer a welcoming environment where everyone who interacts with us is treated with respect, kindness, dignity, and care.

All of us can take some simple but powerful steps in our clubs and districts to leverage our full power to create hope. The suggestions in this guide are meant to inspire you to find ideas that are right for your club and your community.

SUPPORT THROUGH ROTARY

The **Rotary Action Group on Mental Health Initiatives** is a global community of Rotary members and friends with expertise in or a deep commitment to creating and supporting opportunities for people to improve their mental health.

Speakers from the group can talk about eliminating the stigma associated with mental health issues, raising awareness, and increasing access to prevention and treatment. The group also offers toolkits and other resources to help you start or expand mental health service efforts.

Members of the group can offer feedback on your ideas and help you identify partners through local or national organizations to start or expand your club or district mental health initiatives.

Other action groups specialize in related topics, such as addiction prevention. **Review the list of Rotary Action Groups** and contact them directly for guidance with your service initiatives.

Consult your district resource network, led by the district international service chair, to connect with local professionals who have expertise in mental health. You can also consider applying for a **Rotary Foundation district or global grant** to support your efforts.

ELIMINATING THE STIGMA

Taking care of our physical health is often commended, but prioritizing our mental health can be stigmatized. Mental health and emotional well-being are too often associated with shame, and this social stigma can prevent people from expressing their feelings or seeking support.

You can help remove negative associations from conversations about mental health. Some ideas to consider:

- ▶ Make well-being a regular topic of club discussions so that talking about it feels normal. At the club level, you might sometimes randomize the seating to help people meet newcomers or survey people anonymously about their well-being. Individually, you can strengthen your relationships and actively listen when people want to share.
- ▶ Ask any mental health professionals in your club or district about what stigma exists in your community related to these issues. Dedicate time during meetings to discuss these stigmas and how you can counteract them to facilitate mental well-being in your area.
- ▶ Invite professionals such as licensed therapists, medical practitioners, or educators that support mental health to discuss strategies that address well-being. The speakers could include spiritual leaders who share nonreligious practices that might resonate.
- ▶ Find out what local efforts to address mental health stigmas already exist that your club or district can support. Work to strengthen and expand these campaigns and develop a strategy to keep raising awareness through existing programs and initiatives.
- ▶ Form partnerships with local, regional, or national organizations with expertise in mental health and wellness that can design and implement campaigns that fight any stigma associated with these issues.

Beyond conversations that specifically address mental health issues, you can also make some general changes in your club that foster an environment where people feel comfortable being their authentic selves. This encourages a sense of belonging and safety. You could:

- ▶ Organize social activities or networking opportunities away from the usual club setting for members to get to know each other better. People might talk more freely about themselves, and building that environment can create opportunities to offer people support with personal or professional challenges.
 - ▶ Be aware of the signs of burnout. This condition often results from excessive stress at work, school, home, or in volunteer settings. It can lead to significant mental health issues. It's important to advocate for yourself about how much you can do and also make sure it's something your club leaders are aware of.
 - ▶ Incorporate activities into meetings and events to help members and participants explore strategies that support well-being, like a yoga or meditation session, or strategies for managing stress and avoiding burnout.
-

RAISING AWARENESS

We can take action to increase awareness about these issues or advocate for the resources that people in our communities need to live healthier lives. Some ideas to consider:

- ▶ Learn about reliable resources for different kinds of support, such as what organization to call if you're concerned about a friend and which one to call during a crisis. Share these resources and encourage people to prioritize their mental health and seek help when needed.
- ▶ Promote existing local or national resources. These might be confidential support phone lines where people can speak with trained mental health professionals, or they could be emergency services for people in crisis.
- ▶ Ask mental health experts to hold a session about working with vulnerable communities, such as people without housing or survivors of natural disasters. This can sensitize people to the emotional considerations of those you support.
- ▶ Invite mental health professionals to discuss ways people can increase their resilience and seek help. This could be at a club meeting, district assembly, or community event, with speakers such as counselors, therapists, doctors, professors, or spiritual leaders.
- ▶ Form partnerships with secondary schools and universities aimed at encouraging more people to pursue careers in mental health or specialized training. Your club or district could create or support a scholarship for aspiring mental health professionals.

Mental health is a critical issue for young people, often due to the physical, emotional, and social changes they are experiencing. You could raise awareness in this area by:

- ▶ Exploring possible collaborations with organizations that specialize in social-emotional learning and development for youths. This may help create or support activities that strengthen your RYLA, Rotary Youth Exchange, and Interact programs and help young leaders learn about their own mental well-being.
 - ▶ Including social-emotional learning with professionals in the preparation for outbound students and host families in your district's Rotary Youth Exchange program. Invite program leaders, like district youth exchange officers, to also take part.
 - ▶ Expanding on the great work to raise awareness being done by youth leaders. Young people are often more comfortable discussing this subject and take innovative approaches to reaching wider audiences. Support youth-led campaigns and share engagement opportunities with your club or program participants.
 - ▶ Fostering conversations about mental health across age groups by inviting Interactors and youth leaders to discuss how they approach and support mental health. Together, you can explore the cultural and generational barriers to talking about these issues.
 - ▶ Having professionals supplement your youth protection training by leading sessions about mental health for club members who work directly with young people.
-

INCREASING ACCESS TO PREVENTIVE CARE AND TREATMENT

We can do a significant amount to support mental health worldwide by connecting our members and our communities to resources. We can also promote approaches to mental health and well-being that are based on evidence and have been proven to work. Some ideas to consider:

- ▶ Contact organizations that work in mental health care to discuss the local needs and how your club can help expand people's access to prevention and treatment.
- ▶ Work with medical centers and health systems to advocate that they incorporate mental health support in primary care for children and adults, if they don't already do so.
- ▶ Partner with mental health practitioners to advocate that screenings and access to treatment be added to existing programs that offer health and wellness services.
- ▶ Explore ways to expand regional or national efforts to provide access to preventive services or to treat mental health issues in underserved communities.

Beyond these kinds of collaborations, you could:

- ▶ Explore ways to create or expand training so that community health workers can provide mental health services, particularly to underserved communities.
 - ▶ Think about how a vocational training team could support primary care practitioners in these same communities.
 - ▶ Develop programs to create or expand access to telephone consultations with trained professionals, either for scheduled appointments or for people in crisis.
 - ▶ Work with Interact clubs to support mental health wellness in schools and among youth groups.
-

TIPS TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

STRIVE TO:	AVOID:
Invest in intentional, meaningful relationships that build a sense of belonging.	Trying to have a conversation about a difficult topic in a space that doesn't offer privacy.
Learn the signs and symptoms of mental illness to increase your own knowledge and help you raise awareness.	Dismissing mentions of uneasiness or sadness. Instead, use them as opportunities to engage in further discussion.
Discuss the importance of self-care and share examples that may resonate with others. Use wording that challenges stereotypes or myths and makes it clear that mental health issues are only one part of who someone is.	Advising a specific intervention or solution when you discuss a mental health issue. Leave this to professionals with expertise.
Learn what professional mental health resources are available in your area or nation and share them as appropriate.	Offering unsolicited advice, no matter how well-intended. Someone might want to share without seeking solutions.
Be an active listener. Give people your full attention and be aware of your body language (for example, try to sit up straight and make eye contact). Acknowledge what the person is telling you.	Engaging in comparisons. Sharing personal experiences can be a powerful way to connect, but everyone's situation is different. Make sure to recognize the other person's experience.
Validate what people say and be empathetic. This could mean saying, "I appreciate that you are sharing this with me," or "It must have been difficult to talk about this."	Minimizing what someone is experiencing by using language such as, "It could always be worse," or something similar.
Ask open-ended questions, such as, "What was that like for you?" or "How did that make you feel?" These give people an opportunity to share without judgment.	Invalidating the feelings that someone shares with you, such as by saying, "You're overreacting," or "You'll be fine."
Use appropriate language that focuses on the person, not the mental health issue (for example, say, "She has depression" rather than, "She's depressed"). Use evidence-based wording in line with professional practice.	Using language that labels or stigmatizes someone, such as describing people or situations as "crazy" or "insane."
Be a mental health ally. In this role, you can support someone and offer resources or direct them to professionals as appropriate.	Trying to fix everything for someone who confides in you or says they need support. Seek out resources and be an ally for them.

LEARN FROM YOUR PEERS AND SHARE YOUR EFFORTS

Browse the Mental Health Initiatives campaign through [Rotary Showcase](#) to find out how other clubs and districts are identifying and addressing mental health priorities in their communities. Share your own efforts to destigmatize mental health issues and erase misperceptions about these issues. You can also share the ways in which you're advocating for support and working to expand access to care and treatment.

We'd also love to know about your club experiences with the mental health initiative — from discussions and personal interactions that people are comfortable sharing to new global grant-funded projects. Write to mindhealth@rotary.org to tell us your stories.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, please seek help from a medical expert, trained crisis professional, or emergency personnel.

