



CHANGING

the way we talk about and treat

MENTAL ILLNESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A GUIDE TO EDUCATION, AWARENESS & SUPPORT
FOR ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES





A WORD OF THANKS FROM THE FOUNDATION

Thank you for taking time to learn more about mental health in our communities, specifically as it relates to our adolescent sons, daughters, students and neighbors. There is a critical need for greater awareness and understanding of mental illness – what it is and how we can help those living with it. After losing my eighteen year-old son to suicide in January 2020, my family and I have committed ourselves to making a positive difference in adolescent mental health.

It can be done. In fact, as a grassroots effort, we have a fighting chance to create change within individual communities. And by creating a repeatable model, we can have an even broader impact.

Our focus is to:

- Support adolescents in school in their awareness and understanding of mental illness
- Educate parents, teachers, coaches and other adults involved with our youth on the definition, symptoms and effects of adolescent mental illness
- Facilitate candid conversations about mental illness, de-stigmatize it and take concrete actions to support the individuals and families impacted by it

The greatest tragedy in life is to lose a child. When we lost Chase, my family and I came to understand that too many families are losing their children both figuratively and literally to mental illness. While we do not expect to eliminate mental illness among our youth or cure its effects, we should be able to significantly impact and potentially reverse the trends that are claiming more and more young lives.

We are passionate about making change happen one community, one family, at a time. We hope you will join us and play an active part in your community. Together let's address teenage mental illness head-on. Let's take it out of the shadows, cast a light on it and help everyone understand it. We'll begin by taking small steps that will lead to big change.

Sincerely,

David Bjork

Co-founder, Chase Bjork Foundation





CHASE'S STORY

Chase Christian Bjork was by all accounts a great kid. He lived in a caring and well-educated Massachusetts community and was surrounded by good friends, an involved and supportive family and lots of pets. He never met an animal he didn't love! He was highly intelligent, and a pillar of kindness and love to all he touched.

Despite the near-constant pain he was feeling, he never stopped treating everyone around him with kindness, love and respect. He was present in his family and community and yet, this beautiful young man shocked everyone when he took his own life in January 2020. Chase Bjork's family, like so many in Massachusetts and across the country, has been immeasurably impacted by his mental health disorders and resulting suicide.

Chase was noticeably anxious when he was 14. His symptoms progressed by the time he was 16. He and his family sought help for his mental illness for years, to no avail. As a result, Chase and his family experienced first-hand many of the breaks in the healthcare system (specifically the behavioral healthcare system) in the United States.

One of the most tragic breaks is that Chase's condition went undiagnosed for more than a year. Identifying mental illness in our own children is something every parent wants to be equipped to do, and yet none of us are educated on how to actually do it. Parents aren't typically acquainted with even the basics of mental illness. And neither are our children. The Chase Bjork Foundation was created to address this precise issue.

Our mission is focused on promoting awareness and education about adolescent mental illness among the full sphere of influence on our adolescents: parents, guardians, families and other important influencers in the community such as teachers, coaches, clergy and their peers. We will help by providing an improved understanding of:

- What mental illness is
- How to identify it
- How we, as a community, can support those living and struggling with it
- How to talk about it
- Who is impacted by mental illness

Through programs like those sponsored by the Chase Bjork Foundation, adolescents, their families, community members and peers will be made aware of and educated on the topic, ushering in a new era of understanding and, in turn, a de-stigmatization of the issue so that more rapid progress can be made.



Chase Christian Bjork

8/21/2001 – 1/30/2020

High school student. Friend.

Beloved child. Brother. Neighbor.
Schoolmate. Adored grandchild.

Someone well known or just in passing.

A familiar face around town.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental illness impacts each of our lives far more than we realize.

Take a moment to put yourself in this hypothetical situation:

- You suddenly become responsible for the well-being of all the children (10-18) in your local community for the next ten years.
- You discover that one in four (26%) of these kids suffers from an illness that will most likely impact them for the rest of their lives.
- Treatment only happens after the illness has become so acute that the kids suffering from it have already been harmed.
- No one in the community wants to talk about the illness. In fact, kids that are afflicted as well as their parents and siblings, don't want to admit that the illness exists because there is such a strong stigma associated with it.
- The stigma very often translates to isolation and bullying for the affected child.
- The kids that live with this illness suffer so badly that every twelve months one in ten attempts to kill themselves.

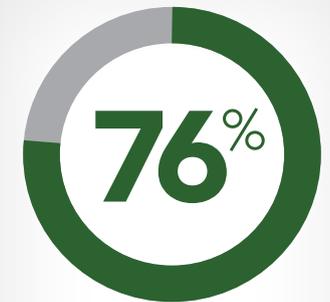
And then you learn that:

- The prevalence of this illness increases every year.
- No one educates people (families, educators, even primary care physicians) about this illness.
- There are not enough healthcare resources to care for the kids suffering from the illness.
- And although you have good insurance, treatment, providers and prescriptions are not adequately covered.

I suspect you would view this illness as a critical condition that needs to be addressed – substantively and immediately. You might also wonder with frustration why more wasn't already being done. And you'd very likely be motivated to do something about this devastating illness yourself.

The illness is adolescent mental illness. And the time for action is now.

Mental illness is much more prevalent than most of us realize, and it is especially important to address adolescent mental illness because one in four kids has a clinically-diagnosable mental disorder that spans the spectrum of anxiety, stress, depression, substance abuse and psychotic disorders. This incidence has long-term impact: 76% of all mental illness that will last a lifetime is onset during adolescence.



of all mental
illness is
onset during
adolescence.

Source: U.S. CDC, 2020





The mental health of our children is a very real and highly prevalent issue.

The incidence of mental illness—and indeed suicidal ideation and attempts—affect a large number among the high school population. Consider that more than 26% of our high school age kids are living with clinically-diagnosable mental illness. Included in that number are 2% of high school students who will attempt to take their own lives, resulting in the need to seek medical attention. **In a high school with 1,000 students, the equivalent of an entire classroom—20 students—will attempt suicide every year.**

Sadly, the mental health of our children is something our society is not discussing. The majority of parents, teachers, school administrators and the teens themselves are not educated on the topic. They actually—and actively—avoid discussing the subject because of the stigmas, myths and realities associated with it. Furthermore, the prevalence of mental illness is on the rise as is its most tragic conclusion – the incidence of adolescent suicide. The corresponding trends offer vivid proof of the powerful grip that mental illness has on this young and highly vulnerable population.

Reaching, identifying, treating and supporting high schoolers is a public health imperative. It all starts with education and awareness.

The mission of the Chase Bjork Foundation is to raise awareness and understanding of mental illness and promote the fundamental need for mental health and fitness among adolescents. We will do this by educating adolescents, their families and our communities.

Through our initiatives, we will strive to make adolescents and their parents aware of mental illness and the likelihood that it will affect them directly. We will educate them on what mental illness is; how to identify it; how to discuss it; and what to do about it. We are specifically starting with high school students because as a group, they are suffering the most. Resources that we deliver during these extremely important years can have a material and lasting impact.

Our approach is to work directly with school districts to make “mental health and fitness” programming available to high school students. High schools are well positioned to deliver this because they have the students' attendance and attention, as well as the oversight to observe its impact.



of high school students have a **diagnosable mental illness**



U.S. high schools are inundated with mental illness and are not equipped to handle the magnitude of the issue. Meanwhile, in parallel, our care system for teenagers living with mental illness is not working, despite the collective cost of multi-faceted approaches. Statistical data tell the story of a system that is horribly ineffective, and simply broken at its core.

Variables that comprise the broken pieces of this puzzle include:

- Low or non-existent insurance coverage and reimbursements
- Limited access to care
- Highly lacking or non-existent care coordination, including transitions of care
- An absence of standardization among specific care protocols



Compounding the problem further is a woeful imbalance in professional resource supply and demand. There is simply not enough properly trained support for the volumes of students and parents who need help.

Mental health has been identified by numerous organizations as an important public health issue, and much is being done at many levels to address the systemic problems associated with identification and treatment. Federal and state governments, health systems, health insurance companies, cause-related associations, school systems and health professionals are all making efforts to address mental illness. However, the services provided by these organizations are siloed efforts that do not deliver a coordinated benefit to the mentally ill. In addition, service provision is weighted more heavily on post-diagnosis treatment rather than early detection.

For decades, messaging about cancer has promoted that early detection is instrumental to increase positive outcomes. The same is true for mental illness. Too many lives are impacted by the inefficiencies and inadequacies of a broken system. The breaks in the system cannot be fixed soon enough. We need to solve the problems that are happening here and now. Our kids cannot wait.

The Chase Bjork Foundation is purpose-driven to support communities in the education and awareness of adolescent mental illness. Being better informed at the community level will instigate a groundswell of important action and will have a profound and positive impact on the lives of many.



of high school students will attempt suicide and hurt themselves in the process.

Every 12 months.*

That's a full classroom of kids every year!**



"It takes a village,"
they say... In the case of mental illness,
nothing could be more true.

We need communities of people who are tuned in, educated, and willing to become involved.
We need knowledge and understanding to become woven into the fabric of our culture.

Please join us in our quest to raise awareness of adolescent mental health and to educate teens, their families and the communities in which they live, about what mental illness is, how to discuss it, how to assess it and what to do about it.



Visit chasebjorkfoundation.org to learn how you can become involved.