



Recommendations for Universal Mental Health Screenings

Schools play a critical role in monitoring, intervening and supporting the mental well-being of young people. One component of a comprehensive plan for supporting youth mental health is the use of universal mental health screenings. When a school decides to move forward with administering universal screenings, there is a set of guidelines and best practices that they should follow.

Recommendations for Best Practices Include:

- **Mental Health Literacy Instruction:** It's important for schools to provide mental health education regardless of whether a universal screening is being conducted. This helps create a supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help.
- **System of Care:** Schools need to ensure that they have created a system of care within the school to support students.
- **Triage:** Universal mental health screenings should be used to identify at-risk students.
- **Comprehensive Approach:** Universal mental health screenings are just one piece of a larger plan within schools to promote mental wellness among students.
- **Valid and Reliable:** Schools should use valid and reliable instruments with concern for cultural sensitivity and bias.
- **Routine Times:** Universal mental health screenings should be administered at routine times, similar to vision and hearing screenings. For example, in the middle of a school year, transition to a new school, such as transitioning to middle or high school
- **Early Identification and Prevention:** Students do better when they feel well emotionally. Universal Screenings are one way to help identify and intervene early.
- **Teach:** Mental health literacy regardless of the use of universal screenings.
- **Fishing Net:** Schools should think of universal mental health screenings as casting a fishing net. The results may indicate that some students are in need of additional services; however, screenings will not capture every student. Schools need to continue to offer high-quality mental health literacy instruction, staff training, and foster environments where students feel comfortable seeking help.
- **Mental Health Screenings vs Suicide Prevention Screenings:** If schools utilize a universal mental health screening, the screening tool should focus on a variety of mental health disorders as well as daily living habits (sleep, nutrition, stress) as a prevention measure. Suicide Prevention screenings should be administered if a student could be at risk for suicide (via self-reporting, staff reporting, peer reporting).
- **Informing Parents/Guardians:** Schools need to have a comprehensive plan in place for informing parents/guardians if their young person's screening comes back as at-risk. The school should work collaboratively with families for ongoing plans of support for students at risk.
- **Policy and legislation:** Every school should follow district policy and legislation for suicide prevention and mental health screenings.



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- **Understanding Screener vs Assessment:** There is often confusion between screenings and assessments. It's important to know that there is a significant difference between a universal mental health screening and a psychological assessment. According to the American Psychological Association:
 - **Screenings:**
 - Are used for the early identification of individuals at potentially high risk for a specific condition or disorder
 - Can indicate a need for further evaluation or preliminary intervention
 - Are generally brief and narrow in scope
 - Are used to monitor treatment progress, outcome, or change in symptoms over time
 - Support staff follow an established protocol for scoring with a pre-established cut-off score and guidelines for individuals that score positive.
 - Are neither definitively diagnostic nor a definitive indication of a specific condition or disorder
 - **Assessments:**
 - Provide a more complete clinical picture of an individual
 - Are comprehensive in focusing on the individual's functioning across multiple domains
 - Can aid in an accurate diagnosis and/or treatment planning
 - Can identify psychological problems and conditions, indicate their severity, and provide treatment recommendations
 - Integrate results from multiple psychological tests, clinical interviews, behavioral observations, clinical record reviews, and collateral information
 - May include screening measures that are used in conjunction with other information from the assessment, providing a broader context for interpreting the results
 - May use screening results to determine the choice of instruments for an assessment
 - May cover domains of functioning, such as memory and language, visual and verbal problem-solving, executive functioning, adaptive functioning, psychological status, capacity for self-care, relevant psychosocial history, and others needed to respond to the referral questions

Additional Resources and guidance on Universal Screenings:

[National Institute of Health](#)

[US Prevention Task Force: Depression and Suicide Risk](#)

[American School Counselor Association](#)

[SAMHSA's Recommendation for school based suicide prevention](#)

[SAMHSA's Behavioral Health Risks in Schools](#)

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If this is an emergency, please call 911.