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# Preparing 21st Century English Teachers: Using Young Adult Literature to Challenge Stereotyping and Reduce Stigma of Marginalized Populations

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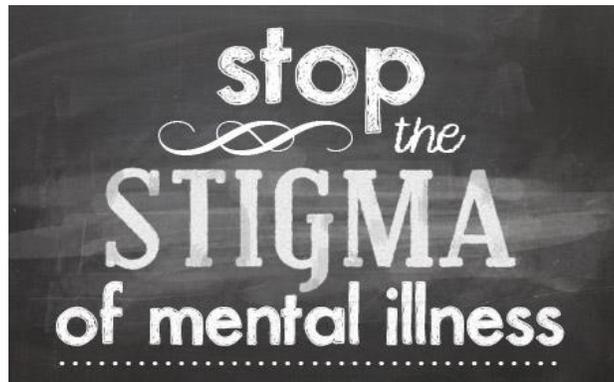
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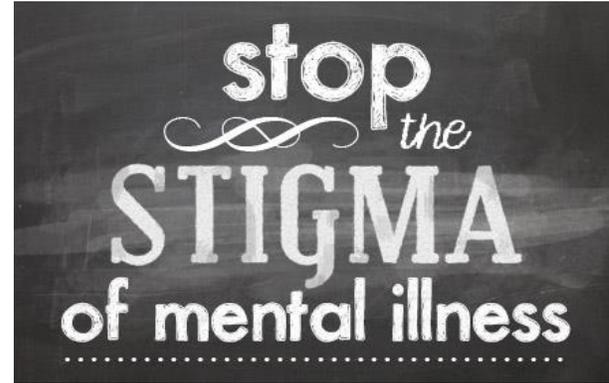
# Preparing 21st Century English Teachers: Using Young Adult Literature to Challenge Stereotyping and Reduce Stigma of Marginalized Populations

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# Mental Illness Stereotypes

ACTIVITY: Alone or with a partner

Please write down words that you have heard which refer to someone with mental illness. You might think about terms you've read in books, seen in movies, or heard in songs. Or, if you prefer, sketch images or symbols that might represent mental illness.

*photo credit: Dr. Sarah-Louise Quinnell*

# Mental Illness Stereotypes

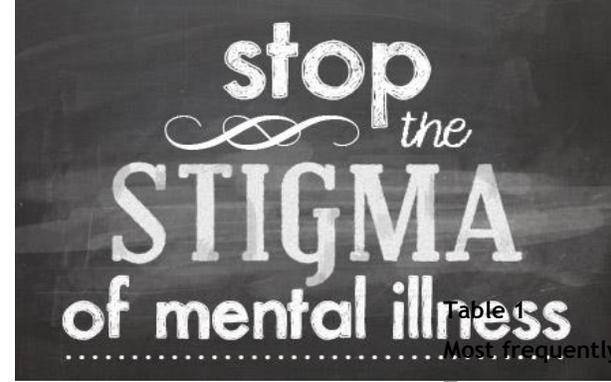


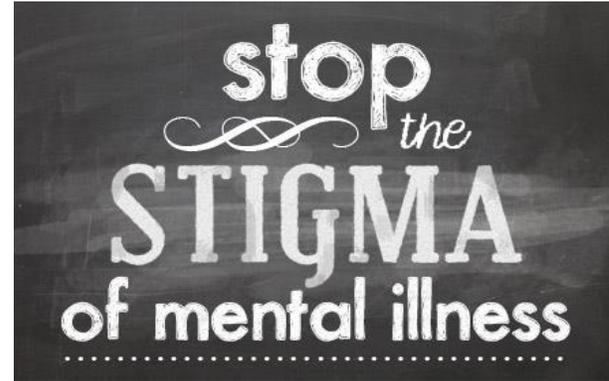
Table 1  
Most frequently occurring words and terms

Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency
Disturbed	11	Scary	5
Nuts	11	Div	4
Confused	10	Dumb	4
Psycho	10	Ill	4
Spastic	10	Loneliness	4
Crazy	9	Loony bin	4
Depression	7	Psychiatric	4
Disabled	7	Screw loose	4
Mad	7	Stress	4
Unpredictable	7	Violence	4
Insane	6	Brain dead	3
Loony	6	Demanding	3
Mental	6	Demented	3
Schizophrenia	6	Dinlo	3
Thicko	6	Distressed	3
Weird	6	Embarrassed	3
Depressed	5	Flid	3
Different	5	Frustrated	3
Freak	5	Isolated	3
Odd	5	Sad	3
Problem	5	Strait jacket	3
Retard	5	Wheel chairs	3

Disturbed. Nuts. Freak. Psycho. Spastic. Crazy. Mental

These labels are among the more than 200 that researchers (Rose, Thornicraft, Pinfold, & Kassam, 2007) identified as being used by young adults to stigmatize people with mental illness.

## More info



- ▶ Findings by Rose, Thornicraft, Pinfold, & Kassam (2007) suggest that “help-seeking by mentally ill young people may be improved by interventions that address both their lack of factual information about mental illness, and those which reduce their strong negative emotional reactions towards people with mental illness [63].”
- ▶ “...studies suggest that one of the key components of prejudice toward mental illness is fear, specifically the belief that mentally ill persons are “dangerous,” “unpredictable,” and “violent” (Phelan & Link, 1998)”
- ▶ One study by Caroline E. Mann (2010) indicates that “a perspective-taking intervention can successfully reduce prejudice toward mental illness, and that if the stimulus materials are vivid enough, participants may automatically assume a perspective-taking orientation.”

# Mental Illness Stigma



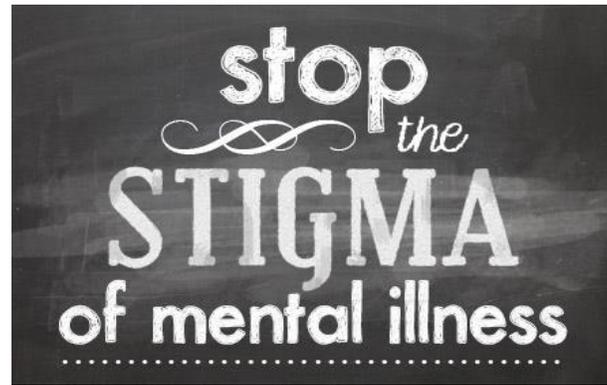
Mental illness stigma includes three concepts (Corrigan, 2004 ):

- ▶ **Stereotypes** - can include beliefs about people with mental illness (e.g., they are violent or dangerous) or that mental illness is due to a person’s action/inaction or a character flaw
- ▶ **Prejudice** -could be exhibited by the degree of willingness to engage in interactions with persons with mental illness (e.g., willing to become friends, work with, be neighbors)
- ▶ **Discrimination** - includes the social exclusion and negative social interactions as well as laws, policies, and practices that treat persons with mental illness unfairly (e.g., restricts rights their rights)

Note: The APA (2012) notes that affirming attitudes may reduce mental illness stigma. Other options include making people feel guilty for having prejudiced beliefs, inducing empathy for and promoting the empowerment of people with mental illness, and training people to unlearn stereotypes by repeatedly confronting them with their biases and having them practice inhibiting their stereotypes.

Among secondary school populations, educational interventions have yielded positive outcomes on attitudes and knowledge (Essler, Arthur, and Stickley, 2006; Rahman et al., 1998; Morrison, Becker, and Bourgeois, 1979). \*\* taken from “Interventions to Reduce Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination” Collins et al, 2012

# Recent Scholarship



- ▶ In a 2013 article in the *Wisconsin English Journal*, Katie Rybakova, Amy Piotrowski, and Ellie Harper talk about teaching *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2009), which includes “controversial issues such as suicide, underage drinking, bullying, and sexual molestation and harassment.” They note, even for “students who are not struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, this book allows them to see how they may affect a person’s life without knowing it.”
- ▶ In a recent YA lit class, JoeyLynn Selling (Ph.D. student at U of M) and I created an assignment in which students used social media to respond to Asher’s book with Facebook posts, Twitter hashtags, and Instagram. Doing so allowed them to discuss issues related to suicide using new media.

# Thirteen Reasons Why - Suicide

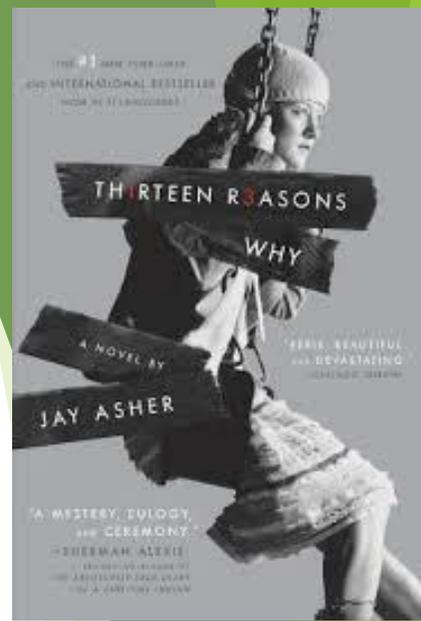
- ▶ According a recent study (2012), every two hours or so, a young adult under the age of 25 commits suicide (CDC cited in Rybakova, Piotrowski, & Harper, 2013).
- ▶ Hashtag - we asked English Ed students to include hashtags with their images as a way of summarizing the emotions surrounding the events that they chose to represent from the novel

Student # 1 #icansaytheword



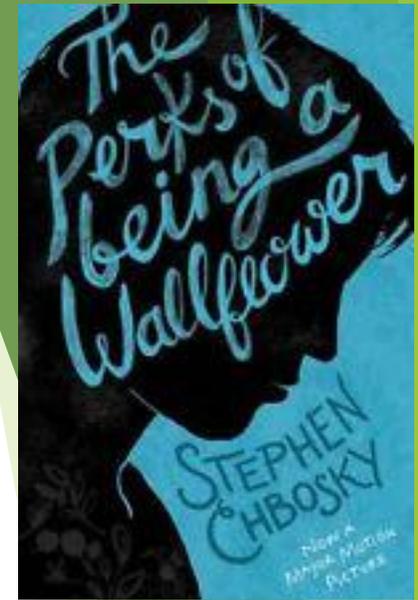
Student #2

Death was much more romantic for Romeo and Juliet. So was life. #i'mmnojuliet  
#whatcouldhavebeen #regrets

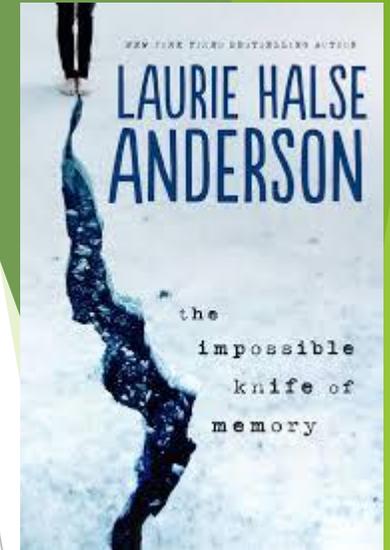


# Perks of Being a Wallflower - Depression and PTSD

- ▶ A few assignments to help students focus on the mental health issues while teaching *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* include:
  - ❖ Writing a poem or drawing a picture that represents Charlie's emotional state when dealing with PTSD or anxiety.
  - ❖ Reflecting with a partner on one of the following issues that Charlie experiences: anxiety, depression, panic attacks, or substance abuse. Discussing how you might help a friend who was dealing with a similar problem. (Providing students with informative literature and/or web sites could be beneficial before this activity.).
  - ❖ Discussing in small groups how Charlie is treated by others in the book and which characters provide empathy and/or help.
- ▶ NOTE: By discussing Charlie's relationship with his English teacher, my pre-service teachers predicted what they might do in their own classrooms to help students who could be struggling with mental illnesses.



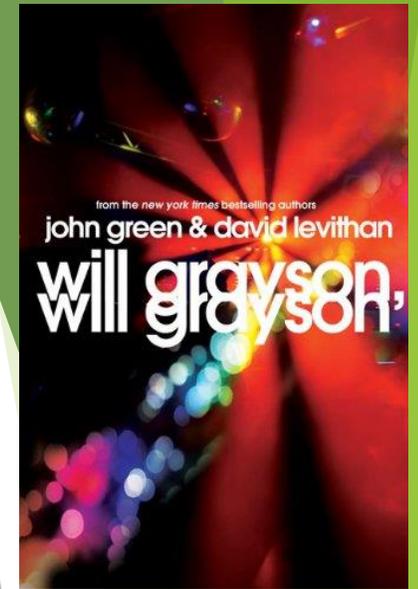
# *The Impossible Knife of Memory* - PTSD, depression, anxiety, addiction



- ▶ Laurie Halse Anderson's newest novel (2014) - *The Impossible Knife of Memory* - focuses on Hayley Kincaid's senior year and her struggles living with a father (Andy) who has PTSD and some addiction issues.
  - ❖ Who said this - Haley or her dad, Andy?
  - ❖ *"I swallowed the fear. It's always there – fear –and if you don't stay on top of it, you'll drown. I swallowed again and stood tall, shoulders broad, arms loose. I was balanced, ready to move."*
- ▶ Small group discussions could focus on both Haley and Andy's behaviors and how they fit with what we know about PTSD, depression, anxiety, and addiction (after reviewing information from the new DSM-5).
  - ❖ <http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/PTSD%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
  - ❖ <http://academicdepartments.musc.edu/psychiatry/education/DSM5/Fact%20Sheet%20PDFs/Substance%20Use%20Disorder.pdf>
  - ❖ <http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad>
  - ❖ <http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/depression>

# *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* by John Green and David Levithan

- ▶ This 2010 novel features two boys named Will Grayson, one of whom lives with depression.
- ▶ will says - “i think the idea of a 'mental health day' is something completely invented by people who have no clue what it's like to have bad mental health. the idea that your mind can be aired out in twenty-four hours is kind of like saying heart disease can be cured if you eat the right breakfast cereal. mental health days only exist for people who have the luxury of saying 'i don't want to deal with things today' and then can take the whole day off, while the rest of us are stuck fighting the fights we always fight, with no one really caring one way or another, unless we choose to bring a gun to school or ruin the morning announcements with a suicide.”
- ▶ Ask students to create two different Facebook pages for Will and will, adding images, words, and friendships that represent their characters.
- ▶ Discussion question: What do you think are the key points on the topic conveyed? How do you think depression and mental health are dealt with in the novel? What about in your social network or community?
- ▶ [https://d2wzqffx6hjwip.cloudfront.net/text-publishing/assets/e0/42aeb0490811e4b1d6811bcd6837c8/Will\\_Grayson\\_TeachersResource.pdf](https://d2wzqffx6hjwip.cloudfront.net/text-publishing/assets/e0/42aeb0490811e4b1d6811bcd6837c8/Will_Grayson_TeachersResource.pdf)



# Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson

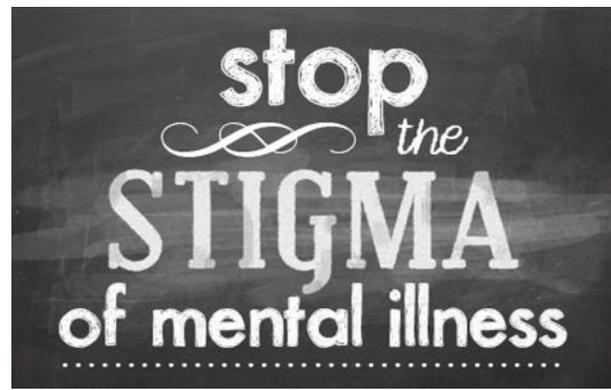
## Starved by Michael Somers

- ▶ Both of these books focus on characters who are living with eating disorders.
- ▶ “Lia and Cassie were best friends, wintergirls frozen in matchstick bodies. But now Cassie is dead. Lia’s mother is busy saving other people’s lives. Her father is away on business. Her stepmother is clueless. And the voice inside Lia’s head keeps telling her to remain in control, stay strong, lose more, weigh less. If she keeps on going this way - thin, thinner, thinnest - maybe she’ll disappear altogether. Laurie Halse Anderson explores one girl’s chilling descent into the all-consuming vortex of anorexia.”
- ▶ “Michael Somers’ debut novel, STARVED, tells the story about 17-year-old Nathan Thomas, a high school senior who develops anorexia and bulimia to cope with the pressures of school and home. STARVED takes us into an inpatient eating disorders treatment program, and is a first-of-its-kind telling that reminds us boys get eating disorders, too.”
- ▶ DISCUSSION: Look at the “Common Myths of Eating Disorders” and relate back to the novels.

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/Toolkits/EducatorToolkit.pdf>

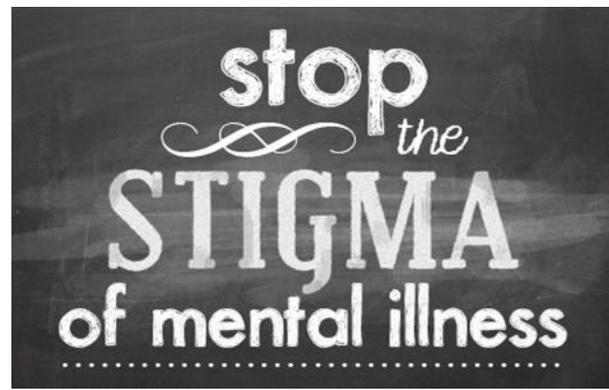


## OTHER YA BOOKS which feature characters with mental illnesses



- ▶ *Liar* (2009) - Justine Larbalestier
- ▶ *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007) - Sherman Alexie
- ▶ *The Burn Journals* (2004) - Brent Runyon
- ▶ *Cut* (2000) - Patricia McCormick
- ▶ *Lisa, Bright and Dark* (1969)- John Neufeld
- ▶ *Kissing Doorknobs* (1998) - Terry Hesser
- ▶ *My Friend Dahmer* (2013) - Derf Backderf
- ▶ *Just Listen* (2006)- Sarah Dessen
- ▶ Of course, there are many others. 😊

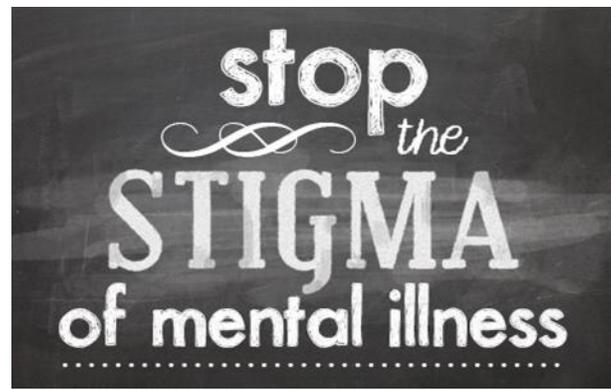
# WHY DO IT?



“It seems essential that teachers possess an understanding of normal and abnormal psychological development. They need not become experts in diagnosis or treatment; no one is suggesting they assume the role of therapist or counselor. But if we insist that regular classroom teachers receive training in special education, then why not instruction in mental health or, at the very least, the signs of potential danger?” (Thomas J. Cottle and Jennifer Greif Green, 2014)

- ▶ “Research on Mental Health Literacy suggests that when people can recognize what is being experienced by themselves or others as mental health distress there is a better chance that they will seek or offer help appropriately (Hight et al., 2004).”
- ▶ “Knowledge about mental health issues and stigma are related—as people know and understand more about the causes of mental health disorders stigmatizing attitudes decrease (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).”

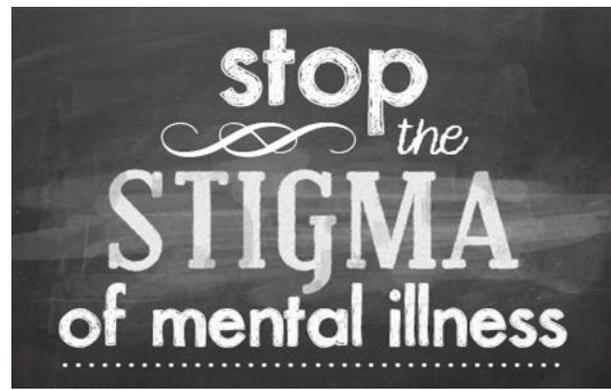
## WHY DO IT?



“Educators who interact with youth on a daily basis often lack the basic knowledge and skills necessary to recognize and understand mental illness, and have repeatedly expressed concern regarding inadequate educational foundations in mental health literacy.”  
(Chris Gillam, St. Francis Xavier University, 2015)

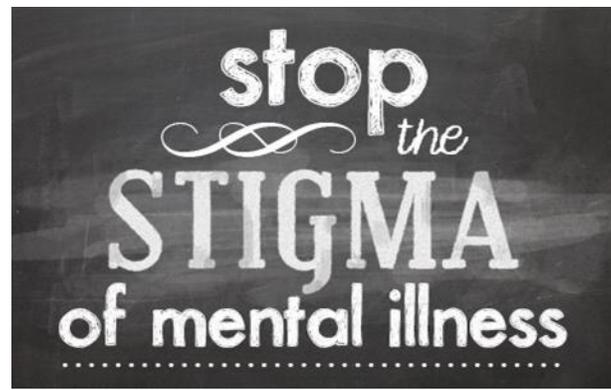
Preservice teachers should receive more training to meet the needs of students who have "emotional behavioral disability" (EBD) and/or “mental health distress and disorders (MHD)” (Huckabee, 2014)

# WHY DO IT?



- ▶ Pre-service teachers should consider their own textual choices in the English classroom and choose some which will help secondary students who are living with mental illness or whose family members or friends are dealing with psychological disorders.
- ▶ Reading books about mental illness can motivate students and teachers to be aware of the power of language choices and to become empowered to confront the stigma associated with mental illness and confront bullying of those struggling with depression, anxiety, and others living with mental illness.

# THANK YOU!



- ▶ Resources
- ▶ <https://www.nami.org/>
- ▶ <http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx>

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- ▶ <http://teenmentalhealth.org/single-headline/innovation-in-school-mental-health-underway/>