

Parents invited to sharpen their mental health skills

By Kris DiLorenzo

At the Ardsley High School Wellness Fair in March, Alec Miller, an expert in the treatment of anxiety, mood disorders, stress management, and suicidal behaviors, introduced students to DBT (dialectical behavior therapy).

The high school was the first in Westchester to offer DBT to students 11 years ago, and its program is considered a model for other schools. Now it's parents' turn to learn about DBT.

For 12 weeks beginning in early November (the exact date has not yet been confirmed), AHS will offer a free series of weekly 90-minute classes for parents (grandparents or other guardians are welcome) to learn the language of DBT and understand the life skills students are already developing in individual, group, or classroom settings.

School social worker and licensed health coach Monique Johnson explained a useful concept for both parents and students. "You can have two opposites occurring at the same time. DBT teaches that situations are not just black and white; there is a grey area. It's not all or nothing. What we're teaching kids is that there are a number of different ways we can look at handling our thoughts, emotions, and feelings."

Parents will receive an overview of the skills their offspring are learning: mindfulness, regulation of emotions, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness, as well as self-validation and validation of others. "Validation improves relationships, fosters connections, and decreases judgments," Johnson added.

Social and emotional development is woven through the AHS academic curriculum, which uses DBT for helping stu-

dents increase their resilience and coping skills, withstand challenges and pressures, change an emotional state, and communicate effectively. Parents need the same skills to be able to communicate effectively and empathize with adolescents. Interpersonal effectiveness teaches how to build and maintain relationships without compromising self or disrespecting others.

Johnson, guidance counselor Erica Hezi, and psychologist Dalia May, who retired from the Irvington School District, will facilitate the classes, which are designed to fill a void in the AHS program: support for families. "We're offering students education and information on these skills, and we feel it's very important to offer them to the parents," Johnson stated. "Families are in dire need of support, because as we've seen, the incidents of children who experience anxiety and extreme emotions are increasing."

Hezi commented, "We thought, why don't the schools offer this? We want to help the parents with their stress, we want them to realize we're partners and help them build strategy." She and Johnson view the upcoming classes as both preventive and intervention, for both students and parents.

At the core of DBT, which was developed in the late 1980s by psychologist Marsha Linehan, is mindfulness: staying in the present moment instead of focusing on the past ("shoulda, woulda, coulda," Johnson summarized), or focusing on the future ("What if...").

DBT teaches that the present is the only thing anyone can control, and provides ways to regulate one's emotions, to have control over them rather than letting emotions have control. Parents must learn distress tolerance, too: how to tolerate an emotionally charged

DBT

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situation that's painful without making it worse, and "hitting the pause button" to be able to problem solve.

Hezi cited "a child screaming in your kitchen" as a possible scenario. "Even as adults we have trouble not reacting to that situation," she said.

DBT shows that emotions are contagious, and reacting to them can escalate them to extremes. A teen who often has a hard time controlling emotions may not be able to make decisions, or makes impulsive decisions. Using the principles of DBT helps parents look for different ways of coping with adolescents.

Hezi acknowledged that parental coping is more challenging than it has been in the past. However, she made clear that this DBT training isn't therapy or a

support group. Parents may have different reasons for taking the class, not just because of a child showing signs of trouble, and those reasons do not have to be shared with the class. "They're coming in to receive skills to be more effective and healthy parents," she asserted.

Miller, a clinician, teacher, and author who founded the Cognitive and Behavioral Consultants group, based in White Plains and Manhattan, uses DBT to reduce clients' stress, anxiety, and depres-

sion, and provide them with tools to get through a crisis and handle troublesome situations, such as self-harming behaviors — including suicide — resulting from overwhelming emotions.

Parents who volunteer to take the DBT class will have homework — "practice work," in which they exercise each skill.

If the pilot DBT program for parents is deemed a success, it may be offered in the middle school and Concord Road Elementary.