

CHAPTER SUCCESS GUIDE: PROGRAMMING BEST PRACTICES



A great deal of the work your chapter does will likely be related to planning, partnering, and executing high-impact programming. No two programs look alike and can include things like tabling, pieces of training, educational talks and speakers, action-oriented activities, and more!

What are your main goals?

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The academic year goes quickly and sometimes it's easy to get wrapped up in a day or month of mental health awareness or celebration; it can be productive and exciting to jump in headfirst and follow a great idea though! That said, approaching each year, term, or month with a small handful of goals can help guide your work, make sure you're thinking about all the different audiences or topics you want to cover and give you points to measure your progress and celebrate your successes.

The main idea behind program planning distills down to who, what, where, when, why, and how. We encourage you to consider these questions in any order but recommend thinking about all of these aspects when planning programs and setting goals.

Who is our primary audience?

Your audience may be broad (ie. all students) or narrow (ie. undergraduate and graduate nursing majors); both approaches have distinct advantages and disadvantages. Don't forget to consider all of the other audiences that exist at your school including faculty and teachers, staff and administrators, members of the wider community such as local businesses, and more.

What is the main message, take-away, action, or knowledge we want to achieve through this program?

You likely have several goals for your program such as attracting a certain number of people or being fun and engaging, but consider what the one thing you want people to walk away from your program knowing or doing. Some examples might include saving the number of a 24-hour crisis service on their phones, following your chapter on social media, feeling confident talking to a friend about mental health, or challenging stigma.

Where & When will this have the most impact or be the most attendance?

High-traffic areas on campus such as a Student Center or a cafeteria may be a fantastic place to reach a lot of people quickly with a simple message but those venues may not be the best for in-depth conversations or group activities. Consider the time of day, day of the week, and at what point during the term will your messaging be most effective and important. For example, it might make sense to do Stress Less Week activities near midterms or near the end of the term when students are preparing for finals and most need a reminder to take care of themselves.

Why does this program matter right now, why is it important to your target audience?

It's always worthwhile to consider the "why" so that you can be confident that you're doing the work that matters most, in a way that resonates with your target audience. Let these questions be your program planning guiding star.

How will we plan, run, and evaluate this program?

This question gets to the logistics of planning and running your program and is probably a great place to bring in your larger chapter membership, volunteers, and partners. This might involve reserving space, securing or requesting needed funds from your budget, creating marketing materials, making a schedule for volunteers, and assigning responsibilities. You should also consider how you will know your program has been successful and how you will evaluate it. Evaluation can be more formal, such as creating surveys for attendees to understand what they learned, or it can be a more informal debrief as a leadership team about what went well and what could be improved for next time.

Story-Sharing Best Practices

Folks who are struggling, or know someone who is, often find comfort and education in the stories of others. Personal stories of lived experiences - whether or not you can directly relate to the personal story - can have a profound effect on the listener, including stigma reduction, increased empathy, and decreased sense of loneliness. There are many ways to share stories around mental health: panel discussions, short and long-form written narratives, [professional speakers](#), and more.,

If you are considering creating spaces for personal story sharing, there are special considerations you should consider to ensure that the conversation remains productive, healthy, and safe for participants.

AIM TO:

- Talk about what helped you when you were struggling.
- Share concrete ways that friends and loved ones helped you or could have helped you so audience members learn ways they can be there for their loved ones.

- Discuss resources available that can help people who are struggling with something similar.
- Keep the story focused on the goal. What do you want people to walk away from your talk knowing? Thinking about that ahead of time can help you hone in on what details are relevant and helpful, and what things might be less helpful to hear.
- Leave the audience with an action step. Whether it be to check in with a friend, give themselves grace, sign a petition, or something else, give people a direct call to action.
- Prepare your speakers with this information so you have the most impactful program possible.
- Think about how you plan to handle questions or if to take questions at all including how questions will be checked for appropriateness, how people can ask questions anonymously (if you'd like that option), and how to redirect conversations that start to get too off-topic or personal.
- **IMPORTANT:** We highly recommend you collaborate with your Counseling Center or mental health professionals at your school to have someone present for the entire event in case you need additional help facilitating conversations, answering questions that are more appropriately answered by a professional, or supporting anyone who may have an intense or unexpected emotional reaction to what they are hearing.
 - Make sure to frequently remind people about counseling services or professional support at your school, local resources, and crisis hotlines and services.

AVOID:

- Discussing means of suicide or a suicide attempt, or sensationalize suicide by saying things like “they’re in a better place.”
- Describing techniques of unhealthy coping mechanisms such as self-harm or substance misuse.
- Talking about specific eating disorder behaviors, weights, sizes, calories, heart rates, etc.
- Sharing too much gratuitous or violent detail about your experiences--you want to stay connected to your audience. Share only what you need to in order to advance your story.
- Sharing before you’re ready. It’s one thing to talk to a friend or share your story in writing but it feels very different, and often very emotional, to share your story for a large audience of people you don’t know. Have a support system in place and talk with your network about the elements of your story you may want to share, how you plan to take care of yourself before and after sharing, and steps you can take if you find yourself struggling after sharing.

You can learn more about common pitfalls, phrases, and mistakes people might make when sharing their mental health story in our [Mental Health Messaging Guide](#).

Resources

- Find Chapter resources, success guides, opportunities, and more on the [Active Minds Chapter Hub](#).
- Connect with Active Minds National Staff! Get advice, ask questions, and brainstorm with our team. We're here for you. The Chapters team hosts weekly [office hours](#) where you can learn about chapter success tips, ask questions, work through any challenges you may be facing, and more!
- Sign up for Slack and chat with student leaders from across the country! Slack is a comprehensive platform that gives you the ability to ask questions, provide ideas, share successes, and overall build a more cohesive network of Active Minds, mental health advocates, and activists. [Sign up for Slack](#) and download the app onto your phone and/or computer.