**Artist:** Carol Sparber

**Artist Mentor:** Martinez E-B

**Title:** Teens on the Edge

**Metaphor:** Mental health issues are an invisibility cloak that masks cries for help

**Social Justice Issue:** Throughout this course, we discussed marginalized populations in terms of gender, race, and SES, but in thinking about our role as teachers and administrators and serving all children, there is another marginalized population that we acknowledge with our eyes wide shut. We fail to see and serve many of the children who fall under the umbrella of mental health issues, and we need to pay attention to this.

*Do we have the eyes to see teenagers on the edge?*

*Mental health issues are an invisibility cloak that masks cries for help.*

*When you recognize the warning signs in seemingly “normal” students, do you act?*

*What does fearless dialogue look like in your context?*

These salient questions pose a conundrum to educators. We see students on the edge every day in our classrooms and in our hallways, yet we see them with our eyes wide shut. We are oblivious to the weight of inner turmoil and emotional stress many of our students experience on a daily basis due to marginalization from their peers.

Adolescence is a time when individuals experiment with risky behaviors. Data show that adolescents are more likely than adults to use illegal substances, have unprotected sex, and engage in antisocial behavior (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). The tendency for individuals to take more risks at this age implies that adolescent risky behaviors are determined mainly by social factors, in order to reduce social marginalization by conformity to peer pressure (Ali, Amialchuk, & Pentina, 2011).

Adolescence is also a time of rapid and intense physical and emotional transformation and the desire to fit in and form close interpersonal relationships are a fundamental human need ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4516632/" \l "R6)). During this transformational period, it is the acceptance and approval of peers that is most valued by adolescents who are in the process of defining their role and identity in life (Strauss & Pollack, 2003). Existing literature on coping (Duhachek, 2005) suggests that in response to marginalization, stress, and negative emotions, adolescents engage in a wide variety of cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral activities in order to experience more desirable emotional states and reduced levels of stress. Coping with the stress of marginalization can manifest in behaviors aimed at increasing peer acceptance by engaging in various group activities. Moreover, if being popular with a peer group that values risky behaviors means adopting them, socially marginalized youth may attempt to excel at those risky behaviors to overcome their stigmatized status (Ali, Amialchuk, & Pentinal, 2012). Low acceptance by peers puts adolescents at risk for adopting unsafe behaviors and peer alienation is positively related to drug use, substance abuse, self-harm, delinquent and anti-social behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, (2012). Furthermore, the consequence of adopting risky behaviors can manifest serious physical and mental health problems resulting in abuse, dependency, delinquency, depression, self-injurious behaviors, suicide, and death (Redonnet, Chollet, Fombonne, Bowes, & Melchior, 2012).

My artwork is a collection of photo collages representing teenage risky behaviors that can lead to mental illness. This piece went through a number of iterations before the final product was printed on an 18” x 24” canvas. It evolved from paper/photo collages to an image transfer collage to a photo collage. My initial idea was to create five individually framed pieces with a collage background of newspaper headlines reflecting each topic with photos of nondescript teens offset in front of the collage. My artist mentor liked the idea; however his comment was, “this has a high school student look to it, and the easels used to present the pictures would be a distraction”. He suggested that I “float the photo image above the calamity that is happening around the image by creating an image transfer”. After watching six different Youtube videos on how to create an ‘image transfer’, I attempted the process with my first set of photos. It didn’t work. I tried two more times; each time was a complete failure. Frustration and anxiety ensued! I was running out of time to complete my final project. After expressing my angst to my artist mentor, he suggested a photo collage. After a crash course in Adobe Fireworks, I was able to create a collage that we were both pleased with. My artist mentor’s exact expression with he saw my art was “Holy Crap I LIKE IT!

The faces in the artwork are a collage of my photos pieced together using the Adobe Fireworks program. The collage effect forces you to look closely – in order to see each individual as their own being, yet you never get away from the multiple features that represent the many types of students we serve (e.g., male, female, Black, white). Color was strategically placed on the part of the face that is speaking. In the collage with multiple colors, they are all speaking.

This artwork represents manifestations of mental illness that has personally and professionally affected me through extended family, friends, and students. Mental health disorders can affect how adolescents relate to others and make choices and can take many different forms. Some are rooted in deep levels of anxiety, extreme changes in mood, or reduced ability to focus or behave appropriately. Others involve unwanted, intrusive thoughts and some may result in hallucinations or unfounded fears.

Educators who interact with youth on a daily basis often lack the basic knowledge and skills necessary to recognize and understand mental illness and corresponding behaviors. We have a moral and ethical obligation to educate ourselves in order to recognize our marginalized students who are prone to risk-taking behaviors that can lead to self-abuse, self-destruction, and mental illness.

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