

WebMD Announces 2022 Health Heroes: A physician, veteran, a neuroscientist, and three college students confront mental health challenges

NEW YORK, Sept. 16, 2022 -- WebMD today announced the winners of the 2022 WebMD Health Heroes Awards, which this year honor everyday heroes who are confronting the nation's mental health challenges with ingenuity, compassion, and bravery.

Their work arrives at a moment of urgency. Mental health disorders were already on the rise, but the impact of the pandemic, the burnout of health care professionals, and the isolation and loneliness of lockdowns exacerbated the problem.

Currently, more than 52 million Americans are living with mental illness, and an estimated 12 million have had suicidal thoughts. Nearly 5 million are not able to obtain mental health care, are unable to afford it, feel uncomfortable opening up in a traditional therapeutic setting, or risk career and personal stigma if they seek help.

This year's Awards spotlight six inspiring individuals who are taking on this challenge, sharing their personal struggles and vulnerabilities, shining a light on issues that have long been stigmatized, and making a difference.

The Awards are now in their 15th year, and the honorees are selected by WebMD's editorial team, composed of board-certified health care professionals and award-winning journalists.

The WebMD 2022 Health Heroes are:

ADVOCATE

Justin Bullock, MD, MPH: By opening up about his mental health struggle in a leading medical journal, he inspires other doctors to ask for help

In a 2020 perspective in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Dr. Bullock shared his deeply personal experience with bipolar disorder and the suicidal thoughts that shadowed him during his medical training. By sharing his story, he hoped to inspire other struggling medical students and doctors to come forward and ask for help.

At the time, he was doing his medical internship at the University of California, San Francisco – a pressure-cooker environment, even for someone without mental health issues. For Dr. Bullock, who'd already survived two suicide attempts – one after coming out as gay to his family in high school, the other during his second year of medical school – it was a powder keg situation.

He felt the need to come forward about his struggles because no one was talking about suicide and the intense pressure that drives so many doctors to it. He's been encouraged by the positive response he's received. Dr. Bullock is now doing a fellowship at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle, and he is planning a series of projects aimed at

improving the environment in medicine for people of all identities, including those with mental illness.

CHAMPION

Matt McDonell: A veteran uses the healing power of golf to promote mental health in vets and first responders

His life appeared ideal from the outside, but after returning home from Afghanistan in 2015, Matt McDonell was taking a cocktail of prescription drugs to help him sleep and relieve his emotional and physical pain from tinnitus, TMJ, post-concussive migraines, and much more. For nearly 7 years, the repressed memories of war kept flooding back. Then he got an email from Semper Fi & America's Fund, an organization that supports combat veterans, inviting him to a golf camp in Denver.

He went to one golf camp, then another, and realized how many mental health practices such as mindfulness were intrinsic to the game – from making a choice of what club to use, to deciding how to approach a shot. That spark of an idea grew into Next 18, a nonprofit program that hosts golf camps for military vets and first responders. The participants receive instruction from local pros, as well as guidance in self-care practices such as breathwork, mindfulness, journaling, and yoga.

During their camp experiences, participants say they can discuss things they may not have spoken to others about before and begin to heal the trauma that many have encountered in battle and elsewhere.

Next 18 has hosted six camps with 63 alumni so far, and they plan to have eight more camps next year. McDonell, who is also working on getting his master's degree in social work, wants to grow to 15 to 20 camps a year and expand into warmer parts of the country for the winter months.

HELPER

Ariel Brown, PhD: A neuroscientist founds The Emotional PPE Project, connecting COVID-19 health care workers with free professional mental health care.

The mental trauma of working through COVID-19 left millions of health care workers exhausted, burned out, and struggling with mental health concerns.

Brown, a senior director of medical science at Sage Therapeutics in Cambridge, MA, wanted to help, but she wasn't sure how. She had expertise in mental health research, but she wasn't in the trenches with health care workers. A friend, also a doctor, advised her to think of ways to provide health care workers with more resources.

A believer in the healing power of counseling, she reached out to every therapist in her social media network and asked for volunteers. The response was tremendous, and The Emotional PPE Project was launched in spring 2020.

A nationwide network of more than 700 therapists, the organization connects health care workers with free confidential counseling with support from individual and corporate donors. The therapists work pro bono.

So far, the program has connected more than 2,000 health care workers with therapists, and the experience has been rewarding for both groups.

Brown believes that there will always be a need to care for the emotional health of frontline workers, even when the current pandemic fades, and that changes in policy and support from medical regulatory bodies are necessary to eliminate the stigma and fear of professional reprisal that stops many doctors from reaching out to get the support they need.

CONNECTORS

Allen Zhou, Anthony Zhou, and Aditi Merchant: Connecting isolated seniors to young people

Even before the pandemic, nearly 1 in 4 Americans over age 65 were socially isolated. Then COVID-19 hit, leaving older adults even more isolated. Young people weren't immune to isolation either. Driven online for learning and social interaction, more than 60% of 18- to 25-year-olds reported high levels of loneliness.

Aditi Merchant, a senior at the University of Texas at Austin, saw the widespread mental health problems among her college-age peers and was aware of issues with older Americans. She, along with classmate Allen Zhou and his brother Anthony Zhou, a sophomore at Columbia University, founded Big & Mini, a nonprofit that bridges distance and generations using technology. Older adults (Bigs) and young people (Minis) fill out a form on the organization's website and are matched free of charge based on their interests and goals.

In the past 2 years, Big & Mini has made over 6,000 matches throughout the U.S. and around the world. Participants go beyond talking online – they've taken cooking classes together, learned new languages, and sometimes traveled hundreds of miles to meet in person.

When they tracked a group of 70 Bigs and Minis using the Duke Social Support Index, an instrument that measures social support in older adults, scores in both groups improved from an average of 4 out of 10 to more than 8 out of 10 within 6 months after the first call.

The founders plan to continue, even as the world opens up, building on their efforts with local chapters where members can meet in person.

For additional information on the 2022 WebMD Health Heroes, click here:

<https://www.webmd.com/healthheroes/default.htm>

SOURCES:

National Institutes of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>

National Alliance on Mental Illness: https://nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/NAMI_2020MH_ByTheNumbers_Adults-r.pdf

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