

# SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY  
**GÁBOR GOMBOS**

## MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY AROUND THE WORLD

### KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- define and identify examples of mental health-related discrimination and stigma
- evaluate the prevalence of mental illness as well as mental health advocacy efforts
- explain the role the U.S. media plays in stigmatizing mental illness
- communicate positive messages supporting individuals with mental illness

### OVERVIEW

In this activity students learn about the life and work of human rights defender Gábor Gombos, who is fighting on behalf of individuals living with mental illness. Students define the terms “discrimination” and “stigma” and brainstorm examples related to mental health. They then review global mental health statistics and evaluate Gombos’ advocacy efforts. Students use secondary source materials to evaluate the role the U.S. news media plays in stigmatizing mental illness. Finally, students take action to become mental health advocates.

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- Article 5: Prohibition against torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment
- Article 13: Right to freedom of movement and residence
- Article 25: Right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family

### TARGET AUDIENCE

Social Studies, Language Arts, Grades 9–12

### ACTIVITY DURATION

Two 45- to 60-minute class periods

### ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

- All humans have basic rights that are universal and transcend the rights granted by the nations in which they live. Among these are the right to protection against discrimination and the right to a standard

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of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families, including medical care and necessary social services.

- The media plays an important role in our understanding of and attitude towards mental health.
- We have a collective responsibility to protect and defend the human rights of people everywhere.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do our rights to freedom from discrimination and an adequate standard of living need to be protected?
- What role does the media play in misrepresenting mental illness?
- How can ordinary citizens hold the media accountable and contribute to efforts to end the stigma of mental illness?

## MATERIALS

- Access to the biography of Gábor Gombos available on the Interactive Map
- *Mental Health in the Mainstream Media* handout (one per student)
- *Mental Health Advocacy Project* handout (one per student)
- Internet and computer access

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION/LINKS

### Mental Health around the World

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. Roughly 450 million people currently suffer from such conditions, making mental disorders one of the leading causes of illness and disability worldwide.

Treatments for these conditions are available, but nearly two-thirds of people with known mental health disabilities never seek help from a health professional. This is the result of stigma, discrimination, and neglect. At present, more than 40% of countries have no mental health policy and more than 30% have no mental health program; approximately 25% of countries have no mental health legislation.

People living in poverty often bear the greatest burden of mental health disabilities, both in terms of the risk of developing a mental disorder and the lack of access to treatment. Exposure to severely stressful events, dangerous living conditions, exploitation, and poor general health all contribute to the increased vulnerability of this population. The lack of access to affordable treatment can increase both the length and severity of mental illness, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and mental health disabilities that can be very difficult to break.

### Mental Health in the U.S. Media

There are many examples of mental health stigmatization in the mainstream media. When horrific acts of violence occur, the media often focuses on the perpetrator's mental health rather than societal factors that contributed to the event. In reality, individuals suffering from mental illness are significantly more likely to be victims of, rather than perpetrators of, violence.

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Another way in which mental illness is stigmatized is through overgeneralization. The characteristics or actions of an individual are attributed to all individuals who suffer from a specific illness or disorder. In fact, a single mental illness or disorder can manifest very differently in each individual.

In some cases, mental illness is trivialized. This has been the experience of those who suffer from anorexia, an eating disorder that can, in fact, be deadly. In other cases, mental illness is oversimplified, such as in the case of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which is portrayed as mere perfectionism instead of obsessive thinking.

Articles on mental illness often use derogatory terms such as “crazy,” “insane,” “mental,” “crazed,” “deranged,” and “nuts.” Additionally, these articles characterize individuals with mental illness as being defined by that illness. People are called “alcoholic,” “drug addict,” or “paranoid schizophrenic,” while other aspects of their personalities are ignored. Lastly, the mainstream media often fails to recognize or acknowledge that mental illness is treatable and that individuals living with mental illness can recover and live healthy, happy lives.

## SOURCES

- [Mental disorders affect one in four people](#)
- [Mental Health by the Numbers](#)
- [How the Stigma of Mental Health Is Spread by Mass Media](#)
- [Stigmatizing Media Portrayals: What Can We Do?](#)

This activity is sequenced in four phases: Ask, Analyze, Apply, and Act:

- Ask: The students will define the terms “discrimination” and “stigma” and brainstorm examples related to mental health. (15–20 minutes)
- Analyze: The students will review global mental health statistics and learn about Gábor Gombos' mental health advocacy efforts in Hungary. (25–40 minutes)
- Apply: The students will evaluate how the U.S. news media stigmatizes mental illness. (25–30 minutes)
- Act: The students will take action to become leaders in the mental health movement by creating positive, compassionate messages supporting those with mental illness. (20–30 minutes, plus additional time to implement their action plans)

## PROCEDURE

### Ask

1. Before class, write the terms “Discrimination” and “Stigma” on the board or a piece of flip chart paper.
2. At the beginning of class, ask students to pair up with a partner and collaborate to develop definitions of the two terms.
3. Call on one or more student volunteers to share their definitions. As needed, use the following information to ensure that all students understand the terms:

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- Discrimination: the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things.
  - Stigma: a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person.
4. Ask students to work with their partners to brainstorm examples of discrimination and stigmas in society.
  5. Call on student volunteers to share their examples.
  6. Explain that students are going to investigate discrimination and stigmas related to mental illness.

## Analyze

7. Ask student pairs to join other pairs to create small groups of four.
8. Provide each group one of the following sources to review and direct them to take notes:
  - [Mental disorders affect one in four people](#)
  - [Mental Health by the Numbers](#)
  - [The State of Mental Health in America](#)
  - [Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health](#)
9. Call on student groups to share the statistics they learned. After each group presents, ask, "What statistic most surprised you? Why?"
10. Ask, "Are the statistics from the different sources the same? Why do you think there might be differences?" Students should understand that sources draw on different data sets. As a result, specific statistics may differ, but the overall picture suggests that many people suffer from mental illness in the U.S. and around the globe.
11. Project or have students access the [biography of Gábor Gombos](#) available on the Interactive Map. Conduct a round robin reading in which student volunteers read one paragraph each. To promote active reading, have students take notes on Gombos' personal history and the tools and tactics he has used to advocate for mental healthcare.
12. Ask students to summarize their key takeaways from the article by writing six-word stories. (Six Word Story is a teaching strategy that allows students to practice summarizing and selective word choice. Students use an article as the basis for a story that conveys a big idea using only six words.)
13. Call on student volunteers to share their stories.

## Apply

14. Remind students of the definitions of discrimination and stigma that they developed during the previous class.
15. Explain that the stigma against mental illness is, in part, perpetuated by the U.S. news media. Provide context using information from the Background Information/Links section.
16. Distribute copies of the *Mental Health in the Mainstream Media* handout. Review the directions.
17. Divide students into small groups and direct each group to find a mass media article or video about mental health to analyze. Check students' proposed sources before giving them permission to use specific articles and videos.
18. After students have reviewed their sources, call on each small group to present its findings.
19. Ask students, "Overall, do you think the examples you found stigmatize mental illness? Why or why not?"

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## Act

20. Explain that, just like Gábor Gombos, students can become leaders in the mental health advocacy movement.
21. Distribute copies of the *Mental Health Advocacy Project* handout and review the directions.
22. Provide time for students to form small groups, choose a project to implement, and develop their action plan.
23. After students have implemented their action plans, provide time for students to share their experiences.

## CONNECTIONS

Connect to Student Lives	Connect to Contemporary Events	Connect to the Future
Students will analyze how the media they consume portrays mental illness and consider what actions they can take to advocate for mental healthcare.	Students will evaluate the status of mental illness in the U.S. and abroad and learn about mental health advocacy tools and tactics.	Students will promote understanding and compassion about mental illness and think critically about how they are reading, watching, and communicating messages about mental health.

## NATIONAL STANDARDS

### College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards

- D2.Civ.7.9-12 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12 Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.Civ.12.9-12 Analyze how people use and challenge local, state, national, and international laws to address a variety of public issues.
- D2.Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.
- D3.1.9-12 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- D4.6.9-12 Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.
- D4.7.9-12 Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

- RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain
- W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-

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generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

- W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

## MENTAL HEALTH IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

**Directions:** Find an article or video focused on mental health to analyze. After you have read/watched, answer the questions below. Support your answers with specific evidence from the text.

**Title:**

**Source:**

**How does the source characterize mental illness?** Note specific words/images used in the piece.

**Does the source overgeneralize?** Does it suggest that everybody with a specific condition exhibits the same characteristics of the disease?

**Does the source portray mental illness as a permanent condition or as treatable?**

**Does the source portray mental illness as an individual issue or a societal issue?**

## MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY PROJECT

**Directions:** Choose one of the following activities that your group will implement to communicate positive, compassionate messages about mental illness. If you prefer, you can develop your own project idea and get it approved by your teacher prior to moving forward with planning and implementation.

### Activity Ideas:

1. **Write Letters to the Editor:** Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper in which you advocate for more balanced and humane representation and treatment of people with mental illness. Include specific evidence from the sources you reviewed.
2. **Engage Local Leaders:** Reach out to your mayor and/or governor and encourage them to take action to protect the rights of individuals living with mental illness. Ask them to recognize and participate in the national mental health awareness events, including Mental Health Month in May, National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month in July, and Mental Illness Awareness Week in October.
3. **Partner with Local Businesses:** Identify local bookstores and review their collection of books on mental illness. Encourage them to stock and feature books about mental health and host an event featuring an author or another speaker. Contact businesses where people congregate, such as coffee shops, and ask them to host an event focused on mental health.
4. **Create a Compassion Mural:** Identify a space in your school where you can post positive messages about mental illness. Your mural can include positive artwork, statistics and information, quotations, and other sources to inspire understanding and empathy.

**Which activity will your group implement?**

**What resources will you need?**

**What role will each member of your group play?**

**Develop a timeline for implementing your plan.**