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## **MENTOR HIGH SCHOOL AND NAMI PARTNER ON OHIO'S FIRST STUDENT SUPPORT GROUP COLLABORATIVE**

*Painesville, OH* – The Lake County Chapter of NAMI and Mentor High School have teamed up on two new support groups for students impacted by a mental illness. This marks the first time that an Ohio high school and a NAMI chapter have partnered on school-based support groups for students.

NAMI is the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The organization that works to improve understanding of mental illness, combat the stigma associated with those disorders, and support families impacted by the illnesses. Locally, NAMI is a part of the Lake County Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) Board network of service providers.

NAMI's Christi Farmer and Christie Graf, School Social Worker for Mentor Schools, will co-facilitate the new high school support groups. According to Farmer, the "E!" support group (the name stands for "Empowerment") is for students who have a diagnosed mental illness. The "Pillars of Strength" support group is for students who have a friend or family member with a mental illness.

"We're thrilled to be able to collaborate with the school on this project," Farmer said. "The high school years can be stressful for any student. When you add a mental illness to the list of stressors, that can take things to a whole new level. These support groups will give students impacted by a mental illness a chance to gain perspective, draw strength from each other, and find healthy, effective coping strategies."

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Graf notes that both support groups are available to any Mentor High student. “The majority of our participants will come through referrals by teachers, guidance counselors, and other school faculty members,” she said. “But we’ll also welcome parent referrals, as well as students who hear about the groups and decide they’d like to join on their own.”

The support groups will start meeting in early February according to Graf. Meeting days and times are still under discussion. “We want to schedule times that work best for the students, so we’ll get input from them before we lock things in,” she explained.

The new student support groups become part of a growing spectrum of NAMI-driven initiatives that are helping schools improve the educational experience for students who are diagnosed with bipolar disorder, depression, or other serious mental illnesses. Another is NAMI’s Parents and Teachers as Allies program – a two-hour in-service designed for teachers, coaches, administrators, school nurses, and others in the education profession. Parents are invited to attend as well. The program gives participants a unique look at the nature of mental illness through the eyes of people who have dealt with it on an up-close basis. “Our goal is simple,” explains Pat Kohut, NAMI’s Director of School Programs. “We try to improve communication between parents and schools so that they can both be more effective in dealing with a child who has a mental illness.” Kohut says the program attendees hear from four carefully chosen presenters. One is a peer from the education world – a teacher or school counselor or school nurse who has had first-hand experience dealing with the issues surrounding mental illness in school environments. One is a family member – for example the brother of someone who has to negotiate the school experience while battling a mental illness. One is an adult who recounts his or her experience of being in school with an illness. And one is a parent of a current student who has been diagnosed. “It adds up to a wonderful and very valuable array of perspectives,” she says. “The people who attend learn more about symptoms, resources, and the importance of early intervention. They walk out of this program with a vastly improved understanding of what might be causing certain classroom behaviors, and they’re better able to deal with those issues effectively.”

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The Lake County NAMI Chapter receives funding and support from the Lake County ADAMHS Board. Established by Ohio Statute, the ADAMHS Board is responsible for planning, funding and evaluating Lake County's network of mental health and recovery services. For more information about mental illnesses and/or NAMI programs, call 440-639-1200, or visit the Lake County ADAMHS Board's website at [www.HelpThatWorks.us](http://www.HelpThatWorks.us).

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