Participants in Distress: Developing a framework for mental health response in the field

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Mental health concerns are on the rise - throughout society, on college campuses, in younger populations, in outdoor programs, you name it.

Nature is known to reduce stress, boost immune function, promote physical health, decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety, boost self esteem, and build resilience. But many people will need additional support to realize these benefits of nature while participating in our programs - so we have a responsibility to support students of all experiences and backgrounds.

Self reflection:

- Describe a time when you didn't know what to do in response to a behavior
    - What were some of the difficulties you experienced while addressing this unanticipated challenging behavior?
    - What sort of help did you seek out or receive in resolving the situation
    - Or, was the situation left somewhat unresolved?
- Describe a time when you successfully coached someone through a difficult experience
    - What were some of the strategies you used to successfully coach someone?
    - How did it feel to work through this situation together?
    - What did you learn from this experience?

After a few years of an upwards trend in anxiety and other mental health concerns on our trips, I turned to our guide manual and realized it was very outdated. As a part of my capstone project for my masters degree, I updated the manual with common mental health and behavioral concerns that we were seeing in our program. I worked closely with my student staff, asking them what they needed support with and what tools would be useful for them. This is the product of that months-long project:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hYsaohJEiylGu544Ph7OnK7ZFZg-XlzM/view

I also developed a flow chart (on page 47, or 8 in the link) because my student staff needed more guidance on how to respond to these incidents. Now every year, I teach a workshop during our staff training trip on how to follow the flow chart. I start by asking them what are the things we already do as a program to minimize the likelihood of this showing up (building rapport, full value contract, positive learning environment, reviewing health forms, pre-course phone calls, etc.) Then I walk them through the flow chart with examples, and give them just one or two tools such as active listening, box breathing, OARS, etc. Long story short, it worked. My staff are much more equipped, confident, and empowered to address these situations when they arise, and we are better able to support participants staying in the field when possible.

And you can too! Use the manual above. Adapt the flow chart to your needs. Lean in to these conversations with your staff - even one hour of training can make the difference. Thank you.