NAYEN Fireside Chat: Mental Health – RYE Students **6/21/2026**

Quick recap

This Fireside Chat focused on mental health issues in Rotary Youth Exchange programs, with Dennis White and Roseanne Field presenting alongside Mary Lyn Kagan as moderator. The discussion covered challenges in assessing and supporting exchange students with mental health concerns, including the importance of proper disclosure from sending districts and the need for adequate support systems in receiving districts. Martin Fiedler shared statistics from Germany indicating that nearly 20% of incoming students have mental health issues, highlighting challenges with medication management and information sharing across districts. The participants discussed the distinction between normal developmental challenges and actual mental illness, particularly noting how COVID-19 impacted social skill development in younger students who missed crucial learning opportunities for reading facial expressions and managing conflicts. The conversation also addressed the need for districts to have mental health professionals as resources and emphasized the importance of "sharing is caring" when providing detailed support letters about students with mental health needs.

Advice and suggestions:

- Ensure each district identifies and involves at least one mental health professional familiar with Rotary Youth Exchange to support decision-making and student support, as recommended by Dennis and Roseanne.
- Improve information sharing and disclosure regarding students' mental health histories and medication needs, including detailed support letters and coping strategies, for both outbound and inbound students.
- Update and educate single and multi-district teams on the use of the mental health handbook and decision trees, especially for districts less familiar with current practices.
- Encourage mental health professionals supporting Rotary Youth Exchange to attend orientations and meetings to better understand program demands and student experiences.
- When evaluating candidates on medication, ensure the district understands the purpose of the medication and involves their mental health resource for assessment, as discussed by Pedro and Roseanne.
- Consider implementing or expanding acceptance and commitment training or similar support for both outbound and inbound students, as shared by Nancy.
- Prepare host clubs, schools, and teams for increased diversity and complexity in student needs, including those related to medication, gender identity, and mental health, as discussed by Janie and others.
- For students with learning disabilities or special needs, gather collateral information (from teachers, parents, with consent) to inform placement and support decisions, as suggested by Roseanne.
- Review and, where necessary, update district policies regarding acceptance of students who require medication, in line with current realities and best practices discussed in the meeting.

Summary

Youth Mental Health Planning Session

Mary Lyn discussed plans to schedule another Fireside Chat session towards the end of the 2026-27 Rotary year, potentially in April or May 2027, to continue important discussions about mental health and skill development in youth programs. Dennis explained that outbound student interviews typically occur early in the year, with Central States selecting students by September and starting orientations in October, making this a peak time for addressing related concerns. Rosanne highlighted how COVID-era learning challenges have affected social competency development in children, suggesting activities like game nights to help address these skill gaps.

Rotary Youth Exchange Mental Health

The meeting began with Mary Lyn welcoming attendees and noting that this was an informal fireside chat discussion rather than a training session. Mary Lyn announced that meeting notes and resources would be posted on the NAYEN.org website under YEO Resources, including a Handbook For Mental Health Issues in RYE authored by Dennis, Rosanne, and Terry Sawyer. The meeting included introductions with Dennis and Rosanne preparing to share information about their backgrounds.

Mental Health in Exchange Programs

Dennis and Rosanne discussed the importance of the mental health handbook and decision trees for evaluating students in exchange programs, emphasizing the need to differentiate between normal challenges and signs of mental illness. They highlighted the importance of having a mental health professional in each district who understands both mental health and the demands of exchange programs. The group also discussed the value of training mental health professionals about the intensity of exchange program demands and the benefits of having them attend orientations to better understand the student experience.

Mental Health Support for Students

Martin shared statistics about mental health issues among inbound students, noting that nearly 20% of the 65 students coming to Germany have indicated mental health issues, with 8-9 requiring serious medication. He emphasized the significant effort required to support these students and highlighted the need for better information sharing from sending districts about students' medical history and coping strategies. Rosanne discussed her approach of writing detailed support letters for students with mental health needs and stressed the importance of full disclosure from both students and parents. The group discussed challenges around medication management across different countries and agreed that districts need access to mental health professionals to properly assess candidates, with Dennis and Rosanne suggesting that district leaders can help find these resources.