



mental health beyond the bell: the lifelong impact of OMM's teen-led program

2025 OMM Alumni Focus Group Report

By Dana McCalla, Ph.D.

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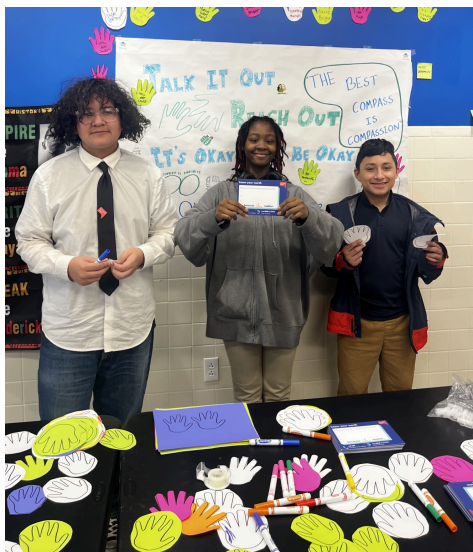
Our Minds Matter
1550 Wilson Blvd, Ste. 700 #215
Arlington, VA 22209

abstract



This focus group study explored the long-term impacts of participation in Our Minds Matter (OMM) from the perspective of five alumni. The study aimed to understand how OMM has shaped alumni pathways and personal development. Through qualitative analysis of a 60-minute virtual focus group session, five major themes emerged: OMM Infrastructure, Mental Health Impact, Character Development, Career/Education Influence, and OMM's Lasting Impact.

Participants described involvement with **OMM as a transformative experience, citing its role in fostering resilience, emotional intelligence, collaborative leadership, and a lifelong commitment to mental wellness.** The findings underscore OMM's ability to create a lasting and far-reaching impact, both within participants' lives and their broader communities.

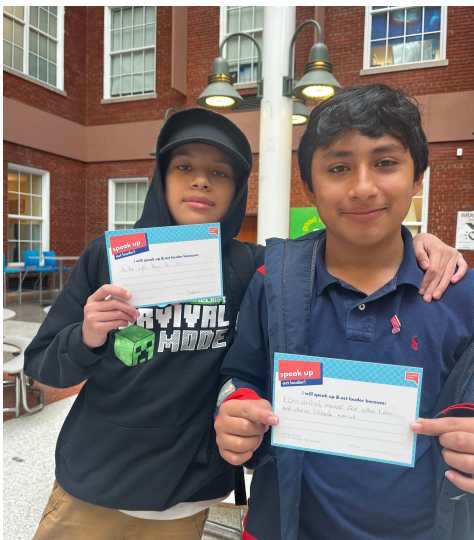


introduction

our minds matter (OMM) is a teen-led movement that empowers youth to improve their own mental well-being and equip them to support their peers who are struggling, thereby changing the mental health culture in their schools and communities.

While numerous evaluations have demonstrated OMM's success in fostering positive school climates and enhancing mental health protective factors among students, less is known about its long-term impact after participants graduate. To address this gap, OMM conducted a focus group with a small group of alumni who remained connected to the organization post-graduation. The purpose was to gather qualitative insights into how participation in OMM has shaped alumni's personal development, mental health awareness, and professional and educational trajectories.

This study also aims to inform the design of a larger, retrospective alumni survey by identifying key domains of impact from an alumni lens. Through careful recruitment of a diverse, highly-engaged sample and in-depth qualitative analysis, the study reveals the unique and lasting ways in which OMM continues to influence former student leaders. Findings highlight the program's broader effects on identity formation, help-seeking behaviors, and a commitment to service, as well as the development of leadership and emotional skills that participants now carry into their adult roles as professionals, family members, and community advocates.



methods



sample

To achieve the stated objectives of the study, a subgroup of OMM alumni were selected for participation in the focus group through a purposive and convenience sampling approach, based on their level of involvement with OMM post-graduation and the following selection criteria:

- Young adults who participated in the OMM program while they were in high school (OMM alumni), from recent high school graduates and college students to young professionals early in their careers.
- At least one representation from each of the three partnered school districts in the DC metro area
- A balance of participants by gender and racial representations

Alumni were nominated for participation by OMM staff members who identified them as willing to contribute to OMM causes, known for their ability to share their perspectives in a respectful manner, and familiar with the research topic. A total of 24 OMM alumni were chosen to be contacted for the study. The target sample size was six to eight alumni, representing each of the three partnered school districts in the DC metro area, and a balance of participants by race/ethnicity, gender, and cohort.

data collection

Recruitment was conducted via email between April 23rd and May 9th, 2025. All prospective participants were sent personal invitations from OMM leadership with a link to the focus group sign-up form. Alumni were informed of the objectives of the focus group, which involve sharing their experiences with the OMM program and its influence on their lives. They were told that participation in the focus group was voluntary and that the session would be conducted either virtually or in person. Nine out of the 24 alumni filled out the sign-up form expressing interest in participating. Four participants ultimately did not join the focus group due to scheduling conflicts and non-response to confirmation emails, resulting in the final sample of five (5) alumni participants.

The focus group was conducted virtually on Zoom in June 2025. The session was co-moderated by OMM's Director of Impact and Research Analyst, and lasted 60 minutes. Prior to the start of the session, each participant was informed of their rights as human subjects in

the research and asked to complete a digital informed consent form as well as an anonymous demographic information form. The focus group session was recorded with permission from each participant. After completing the focus group and as compensation for their time and contribution, participants received \$25 gift cards and OMM merchandise (i.e. OMM tote bags and t-shirts).

qualitative data analysis

The session recording was auto-transcribed using *Sonix*, an online audio and video transcription software. The research analyst manually edited the transcript to account for speech-to-text errors missed by the software and then performed a qualitative data analysis method known as complete coding (also called inductive coding). Complete coding is a process of identifying and labeling all data points within a text extract that are of interest or relevance to the research objectives (Braun and Clarke, 2013). A code is a label attributed to a word or short phrase that is considered useful in the data. An extract of text may be coded in many ways, so long as they fit the purpose of the analysis. The research analyst identified a number of data-derived codes that reflected the semantic content of the focus group data. These codes were first listed in a spreadsheet alongside their textual references. They were then organized into five domains that represented the major themes gleaned from alumni responses: OMM Infrastructure, OMM Impact on Mental Health, OMM Impact on Character Development, OMM Influence on Career/Educational Path, and OMM's Lasting Impact.

results



demographics of focus group participants

4

alumni participants represented their former school districts of Fairfax County Public Schools and one represented Prince Williams County Schools, both located in Virginia

all

participants self-identified as female

3

participants identified as Black or African American and 1 as Asian/Asian American; the fifth participant did not report their race and ethnicity but identified as having immigrant parents

23.5

the average age of participants

2

years was the average length of time that participants were involved with our minds matter in high school

1/5

of participants reported an interest in pursuing an educational path and career in mental or behavioral health

results



theme 1: OMM infrastructure

When asked about the fondest memories from their time in OMM and its influence on different aspects of their lives, several alumni mentioned the strong infrastructure of the program. Three of the alumni expressed **appreciation for the structure provided by OMM's club model as well as the activities and campaigns that fostered peer connection, vulnerability, and mental health awareness-building.**



"I had a major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress, etc. and I think that without this productive channel, it would have been much harder for me to sort of gain control over those feelings and their impact on my life. without...the infrastructure around this program and, like I said, **channeling that sadness and anger into something productive**, I don't think I would have been able to overcome those challenges as productively as I did, nor do I think that I would be as mentally healthy as I am now without that structure."



"The structure that OMM has to support the leaders so that they can support their community, I think is something very unique that I will **forever cherish and remember.**"



"When we hosted 'Stress Less Week', that was a really fun time doing different activities every day of the week, getting to have therapy dogs and stuff like that. Those were some really fun moments and memories [of] **building really strong relationships with club sponsors.**"



“I look back really fondly on the gala that was held where we were able to present some of the work that we were doing at our club. [...] it... **felt really good to be able to showcase and be representatives of our school** in that way, and also get to meet other student leaders.”



several alumni also described their high school OMM club as a “safe space” that helped them through various challenges during their formative years, one that they were able to recreate in other parts of their lives with friends, colleagues, and loved ones.



“Something that I remember from being... a student leader in Our Minds Matter, was just **the power of being there for myself, but also being there for...my friends too**, and making a safe space to have open conversations about our struggles and victories. [...] I think it was just really important that a lot of people came into the room, they felt safe, but also left the room feeling safe as well.”



“I think it's important for you guys [OMM staff] to know that...what you're doing doesn't go unnoticed, and you're making impacts every single day. and because of who you guys [OMM staff] are and because of what you do, I am able to be the person I am. I am...able to **be vulnerable and just hold safe spaces for other people and for myself.**”

theme 2: OMM impact on mental health

A common experience shared by the alumni was the positive impact that OMM has had on their personal mental health. Participants discussed how their time with OMM helped them with recognizing personal mental health struggles, developing healthy coping mechanisms, gaining mental health literacy, and improving their help-seeking behaviors. Involvement

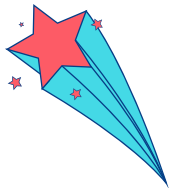
with the organization also **gave them useful tools to help support others struggling with mental health concerns.**



“I never really believed in just going to somebody that I don't know and talking to them about, like what I'm going through or like what's in my mind right now. But being a part of OMM honestly helped me to **understand that it's okay to not be okay.** it's okay to not have all the answers figured out or to, you know, ask for help when you need it, which sometimes is a battle within itself because I'm like, no, like I'm still that girl that's still strong and all that.”



“I think that [OMM] really **gave me the language to articulate what kinds of changes were needed** in my school's culture and in sort of the broader culture. prior to OMM, I sort of had this sense of ...a need for greater mental health awareness[...]. it wasn't until, you know, attending the trainings, speaking to our minds matter staff members, that I was able to develop this whole vocabulary around wanting to change the conversation around mental health. and that's quite honestly, language that I still use today.”



“Our entire exec team, we were sort of known as like the mental health warriors of our school, which was great in that **I would be connected to people that I would never come across solely because their friend was concerned about them,** and they knew that we had the resources or knowledge, which was really fulfilling.”



“OMM has opened my mind and, you know, life has opened my mind to the point that I have joined therapy and I have been getting the help that I need because realistically speaking, the line of work that I do is mentally exhausting. It is physically and mentally demanding and draining. So...if I can't speak about the things that I'm seeing on a daily basis or like- something something's going to give, it's either going to be my mental health is going to be down bad, or I just, I can't be as helpful to my peers or my friends or family. so **I've been open about it and honestly, it's been going really well.**”

Two alumni discussed how **OMM helped them understand and navigate the dynamic between themselves and their family members.**



“We held a parent's mental health night that was only for parents. and...**getting the knowledge and the language and the resources really made an impact like within my family unit.** I think we're generally way more open to therapy and leaning on one another. it's definitely like an uphill battle, but I can take so much pride and almost solace in knowing that, like, I tried my best, or I'm in the process of breaking some sort of intergenerational cycle of pushing that all under the rug, which again, I can owe to OMM, giving me, at that age, the language and the resources to be able to have those conversations within my family unit.”



“I think coming from an immigrant household too, mental health is something that we don't talk about. Like, ‘oh, you're going through [something], you're having a hard day? Go on a walk listening to music’, right? I think that's something that consistently, in a lot of minority households, we're told. So I think being involved in an OMM organization and being a part of the club definitely helped me figure out, **I'm not just the only one that's struggling. All my friends that look like me are also struggling.**”

theme 3: OMM impact on mental health

The alumni shared various examples of how OMM helped them grow as young adults, building their self-confidence and **equipping them with valuable mental health resources that they continue to use.**



“My time with OMM has honestly helped me with the footprint of...**how I think and reframe my thoughts**. really heavy on the fact that, you know, we can't control what life gives us or throws at us, but what we can control is how we react. and I feel like...I've learned how to have a positive outlook and I've been able to pass that on to my community and to my family. So I would say the biggest takeaway is reframing, reframing your mindset, how you think. with whatever comes your way.”



“Were it not for...having such a concerted period of time and such formative years where I was getting messaging about the importance of mental health- about...things to look out for in myself and in others, about the impact that it has in our lives- I'm not sure whether, you know, I would be inclined to, I guess, take as much action as I do again, both personally and in my relationships with others.”

Alumni also reflected on the student leadership skills they gained from Our Minds Matter and how it **shaped their understanding of how authentic leadership looks**.



“I would say something that I vividly remember [is] the leadership trainings. I feel like something that OMM did that was very unique was making sure that they're also **pouring into the leaders cups** since, you know, the leaders, the student leaders were the ones like, you know, creating the spaces for everyone. But **there was always something for us to lean on and learn from**. and I think, honestly, I feel like I learned a huge chunk of my leadership skills from my time with our minds matter.”



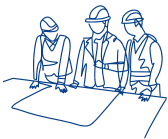
“I think that my...understanding of leadership...as something that's **fundamentally collaborative** was definitely also borne from my Our Minds Matter experience.”



“And so I think that was something that I've learned a lot as I was being a leader in OMM, but also as I'm growing as an adult as well- learning to be honest and transparent and be vulnerable at times when it's difficult.”

theme 4: OMM influence on career / education path

All five alumni reported OMM having a **significant influence on their professional lives, in both direct and indirect ways**. Some participants spoke of transferring learned communication skills to their current jobs and providing emotional support to others in their workplace, while one spoke about pursuing a career in mental health.



“I feel like during high school I always knew that I really enjoyed creating spaces. [...] I think when I was deciding my career choice, I feel like my involvement with OMM indirectly impacted what I do as a career. So I'm a civil engineer- so literally creating spaces. And I think it all started with the OMM after school meetings, just like creating that space for people to come.”



“I've always wanted to do law enforcement... but I also find myself using a lot of therapy skills. I'm not a therapist, but it's more like, you know, checking on people and especially, people that are incarcerated. What I do has taught me a lot from OMM to the point where it's like, I'll check on people and just I'll go stop by and I'm like, ‘hey, how are you?’ and sometimes I don't like the answer I get. So I'm like, ‘no, how are you really? like, how is your mental health? [...] I'm not talking to you with the badge or authority or anything. I'm just talking to you as just somebody that actually cares.”



“I think it really solidified the idea of **mental health being a non-negotiable** in my life, in my career choices...when I think about my current job [and] future jobs- really like recognizing that that's not, it's not a ‘nice to have’. It's not like, ‘oh, I can worry about this when I've done all the other things’. but it really is core to just looking after myself as a person. I think I do owe a lot of that to my time at OMM.”



“I think OMM is probably why I'm so good at my job- where it's entirely managing relationships and people. [...] and beyond OMM, like what I learned at OMM, like the therapy that I undertook as a result of OMM, I think those all shaped my emotional intelligence and my ability to speak to people.”



“I've always said I'm going to do pediatrics because I love working with kids and families. but then once I joined OMM, then I also took AP psych, I was like, well, I actually want to do psychology and I want to do that mental health form and stuff.”

theme 5: lasting impact of OMM — words of advice

Throughout the focus group, all five participants expressed gratitude for what they learned from their time with the organization and reflected on the lasting impact that OMM has had on their lives, something bigger than themselves.



“Our Minds Matter was really my first experience with...**the notion of legacy**, which sounds kind of dramatic the way I've said it. But truly, it was the first time I had ever built something with other people and then passed it on, and watched it kind of go on after my time in high school was finished. And I mean, that's still, I think, a really powerful lesson.”



“There's an **unfathomable impact**, beyond anything that we could really measure, happening as a result of this work. So even if you're not able to measure it, we're all sort of living evidence of the impact.”



“I just gotta say thank you to you guys [OMM staff], and thank you for what you do and for bringing mental health into light, especially in high school where it's difficult or, you know, in places that you often don't see it. [...] So I really just appreciate what you guys do for work and how much of an impact you guys have. [...] honestly, and your hard work and dedication for all of you guys...on your team doesn't go unnoticed.”

For the final question, participants were asked to share words of advice for future students. Their responses are shared below:



“Count the small victories...you can't fix the world with...a high school club, but you can make a small impact, whether it be a friend or family or your club. Those are important things to celebrate- the small wins.”



“Control the controllables and take it one day at a time.”



“I think I would say..., it sounds kind of cliché but...doubling down on kindness. obviously, you know, I know there's a lot going on in the world. [...] high schoolers are very much aware of what's happening...outside the walls of their school... I think we're in a time in which kindness is, as it always is, critical, but also in some ways, countercultural. so...it's all the more important to look for those opportunities to be kind and to promote kindness in school environments.”

discussion



This focus group study examined the efficacy of Our Minds Matter programming and its impact on the personal and professional development of a group of recent program alumni. Findings from the focus group provided insights about the long-term benefits of OMM involvement from the perspective of former OMM student leaders and club members.

limitations

The study was methodologically limited by its sample recruitment strategy, which targeted a highly dedicated and engaged group of alumni, including former student leaders. This subsample was not intended to be a representation of the wide variety of students who participate in the OMM program, but rather an example of the optimal benefits that can come from strong commitment to and full engagement with the organization. The focus group sample included a group of OMM's most involved members, some of whom continue to remain connected to the organization post-graduation. Additionally, the research team set out to recruit a sample of six to eight (6-8) alumni with at least one representation from each partnered school district, and a balance of participants by gender, ethnicity, and cohort. The final sample was slightly under the target, with five alumni, all female, representing one partnered school district and one non-partnered school district. However, the alumni represented a range of professional fields, ethnic backgrounds, thus providing some level of diversity in perspectives.

conclusions and implications

The findings revealed that OMM has had a positive and lasting effect on its alumni with regard to their mental health and wellbeing, character development, social experiences, and career choices.

Several of the alumni spoke of the strong support they received from OMM that improved their understanding of mental health, enabling them to recognize personal challenges and needs during their high school years and beyond. One participant referred to their club as a “productive channel” for managing difficult emotions, such as anger and depression; another

stated that OMM helped to reframe her mindset and have a positive outlook when confronted with adversity. A majority of the alumni described their club as a “safe space” where they could have conversations about their “struggles and victories” and connect with peers across the school community. Participating in the planning and execution of OMM events and campaigns also allowed them to see the larger impact of their contributions to their clubs and the importance of having a healthy, stigma-free school environment. Beyond high school, OMM inspired several alumni to seek professional psychotherapy, which they claim has been beneficial to their overall wellness. Alumni also shared that OMM equipped them with a more inclusive and sensitive vocabulary to better articulate their thoughts in conversations about mental health.

OMM has had a profound impact on alumni character development and leadership growth by providing unique opportunities for students to build confidence, collaborate with peers, and advocate for mental health awareness in meaningful ways. Through leadership training and structured support, OMM poured into student leaders, equipping them with tools, language, and a strong foundation to lead mental health initiatives in their schools. Students reflected on how OMM helped them develop a collaborative understanding of leadership, navigate complex spaces like school board meetings, and advocate effectively for student well-being. For many, OMM was one of the first spaces where they experienced the power of community, learned the value of vulnerability and honesty, and understood the importance of legacy—passing on their work to others with purpose. These experiences continue to shape their personal growth and professional aspirations.

OMM has played a large role in shaping the alumni’s values, priorities, and interpersonal skills, which have greatly influenced their career and educational paths. Many participants credited their time in OMM with helping them discover passions that directly influenced their chosen fields, ranging from civil engineering, where creating supportive physical spaces mirrors their earlier work fostering emotional ones, to careers in law enforcement, artist management, and mental health, where empathy and emotional intelligence are central. Alumni also shared how OMM instilled a belief that mental health is essential, not optional, which continues to guide their professional decisions and personal well-being. While pursuing their individual careers and passions, the leadership and life skills developed through OMM remain foundational in their adult lives.



an important takeaway from the focus group was the evidence of OMM's impact beyond the participants themselves.

several alumni discussed sharing the insights they gained from OMM with their social networks, resulting in stronger connections and greater awareness around mental health.

For example, three participants spoke about seeing transformations within their family unit as a result of their OMM involvement. One alumnus spoke about breaking generational cycles in her family after attending an OMM event with her parents and watching them engage more with the topic of mental health and become open to therapy. Another shared that OMM inspired her to have deeper conversations about her emotions, which brought her closer to her sister and mother. Alumni spoke about advocating for mental health provisions that would support students across the school district and witnessing the success of school-wide OMM campaigns such as “Stress Less Week” which were well received by their peers. Many of the alumni continue to use language, knowledge, and resources learned during their time with OMM in their careers by providing emotional support to colleagues, practicing collaborative leadership, and creating healthy physical spaces. These ripple effects highlight how OMM not only fosters personal growth, but also empowers young people to become agents of change within their schools, families, professions, and communities.

references

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