OCTOBER WELLNESS SERIES · PART 2 OF 3

Real Voices, Real Change

World Mental Health Day and Why Lived Experience Matters

By Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC | October, 2026

Every year on **October 10**, the world pauses for **World Mental Health Day.** The 2026 theme, set by the World Federation for Mental Health, is ***"Lived Experiences Heard: Real Voices, Real Change."***

It's a powerful reminder. Some of the most important changes in how we understand mental health have come not from textbooks, but from people willing to share their stories, and from others willing to truly listen.

Why Stories Change Minds

Statistics inform us, but stories move us. When a coworker shares that they manage anxiety, when a parent talks openly about their teen's depression, or when a friend describes recovery from addiction, something shifts. Mental health conditions become less abstract and less frightening. They become human.

Hearing lived experience:

- **Reduces stigma.** It's harder to hold onto stereotypes when we know someone's real story.
- **Builds hope.** Hearing that someone has recovered or is living well encourages others to seek help.
- **Improves care.** People with lived experience help shape better services, workplaces, and policies.
- **Reduces isolation.** Many people realize for the first time, "I'm not the only one."

How to Listen Well

You don't need special training to be a safe person for someone to talk to. You need presence and patience.

- **Listen to understand, not to fix.** Resist the urge to jump in with solutions.
- **Believe them.** Their experience is real, even if it's different from yours.
- **Avoid comparisons and minimizing.** "Everyone gets stressed" can shut a conversation down.
- **Use respectful language.** Say "a person living with depression," not labels that define someone by a condition.
- **Thank them for trusting you,** and keep what they share private.
- **Ask how you can help.** "What would be most helpful right now?"

If You Choose to Share Your Own Story

Sharing your experience can be healing and can help others, but it's always your choice. You get to decide **what** to share, **when,** and **with whom.** It's okay to start small, with one trusted person. You never owe anyone your story.

Myths and Facts: OCD and ADHD

October also includes **OCD Awareness Week (October 11–17)** and **ADHD Awareness Month.** Both conditions are widely misunderstood. The International OCD Foundation's 2026 theme, "That's OCD," and the ADHD Awareness Month theme, "A Community of Support," aim to change that.

Myth: "OCD means being very neat or organized."

Fact: OCD involves unwanted, distressing thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors or mental acts (compulsions) that a person feels driven to do. It can focus on many themes, not just cleanliness, and it is a serious condition that responds to treatment.

Myth: "Everyone is a little OCD."

Fact: Liking things a certain way is common. OCD causes real distress and can take up hours of a person's day. Casual use of the term can make it harder for people who are struggling to be taken seriously.

Myth: "ADHD is just a childhood condition."

Fact: ADHD often continues into adulthood, and many adults are diagnosed later in life. Adult ADHD can affect work, relationships, and self-esteem, and support can make a meaningful difference.

Myth: "ADHD is about not trying hard enough."

Fact: ADHD involves real differences in attention, focus, and self-regulation. Many people with ADHD work incredibly hard. With understanding, strategies, and support, they can thrive.

Small Ways to Make Real Change

- Share a reliable mental health resource with your family, team, or community.
- Notice the language you use, and gently challenge jokes that minimize mental illness.
- Check in with someone who's been quiet lately.
- Support organizations that center lived experience.
- Take care of your own mental health. It helps you show up for others.

Your Takeaway This Week

This World Mental Health Day, choose one way to make your corner of the world a little safer for real voices: listen to someone without fixing, share a resource, or speak kindly about your own mental health.

> **If you're in crisis or having thoughts of harming yourself:** call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or call 911.

Coming next: Balance at Work and at Home, about coaching your way to well-being during National Work and Family Month.

About the Author

Kathy L. Fortner, EdS, LPC, CCMHC, BCC, is a Board Certified Licensed Professional Counselor with more than 25 years of experience and the founder of KLF-Insights. She offers online counseling, life coaching, executive coaching, and consulting for individuals, couples, and organizations, with a focus on prevention and wellness.

Need support this season? KLF-Insights offers online counseling and coaching sessions. Schedule a session at [insert contact link]. Many employers also offer free, confidential counseling through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP); check with your HR department.

In crisis? If you are thinking about harming yourself, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), or call 911.

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