

Supporting Students in the Midst of Mental Health Shortages

Throughout the United States, there is a huge shortage of licensed mental health care services and providers. The need for mental health therapists has skyrocketed in recent years, especially once the COVID-19 pandemic hit. However, according to multiple research reports, such as the Employee Benefit Research Institute (EBRI), there was already an increase in adults and youth seeking mental health services prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the shortages of mental health therapists and licensed professionals, youth and families are unable to access services in a timely manner, if at all, and get the help they need. The causes for the shortages are multi-layered and the fixes are not simple. The truth of the matter is the remedies needed to repair and strengthen the mental health service system will take patience and time.

Fortunately, whether students are waiting to receive mental health services or not, schools have been rather resilient in looking for additional ways to help support students and their mental well-being.

Here is a short list of what schools can and have done to help support students with their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Implement a Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum:

SEL programs provide a positive foundation for learning that improves a student's ability to succeed in school, and throughout their life. Research shows that SEL helps develop pro-social behaviors such as kindness, sharing, and empathy, as well as improvements in school performance and the overall mental wellbeing of students.

- SEL helps kids learn skills to support healthy relationships and development.
- SEL can help kids improve academic performance.
- SEL can help kids feel better and have better mental wellness.
- SEL can help decrease challenging behavior and emotional distress
- SEL can help students build and maintain healthy relationships.
- SEL can help students feel and show empathy for others.
- SEL can help students make responsible decisions based on ethics, safety, and the well-being of others.

Provide Extracurricular Activities & Clubs:

Connecting a student to extracurricular activities/clubs may be a good interim or alternative for a student who is waiting for and/or is unable to receive mental health services. Research shows a firm connection between student participation in extracurricular activities/clubs and academic success. Students who participate in extracurricular activities/clubs tend to have higher grades, better attendance, as well as improved emotional well-being, good/improved social skills and fewer incidences of depression.

- Extracurriculars/Clubs can help kids discover and promote their passions/talents, which can lead to increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

- Extracurriculars/Clubs have shown to help improve grades and attendance, which can lead to increased self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Extracurriculars/Clubs have shown to help develop social skills, which can lead to increased self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Extracurriculars/Clubs can help with stress relief, which can lead to increased self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Extracurriculars/Clubs can promote good mental health by providing a sense of belonging.

Provide/Implement Mentoring Programs:

Connecting a student with a mentor may be a good interim or alternative for a student who is waiting for and/or is unable to receive mental health services. School mentoring programs can provide a youth with someone who cares about them, assures them they are not alone in dealing with everyday life occurrences and provides them with a sense that they matter. Research confirms that good mentoring relationships have positive and affirming effects on youth academically, socially as well as mentally and emotionally.

- Increased high school graduation rates
- Lower high school dropout rates
- Healthier relationships and lifestyle choices
- Better attitude about school
- Improved self-esteem/self-confidence
- Improved behavior, both at home and at school
- Improved relationships
- Decreased risk of drug and alcohol use

Develop & Provide Check-ins for Students of Concern who are on Waiting Lists:

Having a check-in system for a student may be a good interim or alternative for a student who is waiting for and/or is unable to receive mental health services. Daily or weekly check-ins give school personnel a dedicated time and opportunity to see how a student is doing emotionally/mentally as well as academically. Some schools use their school counselor, social worker or administrator, while others may use a teacher or a specific school personnel that the student already trusts, such as a coach or “favorite teacher”.

- Check-ins can be used to help identify academic and attendance concerns
- Check-ins can be used to help identify signs of depression and suicidal ideation
- Check-ins can be used to help identify bullying concerns or occurrences
- Check-ins can be used to help identify possible threats of aggression/violence before they occur

Please visit <https://scipnebraska.com/> for more information and resources about youth mental health and behavior concerns and what you can do to help.

Sources & Sites for Additional SEL Information:

<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/truth-about-sel-it-works>

www.cfchildren.org/second-step

www.teachthought.com/learning/2-resources-for-social-emotional-learning/

Sources & Sites for Additional Extracurricular Activities & Club Information:

<https://www.child-focus.org/news/what-are-the-benefits-of-getting-your-kids-involved-in-clubs-and-sports/>

Sources & Sites for Additional Mentoring Information:

<https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org>

<https://www.mentoring.org>

<https://teammates.org/>

Talking to Youth about School Violence

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report (2013-2023), there have been concerning increases in high school students' experiences with violence. This includes increases in the percentage of students who were threatened or injured with a weapon at school and who missed school because of safety concerns (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Anxiety and fear over school violence have become common feelings for adults and kids alike. With the prevalence of news surrounding school shootings and



violence as well as recent social media hoaxes of potential threats, youth especially may feel a heightened sense of worry. While talking to kids about traumatic events like school violence can be challenging, it is critical that we offer children and teens opportunities to share their thoughts and emotions, help them find ways to manage fear and worry over thoughts such as “what if this happens in my school or my town?”, and provide them with a sense of safety and security.

We know youth don't always get their information from reliable sources and what they see and hear in the media may not paint an accurate picture. Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping to separate fact from fiction and engage in discussion with children about school safety. Psychologists at the Child Mind Institute note that having age-appropriate conversations about school violence can alleviate anxiety and give kids and teens a safe place to talk, ask questions and get some reassurance. Experts suggest setting the framework by letting kids know they are surrounded by caring teachers and other school professionals, who are educated and trained to do everything in their power to keep them safe. To help guide parents in discussions, organizations like Mental Health America, SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration) and the National Association of School Psychologists, offer the below suggestions:

- Provide a space where kids can talk about their concerns and express their feelings. Some youth may be hesitant to initiate conversation, so parents and caregivers may need to get discussions started by asking if they feel safe at school, in their neighborhood or in public places. One way to initiate a conversation is by saying “it can be normal to feel scared by violence, even if it happens someplace else.” Follow with open-ended questions about what feelings they might have.

- Validate feelings. It's important that adults acknowledge fears and worries. For example, if a teen or child shares concerns over a recent event that happened, explain that it is okay to feel sad and anxious after a tragedy. Try to avoid minimizing what they are feeling but at the same time provide some reassurance by reminding them of the safety protocols their schools have in place.
- Limit media viewing of violent events. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause more anxiety and confusion, especially in younger children. Be mindful of the conversations about these events you have in front of children (including teenagers).
- Correct misinformation. Speculating or spreading rumors about the specifics of a violent event can increase anxiety and fear. Emphasize that law enforcement and other designated authorities have the most accurate information.
- Empower youth to take action regarding their safety. Reinforce that adults are responsible for keeping them safe, but that everyone can play a role in school safety. Encourage them to report specific incidents (such as bullying, threats or talk of suicide, or weapons). Provide youth with tools and strategies to develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills.
- Keep the dialogue going. Making safety a common topic in family discussions rather than a response to an immediate crisis, can encourage children to share their concerns.

Given the intensity of how acts of violence are covered on television and discussed on social media, it is normal to feel some fear and anxiety. In fact, some level of anxiety is healthy as it triggers our bodies' alarm system when a threat is nearby. However, sometimes that alarm is triggered too easily (in the absence of danger or a real threat). If a young person is experiencing anxiety over their safety to a level that is debilitating and interfering in their ability to function, it might be time to seek out professional help from a mental health provider or a family physician.

For additional information, please visit:

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/school-violence-prevention/school-violence-prevention-tips-for-parents-and-educators>

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Child Mind Institute; Mental Health America; National Association of School Psychologists; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration

Information Overload: Doom Scrolling, Negativity Bias, and the Danger of Knowing Too Much

ScienceDirect defines doom scrolling as the “compulsive, indiscriminate consumption of negative news,” and it uses one recent study to suggest that doom scrolling is “associated with exacerbated future anxiety, elevated risk-taking, psychological distress” and lower “life satisfaction.”

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, many isolated adolescents looked to their phones for the illusion of comfort that they thought a constant flow of news coverage would provide. However, the persistent onslaught of devastating news headlines provoked a mental health crisis among youth who were unable to shield themselves from international catastrophes they had no control over, and since 2020, behavioral health agencies in the United States have documented a marked increase in youth anxiety. In fact, the mental health crisis among youth in the United States has become so pervasive that four years later, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force now recommends regular anxiety screenings for youth ages 8 to 18 and regular depression screenings for adolescents ages 12 to 18.



Among the 69% of parents of American teenagers who believe, according to the Pew Research Center, that being a teenager today is “harder” than it was twenty years ago, 15% say that this difference is because the world has “changed” in a “bad way.” Although it may be true that an increase in political unrest, economic insecurity and disease has contributed to the kind of stress that adolescents face today, it is likely also the case that this difference in stress stems, more simply, from a marked increase in exposure to disastrous national and international events.

Indeed, ScienceDirect reports that news media outlets with a blind spot for positive news tend to “disproportionately focus on negative stories” in part because these stories attract more attention, and adolescents who are pulled in by the allure of unnerving headlines are likely to believe that many impending threats loom all too close to home.

Traditional ‘bullseye’ theories of PTSD used to suggest that sufferers of post-traumatic stress symptoms would only be impacted by disastrous events that they were in close physical proximity to. However, new research from the peer-reviewed Nature Human Behavior journal suggests, instead, that continuous media exposure predicts post-traumatic stress symptoms in children who do not live in the vicinity of the natural disasters that they are being exposed to. In 2021, the researchers who conducted this study hypothesized that children who consistently watch television news coverage or ‘doom scroll’ online platforms about catastrophic events experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress because, just like the children who are in the

vicinity of the disaster, they are “still developing a stable sense of security and have relatively limited control over their environments.”

Where it once might have been possible for young people to selectively attend to and act on behalf of the issues that affected their local communities, the globalization of media accessibility has contributed to the kind of ‘learned helplessness’ that makes many adolescents feel paralyzed. As one author puts it in *Imagine Magazine*, teenagers are often trapped “in a loop” of information-seeking because they hope to “gain a sense of control or understanding” about the world around them; instead, though, they “find themselves feeling more anxious and depressed.” Indeed, children and adolescents who are repeatedly exposed to ‘meaning-threatening stimuli’ – such as reports on hunger crises, genocides, and homicides – experience more feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness. As the University Hospitals’ Science of Health blog reports, children who regularly doom scroll are also more likely to suffer from sleep problems, hyperactive nervous systems and daily inattentiveness.

According to ScienceDirect, several factors make some children and adolescents particularly susceptible to doom scrolling, headline anxiety and media overconsumption. These factors include lower self-control, high political interest, minimal caregiver support, having unrestricted access to media and on-screen violence, and high neuroticism or generalized anxiety

The harmful effects of constant media exposure on the body’s nervous system can be offset by supportive interventions that help a child separate themselves from the media they consume. These interventions include:

- **‘Rightsizing’ the News:** Providing broader context is important for children who need to learn how to realistically assess the actual risk for unusual events that garner lots of media attention.
- **Dietary Media Restriction:** Children and adolescents should take regular breaks from social media consumption and create healthy habits around the amount of time they spent on social media, which will prevent them from overexposure.
- **Proactivity:** Children and adolescents who are particularly interested in or passionate about specific issues should take action in their local communities because striving after the things they value will minimize feelings of learned helplessness.
- **Building Safety Nets:** Adults who are in the care of adolescents should practice developing safety plans for children who are or feel especially threatened by world events.
- **Fostering Real-World Connections:** Children and adolescents who are connected to friends and family are less likely to feel isolated and will be more likely to reach out for support if they experience concerning levels of anxiety.
- **Working the Algorithm:** Following accounts that are consistently neutral or positive in informative content will help a young person curate a news feed that is well-balanced and manageable.
- **Practicing Presence:** Young people who practice healthy behavioral techniques like exercising regularly, mediating, and exposure therapy are more likely to be present in their environments and less likely to be distracted by stressful events.

For more resources regarding the prevalence of post-COVID-19 youth anxiety and intervention strategies, see the American Psychological Association Website: [Anxiety Among Kids Is On The Rise](#)

For more resources regarding doomscrolling, see Harvard Health Publishing Website: [Doomscrolling Dangers](#)

For more resources regarding healthy screen time habits, see the American Academy of Pediatrics' Healthy Children Website: [Beyond Screen Time: Help Your Kids Build Healthy Media Use Habits](#)

References:

American Psychological Association's Report on Media Overload:
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/strain-media-overload>

American Psychological Association's Report on Youth Mental Health Crisis:
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/01/trends-improving-youth-mental-health>

Boise Imagine on Doomscrolling: <https://www.boiseimagine.com/mental-health-blog/what-is-doomscrolling-and-how-does-it-affect-teens/>

Nature Human Behavior Journal Article on "Neural Vulnerability And Hurricane-Related Media Are Associated With Post-Traumatic Stress In Youth": <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01216-3>

Pew Research Center's "Why Many Parents And Teens Think It's Harder Being A Teen Today":
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/feature/why-many-parents-and-teens-think-its-harder-being-a-teen-today/>

ScienceDirect on Doomscrolling from Evidence in Iran and the United States:
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S245195882400071X>

University Hospitals' Blog on Doomscrolling and Breaking the Habit:
<https://www.uhhospitals.org/blog/articles/2024/07/doomscrolling-breaking-the-habit>