PRINT-Teens Struggle to Support Peers During Pandemic

Teenagers are more comfortable reaching out to each other, rather than the adults in their lives because they feel their peers are more likely to understand what they're going through, according to high school senior Catherine Fuller.

Fuller attends United High School in Monmouth and recently told a panel at a Prairie Communications radio town hall meeting, her friends and many others her age are failing at providing an adequate support system.

"Kids aren't professionals. They're really not going to be able to properly help each other in these kinds of extreme situations but they're really not sure where else to go; they're not really comfortable going anywhere else," she explained.

The National Mental Health Alliance says the pandemic is hitting pre-teens and teens hardest. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, youth ages 11-17 have been more likely than any other age group to score as having moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression after taking one of its online screening tools. The same group also had the highest rates of thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

Fuller reported many of her fellow high school students are wearing themselves out trying to support their friends and keep up with challenges of online classes. Add to that, they're not able to see their friends in person so interactions leave them feeling isolated. At the same time, their parents can seem emotionally unavailable because they're consumed by dealing with their *own* stressors.

Most days, Fuller is at home in her bedroom doing online classes. But, she reminds parents that just because their child is at home and they're seeing them more often, it doesn't mean they know what's going on with them. Fuller, who wants to be a behavioral health professional, thinks communication needs to move beyond what she calls "robotic" questions and answers.

"We need to sit down and have these serious conversations and when you ask the questions, 'How are you? What's going on?' you need to be able to be ready to hear the answer and respond to that with help," she shared.

OSF Behavioral Health Director Luke Raymond says parents can help their teens navigate options.

"I don't think we have to know the answers or be able to fix the problem but we can be present with that person and help them find the right answer and help get them to the place that can get them the help they need. It's incredibly important that if you're going to ask it, (How are you doing?), you better be ready for the answer," he stressed.

OSF Behavioral Health Director of Physician Services Dr. Sam Sears emphasizes teenagers who are trying to be there for others should realize it *is* extremely valuable to check in with their friends to see how they are doing.

"Yeah, none of us are ok but (asking) 'How not ok are you right now?' and finding ways to really be there right now for folks can mean the difference in whether that person gets through the day or not."

However, behavioral health experts say it is important for teenagers to recognize the difference between people who soothe and energize them and others who regularly leave them feeling stirred up or spent.

Fuller has learned from research and has seen it play out – her peers struggle to project themselves beyond their current situation. Many seniors, like Fuller, are mourning the loss of the traditions the final year high school brings such as celebrating a final band competition or that last game and awards ceremony. In some ways, she explains, it feels like their childhood – which teens can only experience once – is being stripped from them.

“A lot of students are stressed. A lot of students are depressed as well and I think it’s really difficult for them right now to be seeing some of the silver linings … to see some of the positivity and I think that’s what we, as a student community, need to be focused on.” Fuller adds, “We really need to be there for each other. We need to remind each other that this is a temporary problem. It’s going to get better.”

Teenagers should be careful not to mirror the unhealthy coping behavior they could be seeing in their parents including avoiding social interactions**,** being cranky all the time, misusing substances, or sacrificing sleep to binge on social media.

In turn, Raymond reminds parents they should try to model good social, emotional behavior because their teens are paying attention.

“We often tell our teenagers and kids to do certain things but then if we don’t practice what we preach so to speak. (Realize) they’re much more likely to model our behavior than to comply with what we say. So, if we want our kids to engage in those pro social activities then we need to engage in those pro social activities too,” Raymond advises.

Those activities should also include self-care such as sticking to regular exercise and sleep routines.

Danger Signs

Experts on the mental health panel stressed parents also need to recognize signs their child might really be in danger and those signs haven’t really changed because of the pandemic. For example:

- loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- a hard time falling or staying asleep, or starting to sleep all the time
- changes in weight or eating patterns, such as never being hungry or eating all the time
- changes in appearance, such as lack of basic personal hygiene (within reason, since many are doing slightly less grooming during this time at home)
- an increase in risky or reckless behaviors, such as using drugs or alcohol
- talking about death or suicide or giving away important personal possessions

A primary care provider or pediatrician can screen for depression and suicide risk. Additionally, adolescents who have experienced the loss of someone they love due to COVID-19 are at increased risk for mental health challenges and might need special counseling to manager their loss and grief.

To understand the right resource, Raymond suggests an OSF Behavioral Health navigator can be reached at (309) 308-8150. Calling 2-1-1 can also provide direct help for a variety of needs, including mental health crisis support. Immediate help is also available through the National Suicide Prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).