

The Price to Youth Mental Health

Twenty-five months ago, our world changed; life as we knew it drastically altered. Twenty-five months later we are still asking “when will we return to normal?” Answers vary, and in my opinion, we’re not. The normal before the pandemic is gone; it’s best to stop looking back at what was, to live in the present, and look toward the future drawing on information gained and lessons identified during the pandemic. Perhaps the energy being spent on returning “back to normal” could be used to address the grave state of our youth mental health, which is an alarming concern.

Pandemic Revelations

Youth mental health assistance and support are dismally inadequate, which is unfortunate as “poor mental health is a *growing* problem for adolescents” (CDC, 2021). Our great state of Texas ranks 51st in access to health insurance, health care, and treatment (Mental Health America, 2022). Nationally, we’ve seen a 31% increase in ER visits for youth ages 12-17 (and 24% increase in ages 5-11). However, mental health concerns in our youth aren’t new. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) noted the rates of childhood mental health concerns and suicide have been rising steadily since 2010. Since 2018, suicide has become the 2nd leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 (and 8th leading cause of death for ages 5-11 since 2017). This ought to cause alarm for at least two reasons. Untreated mental health issues impact physical health. We also know a chronically stressed brain impacts overall functioning. The pandemic was a significant source of stress and 49% of millennials reported having difficulty with making decisions (APA, 2020)

The Impact

Youth are products of their environment. What we do now can minimize the lasting effects of the pandemic and promote mental health wellness. It’s all about being preventative. The answers may lie in:

- how we continue to address socio-emotional development to mitigate regression seen in learning, communication, and relationships,
- how we foster resiliency, coping skills, and being prosocial, and
- ensuring youth are given a voice, choice, and opportunities to share their narratives and be a part of the decision-making and solution-building processes.

As adults, we want our youth to become adults and live full lives. That is our primary goal. As adults, we sometimes forget that we, too, were adolescents. We assume a “we know best” stance rather than providing scaffolds for our youth to develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills essential for adulthood. Throughout the pandemic, our youth often didn’t have a voice or choice, leaving them to feel powerless, helpless, and hopeless. And when it comes to mental health, our youth often feel dismissed, ignored, or conflicted when they are not listened to or taken seriously. So, what can we do now?

Supporting Our Youth

Perhaps the starting point is to understand what it is like to be an adolescent today. It’s important to understand both our own and youths’ expectations and anticipate the challenges our youth may or are already experiencing. Using a youth-driven and led approach requires a paradigm shift that promotes a “me to we” approach.

A “me” focus is rooted in self-care, which is essential to being able to help others, which leads to the “we” focus. Self-care is not only extremely important, but a modeling behavior. Once we can self-regulate, we are then able to engage in using an ABC template to address mental health. For example:

- A = Affirm; Actively and attentively listen; Accept; Avoid blaming; Ask if suicidal
- B = Breathe; Be calm and compassionate; Be active
- C = Communicate without judgment and use “I” messages; Check-in with your child
- D = Do (keep to routines); Draw on your child’s strengths and positive coping skills

- E = Empathize; Establish safety and trust where youth can speak openly and freely; Empower
- F = Focus on your concerns and problem-solve collaboratively
- G = Grant permission to be vulnerable; to feel anxious or turmoil internally while remaining calm externally; and to not know the answers because you will problem-solve collaboratively with your child.

Lastly, knowledge is powerful. Know the warning signs and symptoms of mental health conditions. Know that language matters in reducing stigma and increasing dialogue. Know the resources. Know that it is okay to not be okay, and that you are not alone. Know that when your child shares with you or someone else, that your child is not only showing trust but bravery and courage. Know that recovery is possible.

Resources

- NAMI Central Texas: www.namicentraltx.org or 512.420.9810
- 24/7 Crisis Hotline for Central Texas: 800-841-1255
- Integral Care: **512-472-HELP**
- Bluebonnet Trails Community Services: **800-841-1255** (Williamson Bastrop, Burnet, & Caldwell counties)
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800.273.8255
- Text NAMI to 741-741 for Online Chat
- The Trevor LGBTQ Crisis Hotline: **866-488-7326**
- Free Real Talk for Parents Groups and Central Texas Teacher & Staff Support Groups thru Seek Institute: <https://seekinstitute.org/>
- Mental Health America: [screening tools](#)
- Ok2talk.org
- Mentalhealthchannel.tv
- teenshealth.org
- [Texas Youth Action Network](#)
- [Texas Youth Helpline](#)

About the Writer: Rebecca L. Farrell, Ph.D., LPCC-S (KY) has over 20 years in the mental health field. Dr. Farrell has worked extensively with children, adolescents, adults, couples, and families navigating mental health, legal, and justice systems and provided resources and clinical services. She has held administrative and leadership positions in non-profit organizations and served as a professor in higher education institutions. Dr. Farrell has been named the next Executive Director of [PLANCTX](#), a nonprofit mental health organization, in Austin, TX.