



Open Communication Helps Students Who Struggle with Mental Health Issues



High school is a time of great change and exciting opportunities. Yet, it is also a time that many teens experience poor mental health.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy recently declared a mental health crisis among our nation's youth, outlining the pandemic's unprecedented impacts on the mental health of America's youth and families, as well as the mental health issues that existed long before the pandemic.

Even before the start of the pandemic, the CDC reports that 1 in 3 high school students had experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019, a 40 percent increase since 2009. Also in 2019, approximately 1 in 6 youth reported making a suicide plan in the past year, a 44% increase since 2009.

JAMA Pediatrics Network analyzed data in 2021 and found that 1 in 5 youth are experiencing clinically elevated anxiety symptoms.

This month's Facebook Live presented by the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition highlighted the state of stigma among high school students and how keeping lines of communication open can help teens achieve mental wellness. Visit letstalkstigma.org/facebook-live to view the discussion.

"Sadly, we are experiencing a significant increase in students who are in need of services – both for mild conditions, such as anxiety, as well as more severe (e.g. depression/severe depression, trauma, grief, suicidal ideations, suicide attempts, etc.)," said Dr. Keli Koran Luchey,

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founder/CEO, Lucid Pathways, and counselor at Sweet Home High School in Amherst.

According to Luchey, it is vitally important that we engage in on-going communication with our youth so that it becomes normalized.

"We want them to feel as comfortable speaking about their mental health and mental illness as they should be about their physical health and illness," she said. "It is my hope that the more we speak about it, the more comfortable they will become, and the easier it will be to address."

Mount St. Mary Academy in Kenmore has enhanced the school's counseling department to better meet the needs of students.

"High school is different from what the students have known as they dive into their values and beliefs," said Jessica Gertz, MSW, school social worker. "Students form identities and explore who they are as people," she said. "Not only are they experiencing hormonal changes, but they are also thinking about their futures and careers for the first time."

Mount St. Mary's has instituted Restorative Justice Training to strengthen relationships among staff and students as well as mental health training.

In terms of stigma, there is more mental health awareness and needs have been heightened by the pandemic. According to Gertz, stigma may impact parents who are hesitant to discuss their child's mental health and students who are reluctant to talk about their struggles.

What parents & families can do to support their high school children?

- Communicate openly and honestly, including about their values.
- Supervise their adolescent to facilitate healthy decision-making.
- Spend time with their adolescent enjoying shared activities.
- Become engaged in school activities and help with homework.
- Volunteer at their adolescent's school.
- Communicate regularly with teachers and administrators.

CDC

"Open communication is important, and the best results come about with constant contact between parents, school counselors, outside counselors, and their students."

Dr. Luchey says it can be very awkward and uncomfortable for parents to talk with their teen who may be struggling.

"For many, it is fear of the unknown," she said. "Parents may not know what to do or what to say. It is ok to articulate this fear to their child, while stressing they are determined to get them the help that is needed to feel better.

"What is most important is that they listen and communicate with love – being patient, open, non-judgemental and willing to seek assistance and support for both the child and themselves," Luchey said.

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BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/support/pledge.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.

If parents notice a significant switch in their child's personality, they can ease into a conversation and open a line of communication," Gertz said. "Ask them about their day, give them grace and support them. Talk about counseling and resources available at school."

Olive Luniewski is a 14-year-old Hamburg High School freshman who has struggled with mental health issues and is an advocate for students with mental health issues.

"Not everyone, especially teens, are fortunate enough to have support, which is why I find it to be so extremely important that schools offer the proper resources to help their students," she said. "School is a neutral environment that every child must attend. If we have administration who can give them the support they need that they may not receive at home, we will notice a huge shift in our next generation's mental health."

Many school districts have expanded mental health services to meet the growing needs of their students.

DiMario Bell, MS, LMHC-P, is treatment team supervisor, Wyndham Lawn Campus, a residential program of New Directions Youth and Family Services in Lockport, N.Y. He works with young people ages 12 to 18 with emotional, educational, and/or behavioral issues.

The pandemic has significantly impacted young people, and as the organization's mental health champion, Bell says he listens, encourages teens to get involved in activities, encourages them to re-connect with their peers, and get outside. Social media also continues to have an impact on young people's mental health.

According to Bell, social media provides access to a lot of opinions, toxic trends, resulting in many teens experiencing low self-esteem issues and depression.

"I encourage them to see value within themselves and remind them they don't need to compare themselves to other people," he said. "Life is the great equalizer." ■

“ Mental health is a topic I've always been very aware of. Growing up surrounded with struggle has taught me a lot about empathy. Understanding how one is feeling and feeling that as if it's your own pain is not a foreign concept. I first started going to therapy around third grade. My parents divorced when I was three and I had been aiming to not have any visitation with my paternal figure as far back as I could grasp such an idea. We thought talking to a professional might help me overcome the fear I felt that was holding me back from having the living situations I longed for.

Unfortunately, this specific therapist didn't end up working for me, so I stopped going. I struggled for two more years until I found the courage to use my voice to advocate for myself and decide for myself how I had to live. As I got older and I experienced harder and harder feats, the stress, anxiety, and confusion built.

I've jumped between different therapists a few times, and I tried to just "handle" it myself. Some aren't as fortunate as I was. Even though we have limitations financially, I have someone looking out for me, making sure I have access to the support I need, whatever the case is. Not everyone, especially teens, are fortunate enough which is why I find it to be so extremely important that schools offer the proper resources to help their students. School is a neutral environment that every child must attend. If we have administration who can give them the support they need that they may not receive at home, we will notice a huge shift in our next generation's mental health.”



Olive Luniewski is a 14-year-old Hamburg High School (HHS) freshman. She holds the Freshman Ambassador appointed position at HHS. She is a pre-professional dancer studying at The Future Dance Center, beginning at age 4. She travels and receives recognition for her talent. In addition, she has participated in Tae Kwon Do, soccer, and basketball. She serves as a chairperson for the second year of the Hamburg Coalition for Equity and Inclusion, run as a student-led club at HHS. She also is a member of Youth Alliance for Education run by UB. She participates in Nature Club. Olive is dedicated to being a voice for peers who need her. Olive was a panelist for the Facebook Live on January 19, The State of Stigma: Keeping Communication Channels Open for High School Students. ■

A Q&A with The Mental Health Association in Niagara County

The Mental Health Association in Niagara County has been serving the community for more than 50 years, working to promote wellness through advocacy, education, and community service programs, while focusing on turning illness into wellness. Services include presentations, self-help material, advocacy services, information, referral services, and valuable support services for individuals with a mental health diagnosis. We spoke with **Daniel Colpoys, Mental Health Association in Niagara County, Executive Director.**

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Why did your organization become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Educating the Niagara County community on the subject of mental health is core to the mission of the Mental Health Association in Niagara County. Joining the Anti-Stigma Coalition is another vehicle to help us deliver the message that people can live with a mental health diagnosis and still be successful in their careers, and have rich, full social and family lives.

How are people with mental health challenges impacted by stigma?

There's no question that people with mental health challenges do not seek the care they need due to stigma. We need to get past

the archaic sentiment that's still out there and permeating some cultures that people can 'tough out their diagnosis' and bury their feelings/issues and eventually things will get better. Things probably won't get better without proper care.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

Thousands of people in Western New York have taken the pledge to end the stigma of mental illness. This is a start, but as a Coalition of some of the biggest, and most respected mental health providers, school districts, private companies, faith-based organizations, and medical professionals, we must do better. I'll challenge all of our members, including my own, to incorporate ending the stigma of mental illness into their professional, and personal, lives. ■

Upcoming Events

JANUARY 19

Facebook Live Event – Keeping Communication Channels Open for High School Students
Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition

JANUARY 27

Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, but Words DO Hurt Me: Decolonizing Language in our Work.

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBER



Healthcare • Education • Action!

Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members.

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members:

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Community Partners of Western New York • Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County
Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
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