



Responding to the Crisis in Children's Mental Health

By Kathy Rivera

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As of this writing, while COVID-19 cases have been inching up, most experts say that we have moved into a new phase of the pandemic, where the disease, while still dangerous, is less deadly than previous strains. In addition, preventative measures and treatments have advanced far beyond the early days of the crisis, when so little was known.

Certainly, that is news we've all been hoping to hear for more than two years, but there is another crisis that shows no signs of abating: the epidemic of mental health issues spurred by long-term social isolation, anxiety, illness, financial insecurity and other challenges.

While all of us have been impacted, the reality is that children, teens and young adults have experienced the losses surrounding COVID-19 in deep and potentially long-lasting ways. Numerous studies have reported sharp increases in rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness and suicide attempts. In addition, the number of U.S. children who have lost a parent or other caregiver to COVID-19 is estimated to exceed 200,000.

In a first-of-its-kind study of youth mental health during the pandemic period, released on March 31, 2022, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported a dramatic increase in emotional and psychological trauma in kids and teens. More than a third of high school students said they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, with 44% reporting they felt "persistently sad or hopeless." One in five considered suicide, and nearly 10% made a suicide attempt.

The CDC also reported that, during the first seven months of lockdown, hospitals experienced a 24% rise in mental-health-related emergency visits for children aged 5 to 11, and a 31% increase for those aged 12 to 17.

Sadly, these statistics came as no surprise to the team of clinicians at North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center (the Guidance Center). From the early days of the pandemic, we have been flooded with calls from hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent care centers, parents, schools and others desperate for help as they saw those statistics come to life.

At the Guidance Center, we've provided therapy to children—some as young as three years old—who are experiencing deep grief from the loss of a parent or other loved one. Many are grieving a loss of hope and confidence about their futures. Others are in dire financial situations born of pandemic job loss. All lost fundamental things that we used to take for granted: the ability to be with friends, go to school, celebrate joyous occasions, participate in extracurricular activities and have confidence that we were safe in the world.

Even if the pandemic disappeared tomorrow, the mental health effects would not disappear with it. Unfortunately, we cannot expect our children to simply get over what has been such a profoundly difficult, scary and uncertain time.

Despite these gloomy predictions, parents need not succumb to hopelessness. You have a vital role to play, and it's one that can make all the difference in helping your children survive and even thrive despite the challenges of the past two years.

First, be on the lookout for signs of emotional distress. Is your child or teen isolating themselves, even though they are allowed to be with others? Have their sleeping or eating patterns changed? Have their grades dropped dramatically? Have they lost interest in the things that used to make them happy? Are they more irritable than usual? Have they turned to substances to improve or numb their moods?

Don't assume that they will tell you they're struggling. Ask them how they are feeling. Assure them that it's normal to be feeling sad, scared and even angry in the face of all they've experienced. And tell them there is absolutely no shame in asking for professional help. Tell them, it's OK not to be OK.

The Guidance Center has been serving the community for nearly 70 years, and we are here during this time. We never turn anyone away for inability to pay, and we promise to see urgent cases within 24 to 48 hours through our

Douglas S. Feldman Suicide Prevention Project and our Fay J. Lindner Foundation Triage and Emergency Services. We offer individualized, culturally sensitive treatment via telehealth, in person or a combination of both, depending on the needs of the family.

Children are not little adults. They have specific needs that are best addressed by mental health professionals who are specially trained to help young people. They are also resilient, and with the proper support, they will overcome the challenges brought on by the pandemic. We all will.

Bio: Kathy Rivera, LCSW, is the Executive Director/CEO of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center, Long Island's leading non-profit children's mental health organization. To get help for your child or to support the Guidance Center's life-saving work, call (516) 626-1971 or visit www.northshorechildguidance.org.