

Helping Young People Thrive Through Mental Health First Aid Practices

By Mary Ellen Young

We are a culture obsessed with physical fitness and appearance (especially as a new year rings in), yet mental fitness - every bit as essential to well-being - can be ignored, invisible, misunderstood, and stigmatized. For generations, individuals and families suffered in silence, often too embarrassed or ill-informed about mental illness. In recent years though, skyrocketing occurrence rates, better public awareness, and the candid acknowledgement of personal mental health challenges by respected celebrities including Prince Harry, Carrie Fisher, Ellen DeGeneres, J.K. Rowling and Lady Gaga, to name a few, have helped to ease the stigma and raise awareness of this public crisis.

Mental health disorders can take many forms including anxiety, depression, addiction, bipolar disorder, attention deficit disorder, and more. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), millions of people are affected by mental illness each year:

- 1 in 6 (17%) youth ages 6-17 experience a mental health disorder and only about half receive treatment
- 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24
- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-34
- The overall suicide rate in the U.S. has increased by 31% since 2001

The dramatic rise in mental health disorders is a serious public crisis; many consider it an epidemic. Prevention strategies, early detection, and treatment are essential.

Here's a few tips for what can parents can do:

- Know how to help. Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), a training course available to the public, is designed to help people assist someone experiencing a mental health or substance use-related crisis by knowing the risk factors, warning signs, strategies, and resources available. For training information and excellent resources, visit: Mentalhealthfirstaid.org
- *Always* seek emergency help if there's *any* indication of injury to self or others and share that message with

your children when age-appropriate. Remind them that just as there are doctors for our bones, teeth, and skin, there are professionals to help diagnose and treat issues with the brain.

- Get you/your family outdoors. Countless studies have proven the benefits of spending time in nature. Studies have also shown that movement/exercise have reduced the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
 - Build healthy relationships. A number of skills are required to develop mutually beneficial, healthy relationships yet some of these may not come naturally to children. Intentionally teach, discuss, and role model relationship skills such as active listening, empathy, assertive communication, compassion, and compromise.
 - Practice yoga and meditation. Focusing on the breath and quieting the mind are essential for mental well-being. There are several yoga practices designed for kids and teens in our area. Many teachers now use mindfulness practices in the classroom. Role model how to carve out quiet time at home.
- Limit screen time and social media. You've heard this over and over – excessive screen time and social media use wreak havoc on mental well-being. Countless studies have shown the correlation between screen time and the dramatic rise in mental health disorders. The current generation of youth are the first to have access to screens from toddlerhood. Many apps have addictive features built-in. Adults must be prepared to teach and role model proper use of these new tools.

Those of us privileged to work with or parent youth, owe it to them to support their physical, social, emotional, and mental health needs so they have an opportunity to thrive!

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