

HEALING



MAGAZINE

2020 Vol. 25, No. 2

Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19

Stockpiling "MPE"
Teaching Empathy
Telehealth



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KidsPeace is a private charity dedicated to serving the behavioral and mental health needs of children, preadolescents and teens. Founded in 1882, KidsPeace provides a unique psychiatric hospital, a comprehensive range of residential treatment programs, accredited educational services and a variety of foster care and community programs to give hope, help and healing to children, adults and those who love them. Learn more at www.kidspeace.org.

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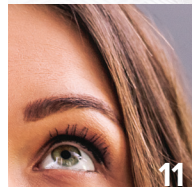
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Providing practical, clinical information to families and children's professionals



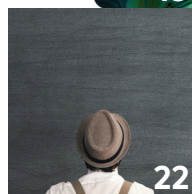
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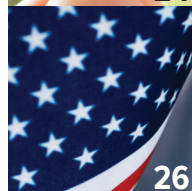
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Are you interested in writing for Healing Magazine?

If you are a professional in the field of mental health, education or parenting, we welcome your submission. *Healing* articles should be about 1,200 words and consist of practical, clinical information about children's mental health that can be applied in the home, classroom, community and/or office setting.

Ideas for articles can be sent to healing@kidspeace.org. *Healing Magazine* reserves the right to edit all manuscripts.



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It may not be obvious but mental health issues are as real as physical health issues. They can affect anyone. Even future pilots.



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Dear Friend of KidsPeace:

As 2020 nears its end, we recognize that this has been an extraordinary year in so many ways – with the most important development in 2020 in terms of the future likely to be the emergence of the COVID-19 virus and the response to the resulting worldwide pandemic. As medical experts are beginning to uncover, the impact of COVID-19 on patients can include long-lasting effects on their health even if they survive the infection. Similarly, the impact on our communities and healthcare systems in the long term will be significant and transformative ... and that includes mental and behavioral healthcare.

In this issue of *Healing Magazine*, we present a range of perspectives on how the stress of the pandemic affected segments of our population, and how the mental health field responded and continues to respond to those challenges. And we propose a new way of looking at how to prepare ourselves for difficult times; just as we learned that making sure we have enough personal protective equipment (PPE) is important to safeguard our physical health, we need to make sure we're practicing good mental health habits to handle the stress of the pandemic – habits we're calling "mental health protective equipment" or "MPE."

Along those lines, we include tips from experts for self-care among the caregiver community, and discussions of how peer counseling is easing the strains among school-aged children.

Healing Magazine's mission is to provide parents, educators, children's professionals and all those who care for our youth practical and clinical information that they can use to help our kids grow, thrive and succeed. We couldn't do that without the folks who contribute to each issue, and this year we recognize that those contributors went above and beyond to provide these insights amid a global pandemic. On behalf of KidsPeace and all the readers of *Healing Magazine*, I thank them all.

To our readers: we hope you find this content useful, and we really appreciate comments and suggestions on the topics we cover – and should cover – in *Healing Magazine*. Please let us know your thoughts so we can make the magazine more useful for you in the future.

On behalf of all of us at KidsPeace, I hope you and your families and friends are safe and well as we end this extraordinary year, and we thank you for your continued interest in *Healing Magazine*.

Michael W. Slack

Michael W. Slack
President/CEO

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Self-Care for Mental Health Professionals

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A global pandemic affects all of us. For therapists who are charged with aiding and guiding others during the crisis, caring for one's own needs is an essential task. Healing Magazine asked three experts for tips on how to ensure those who help others can strengthen and empower themselves to weather the stress of COVID-19.



Enhancing Mindfulness even during COVID-19

By “Dr. Deb” Romberger

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In our fast-paced lives, it can be challenging to stay present, and the thought of adding something to an already busy schedule may seem daunting especially now. But what if I tell you that by learning to be more mindful in what you are already doing, you will begin to see, feel and experience things in a very different way, and may even be happier? Research suggests happiness has less to do with what we have nor what we do, but more about being more present in our lives.

So, let's explore five ways to be more present:

1. Where are your hands and feet?

I know it sounds silly; but I really want you to check and see where your hands and feet are in this moment: look at them, feel into them. What sensations do you notice? Are your hands warm or cold or are they perhaps tingling? Can you feel the socks on your feet or the bare floor beneath them? Be an inquisitive gentle observer, a scientist on an expedition to explore your own experience; that is mindfulness.

2. Follow your breath.

Take a moment to notice your breath: Where is it most apparent to you? At the nostrils, chest or belly? Is the breath slow/rapid/deep/ shallow? Can you notice the rise and fall of your chest/belly? Allow your eyes to close and follow a few cycles of breath.

Now, follow the breath in and then notice the small pause where the in-breath ends and the out-breath begins. Can you notice the slight pause between breaths? If your breath were a color, what color would it be? If you could see it, would it be transparent or opaque?

As you follow the breath a bit longer, do you notice the breath change in length or depth? No need to alter the breath – merely notice and ride the waves of the breath in and out. Be a witness to the breath. Watch it like you would watch those silly little birds that run sideways on the beach.

And when your mind wanders, and it will, just bring back the focus to the “in or out,” wherever you may be.

3. Using your senses, notice your surroundings

This is a lovely one to use in a park where sights and sounds abound (it is equally effective waiting in a long line at the super-market). It is an easy bridge back to the now using all five senses. Begin by finding 5 objects you see, 4 sounds you hear, 3 to touch, 2 to smell, and one to taste.

4. Savor the first bite.

Do you know how the first and last bite of anything always tastes the best? It is because we pause and savor it. If you are fan of cheesecake (like me), take that first bite and put the fork down and savor the taste. We often miss the wonderful taste because we are off planning the future or trying to rework the past neither of which works. The only place we can make a change is in the now.

5. Keep a journal.

Robin Sharma suggests, “The mind makes a wonderful servant but a poor master.”

We all have what we call a negativity bias. If your boss says 3 good things to you and 1 bad you will remember that bad; and it will take 7 more good things to override the one bad unless we do some rewiring of your brain.

Keep a journal by your bedside and write down three things you are grateful for each night before you close your eyes at night. Research suggests by keeping a gratitude journal, writing a gratitude letter to someone who made a difference to us, or by just noticing the neutral things in our lives, we are happier. ◀

If it all seems pretty simple ... it's because it is.

“Dr. Deb” Romberger is a qualified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Instructor as well as a Licensed Professional Counselor. She has taught Mindfulness and MBSR at Lehigh Carbon Community College, The Institute for Retirement at Cedar Crest College, West End Yoga, South Whitehall Parks and Recreation, and in her local community.



Staying positive - Small Actions/Big Results

By Victoria Brahm

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The year is 2020...and let's just say that things haven't gone quite as planned.

Humans rarely experience things for the first time, let alone at the same time, and we are still very much living with the ramifications of a COVID-19 world. In times like these the importance of self-care, community and connection cannot be overstated.

If you find yourself feeling stuck or overwhelmed, there are a series of small actions you can take that will help you to manifest positivity and productivity throughout your day.

1. Be kind to yourself

It's easy to get wrapped up in the uncertainty and the doomsday news cycles. It is natural to feel overwhelmed by what is happening in the world. Don't beat yourself up about it. Everyone feels this way at some point or another.

Your main priority is to treat yourself as if you are someone you are responsible for taking care of.

Be gentle with yourself and have conviction that you're doing the best you can.

2. Get dressed

Do not spend your day in your pajamas. Yes, even if you are now working from home! Instead, put an outfit that makes you feel comfortable and confident.

Think about it: you could spend your day at home not showered, hair a mess, having never gotten out of your pajamas. Or, you can get your butt in the shower, wear something you love and smash the day.

It may be superficial, but "look good - feel good" really does make a difference here.

3. Dance it out

Music can make you laugh, cry, fall in love, smile, and feel like you can conquer the world.

Anyone who knows me knows that music is a big love of my life. Whenever I'm feeling off, one of the things that most frequently pulls me out of it is music.

So if you're feeling down, blast your favorite song and dance it out.

4. Complete something

Whenever you're in a rut, starting and finishing a small task can help you get back on track.

It could be something as easy as emptying the dishwasher, folding and putting away laundry, or checking something else off your to-do list.

Whatever it is, pick something that can be done in 5-10 minutes. Then ignore everything else and focus your sole attention on completing it.

After you're done, pat yourself on the back and pick another small task to complete.

Keep going until you feel your motivation pick up.

5. Do what brings you joy

This one is so simple.

Go for a walk.

Bake something.

Go to a yoga class.

Read a chapter in a book.

Call a friend or a family member.

Whatever brings you joy, do it. You will feel better instantly.

If you don't take charge of your thinking someone else will do it for you. Thinking about the positive instead of the negative requires a daily commitment. It is a choice we all make each day.

And remember...

You are not expected to be highly motivated and driven on an empty tank. Give yourself positive fuel each and every day and you will feel better, even on the off days. ◀

Victoria Brahm is a holistic life coach based in London, U.K. In her practice, she provides a supportive environment where people get more out of themselves, elevate their mindset, and cultivate a life they're proud of living. victoriaelizabethcoaching.com

*...blast your favorite song
and dance it out.*



Thriving in a Pandemic

By Hillery Woods

A virus that is unknown and highly contagious has considerably altered our lives; that alone is enough to change how we handle stress and increasing levels of anxiety.

Here are five self-help holds based in the ancient healing art of Jin Shin Jyutsu - simple remedies for managing chronic stress that require only your attention and your hands.

1. Self Help Bladder Flow “Quickie”

Our body is full of invisible pathways and ingenious circuit-systems that conduct energy and provide circulation to inner organs. The main organ channels affected by fear are the Kidney and Bladder meridians. They are located in the lower back and can be associated with chronic low back pain. Pacifying fear is one way to harmonize the whole body and clear the mind.

The Bladder meridian is long and can be one of the blocked channels leading to chronic shoulder blade pain. Blockages here can lead to headaches and puffy ankles. This simple hold clears the channel and soothes the stress.

Left side Bladder Flow



- Right hand holds the Left side of the neck
- Left hand holds the Left side of the low back

This can be done more comfortable lying down in bed

Switch hands for Right side

2. Self Help Fear-Buster

The Kidney channel goes through the little toe; this “fear-buster” is a good way to move the energy and diminish the power of fear. The Kidney meridian holds the power of self-transformation.

Harmonizing Fear



- Cross your Right ankle over your Left thigh in a “figure-four” shape
- Hold Right pinky toe with Left hand
- Right hand holds the arch of the Right foot.

3. Self Help Heart Hold

Holding ourselves is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety and center our energy. The main central channel of energy lives in front of the spine. Here you can imagine a clear ray of golden light illuminating your spine as you activate this potent hold.

Heart Hold



- Right hand on center of the chest
- Left hand on low belly

Breathe for 36 rounds focusing your attention on the sensation of breath and the gentle movement of your body as you breathe.

4. Self Help For Cross-Communication

Chronic pain from fear can get stuck on one side of the body. This hold helps activate communication between your left and right sides. This is a revitalizing hold that increases energy and focus.

Cross-Communication Hold



- Right hand on Left shoulder
 - Left hand on Right inner thigh
- Switch hands for opposite side

(Step 5 continued on page 28)

Holding ourselves is one of the best ways to reduce anxiety and center our energy

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Spotlight

COVID-19 and Mental Health





Got MPE?

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By Matthew Koval, M.D. / Jodi S.W. Whitcomb

Being Prepared for **Mental Wellness** Amid a Pandemic

Before 2020, the acronym “PPE” was used mostly in the manufacturing and front-line healthcare fields.

Then came COVID-19, and Personal Protective Equipment became a subject on everybody’s lips. From sewing enthusiasts producing heaps of face coverings to children raising money to buy disposable gloves to states chartering flights to other countries in search of surgical masks and gowns – many Americans got a crash course in the importance of PPE.

The hard lesson is that we as a society were not prepared for the demands of the pandemic on our supplies of PPE. That lack of preparation meant our response was not as efficient or targeted as it could have been, and it also meant our front-line responders and essential personnel were left without necessary protection from infection in the early days of the crisis. We now know now that we could have been better prepared, by ensuring we had enough PPE or knew where to get it amid a crisis. That involves anticipating our needs in the likely situation we will face – and recognizing there will be no excuse for being unprepared the next time.

That next time will not be the same as the crisis we faced in the spring of 2020. That situation called for an aggressive response to reduce the possibilities for infection throughout our society – a time of significant and rapid change to the way we work, learn and live. At KidsPeace, our associates rose to the challenge magnificently, throwing themselves into the work of preparing and executing our response to the pandemic. Many of us did so with the belief that our hard work early on could halt the spread of the virus and thus bring about a return to normal life sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, that’s not how the pandemic has played out. We’re continuing to see staggering infection and death tolls from COVID-19, and as a result the changes in our routines are beginning to feel more permanent. Even with all the work we’ve done, it seems like our lives now are defined by the virus, and we don’t know when (or if) there can ever be a “return to normal.” Our perception that this is a short-term event that we can “power through” has changed to a realization that this is a long-term crisis without a clear end

date, and as a result the stress we feel is changing from acute to chronic.

Here’s a useful analogy:

A weather event like a hurricane can cause acute stress for those living in the affected area. But how would our stress change if hurricanes hit us every day, and no one could tell us authoritatively when they would stop? It would turn into chronic stress, and it would have very different effects on our well-being.

Chronic stressors are known to cause or exacerbate not only the mental health difficulties that come with stress (anxiety, poor sleep, irritability, etc.), but physical health issues as well, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, poor immune response, obesity, depression, and substance abuse. In too many cases the individual’s reaction to chronic stress is to “become numb” – they can appear indifferent to the stress and emotionally detached from it, so they dismiss the idea that they are affected. But the stress is still there, and still continues to affect them.

If we recognize that the stress we are living with is changing from acute to chronic, we realize that we need to heed the example of the PPE shortage and prepare for the crisis we will face. This time, the challenge is not physical protection, but mental health preparedness – and that's where the concept of **Mental Health Protective Equipment (MPE)** comes in.

The tools of MPE

MPE is best defined as **a set of actions you can use to protect yourself from the impact of chronic stress, and thus counteract the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic**. If you make these actions a habit, you can actually “stockpile” their positive effect on your mental and physical health in preparation for situations in which given stressors change over time and make additional protection necessary.

The “tools” of MPE are grouped into five categories:

1

Good Sleep & Nutrition

Keep regular routines, especially in the morning and evenings; this helps with maintaining stability for children when they see many things in the world that seem to be unstable.

Stay hydrated – this helps avoid unnecessary headaches and fatigue.



Be sure to stay away from carbonated and sugary drinks; instead, opt for regular water and unsweetened, decaffeinated beverages. Also remember that alcohol is a natural depressant and will only help people feel relaxed in the moment. It can contribute to depressive feelings once that

alcohol has passed through the system and is not healthy to be consumed frequently or in large quantities.

Eating foods that give you energy and good health



The Centers for Disease Control advises following the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015–2020*, a healthy eating plan that:

- Emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products
- Includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts
- Is low in saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars
- And stays within your daily calorie needs

Bananas are at the top of the list for a high energy food and a great late afternoon snack. Others include: strawberries, oranges, avocados, lentils, edamame, green tea, oatmeal, and chicken.

Be careful what you eat in the evening hours because some things can keep you awake at night. Some good choices: Chamomile tea, almonds, kiwi fruit, milk, nuts, and rice.

2

Positive Coping Skills – examples:

Journaling is a great way to process your thoughts and feelings during challenging times



Exercise (even just light activity) can activate endorphins which propel positive emotions in humans

Take the opportunity to **go outside when weather permits**. Even just sitting outside reading is a great way to change your perspective. We have to spend a lot of time inside during the pandemic, so getting outside when we can is really important.



Artistic expression is also very helpful. You don't have to be an artist. It's the **PROCESS** that works. Even just finger-painting, using sidewalk chalk or playing with modeling clay can be very therapeutic.

Just as important, **avoid less-healthy coping skills** - such as alcohol/substances, isolation/avoiding others, procrastination, or negative self-talk.

3

Limiting Media Exposure

Avoid oversaturating yourself with news and/or social media. Watching the same media outlet or the same social media posts that say the same thing over and over is not only exhausting, but it severely narrows your point of view!

And don't underestimate the possibility of **vicarious trauma** that can occur when you watch troublesome stories on the news over and over; it can lead to stress and anxiety just as if you experienced the actual trauma yourself.



4

Helping Relationships

Having a support system of friends and family can be one of the most important aspects of maintaining good mental health. With the limitations on personal contact as a result of the pandemic, look for ways to maintain those relationships, such as “virtual” visits and get-togethers on Zoom or other systems.

It’s important for kids and teens to maintain relationships with those their own age but also to have one or two trusted adults they can go to when they need to talk. This could be an older cousin or sibling, coach, religious leader, aunt/uncle or similar person who is safe for them. Helping relationships could also be with medical professionals or counselors. Don’t be afraid to reach out to these professionals if you need them during this time.

Remember: Seeing a counselor to talk things out is NOT a sign of weakness – rather, it’s a sign of knowing yourself and being strong for those around you. Getting an objective perspective from someone who does not have an emotional connection to your life can be extremely valuable.



5

Access to Mental Health Care

Knowing how and where to find access to care can be a struggle. Don’t give up!

- Start by looking on the back of your insurance card and **calling the number that says “Behavioral Health.”** They should be able to point you in the right direction.
- You also may have an **Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)** through your work that offers some free sessions.

- If you don’t have insurance **you may be able to receive direction or counseling through your place of worship.**
- Your child may be able **to receive help at school.**
- Also, the **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) has a helpline** that offers free assistance and advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week - 1-800-950-6264.

Acknowledging the issue and taking the first step toward addressing it is the most important part. You really should feel very proud of yourself for getting to that point!

As 2020 comes to an end, it’s clear the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the world we live in, now and likely far into the future, and those changes are going to continue to be dramatic, frightening and tragic in many cases. However, the experience of dealing with it has a silver lining if these changes prompt us to develop:

- Increased patience and kindness toward those facing mental health challenges
- A greater understanding of the connection between mental and physical health
- And a greater appreciation for our ability to handle stress and deal with uncertainty.

Focusing on developing our own “stockpile” of MPE will help us be better prepared as individuals not only for facing our own personal issues, but also for meeting the significant challenges we will face as a society in the future resulting from COVID-19. ◀



Matthew S. Koval, M.D., is Executive Vice President and Chief Medical Officer at KidsPeace. He received his bachelor’s and M.D. degrees

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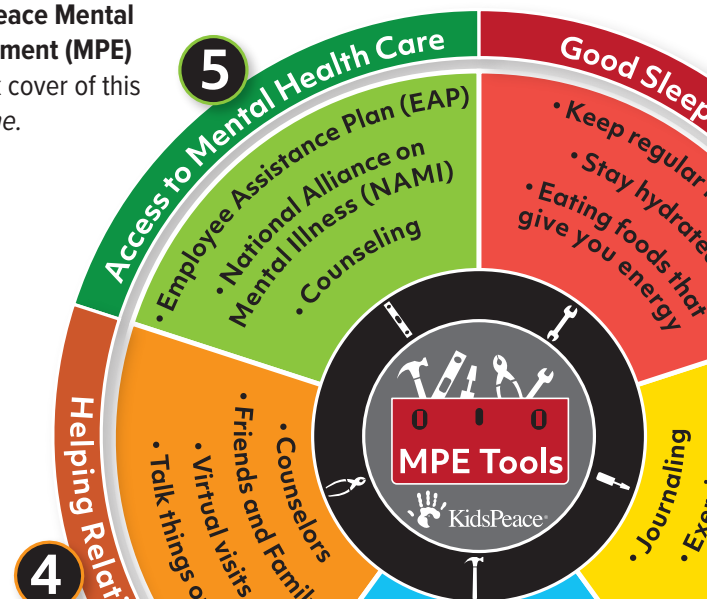
Jodi S.W. Whitcomb, M.S., is Executive Director of Organizational Development & Quality for KidsPeace, and has approximately 25 years of experience working in children’s mental and behavioral health. Jodi is also the leader of the KidsPeace Critical Incident Response Team, and in that role has responded to more than sixty traumatic events, offering help to KidsPeace associates and individuals in the surrounding community. She has also provided training in crisis response and spoken on the topic regionally, nationally and online. Jodi holds a Masters of Counseling Psychology and has completed comprehensive exams in a general psychology doctoral program.


References:

- WebMD.com
- healthline.com
- sleepfoundation.org
- NAMI.org or text NAMI to 741741.

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Find a copy of the **KidsPeace Mental Health Protective Equipment (MPE)** toolkit on the inside back cover of this issue of *Healing Magazine*.





COVID-19: Lessons Learned in Outpatient Care

By Breannah Allen

CCOVID-19 has upended all of our lives in a million little ways. It has changed the way we work, learn, shop and connect with our community. Public health campaigns have been quick to provide concrete steps everyone can take to protect our physical health. Overnight, mask wearing and social distancing quickly became integrated into our daily lives, while “stay at home” orders were broadly issued. We know, however, that this pandemic doesn’t only pose a risk to our physical health but to our mental health as well. Children and adults alike have reported an increase in worry, confusion, isolation and grief since COVID-19 was first identified^{2/3}. The impact that this has had on our mental health is becoming more and more evident as we enter into our seventh month of life with COVID.

There are any number of stressors associated with living through this pandemic. Parents of school-aged children became homeschool teachers overnight as their children came home from school in March not knowing that it was the last day they

would see their teachers and friends for the rest of the school year. Workers transitioned to working from home with little warning, or worse yet had to navigate the unemployment system due to jobs closing down. Many had to continue their essential work services without the safety that quarantine offered. Worst of all, the friends and family of the more than 200,000 people who have lost their lives to COVID-19 are processing their loss without the ability to gather together large groups of loved ones to mourn¹. In the face of all of this change, loss and increased physical risk, it is no wonder that the need for outpatient mental health care is higher than ever.

Just like everything else, outpatient therapy services have had to adapt to meet the needs of our clients without increasing their risk of contracting COVID-19. Meeting clients in person has been replaced by therapy sessions over the phone or video conferencing. At KidsPeace, our outpatient therapists have worked diligently to create a safe and welcoming experience, even if we cannot physically be in the room with

the client. For their part, some clients have created routines to transition from their regular day to their therapy time – such as setting up a quiet space, getting a cup of hot tea and meditating before calling into their therapy session. Children and teens have transitioned to working on therapeutic art activities and worksheets from across a screen, still eager to show off their work to the camera. Families are sitting around the kitchen table for family therapy sessions with their therapist on speaker phone.

As expected, many of the goals identified by our clients are centered on living through COVID-19. Quarantine may increase personal safety but can also result in feelings of isolation, as going out with friends, visiting family or even playing at the park were put on an indefinite hold. This is particularly worrisome as we know that isolation can increase depressive symptoms and feelings of hopelessness.

We also know that students who may struggle with attention issues were hit doubly hard when they transitioned to

remote learning. This has led not only to frustrated kids but also to frustrated parents trying to keep their children engaged in their school work. Some parents have even had to switch to working nights so they can stay home with their children during the day. This unsustainable schedule of course leaves little time for sleep and only adds to the amount of stress that they are under. Finally, feelings of anxiety have spiked as many people continue to worry about their physical health, particularly among those who fall into categories of higher risk of serious illness or death.

We know that some of the issues stemming from this crisis need more direct care than can be offered through a tele-health session. Because of this, KidsPeace has continued to offer in-person walk-in crisis assessments in all four outpatient offices in Pennsylvania. This service is available for both children and adults, and is completed along with COVID-19 screening, social distancing and mask wearing to ensure the safety of both the clients and the associates. (Residents of eastern PA can find out more about this program at www.kidspeace.org/outpatient-services.)

Here are some of the tips and advice that have been frequently given (and personally used!) by our outpatient therapists during the pandemic:

- Take deep breaths to regulate your breathing (especially when you are experiencing symptoms of anxiety or panic). This increases the oxygen to your brain and other organs and calms the sympathetic nervous system. This helps to decrease the physical symptoms of panic. Meditating and conscious breathing are great daily practices to improve your body's ability to manage stress
- List 5 items that you can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. This grounding exercise helps press the figurative "pause button" on racing thoughts. Interrupting negative thoughts by focusing on something different gives you the opportunity to challenge your thought patterns and become better able to control them. Looking for more grounding techniques?

Try listing 100 farm animals, favorite movies or best hair bands.

- Turn off the screen. If the constant news cycle (related to COVID-19 or otherwise) is causing you stress, get off of the couch and away from your phone. Taking walks, painting, journaling or even cooking for your family help you focus on short term goals and accomplishments.
- Identify your support system. This could be in person or otherwise. Video conference with your friends, eat outside with family, or join online forums related to your interests. Make sure that you're hearing the voices and seeing the faces of the people who care about you – even if it is over the phone.
- If you are already receiving mental health care – keep in contact with your provider! Make sure your next appointment is scheduled and your prescription (if you have one) is filled.

Outpatient therapy may look a bit different post-COVID-19, but the work of helping our clients meet their goals remains the same. ◀



Breannah Allen has worked in the mental health field for the past 15 years, and has been with KidsPeace Community Programs since 2016. She currently serves as the Program Manager for the Outpatient Program. She has a master's degree in Clinical Counseling from LaSalle University and a background in working with children and adults who have experienced trauma.

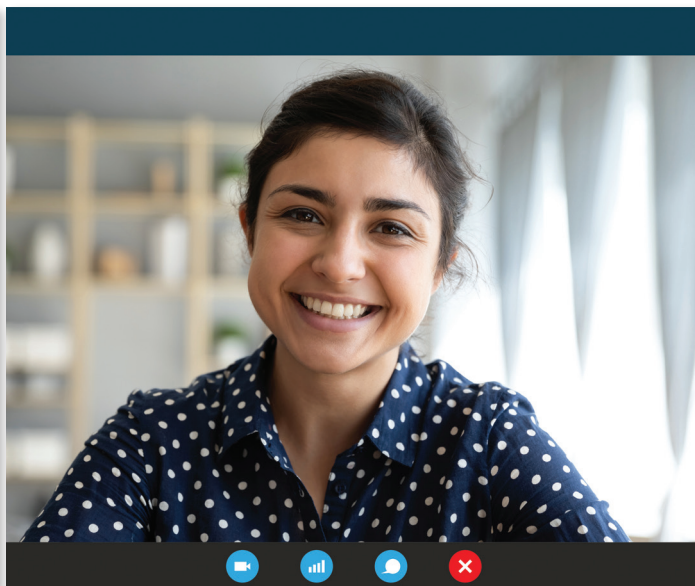
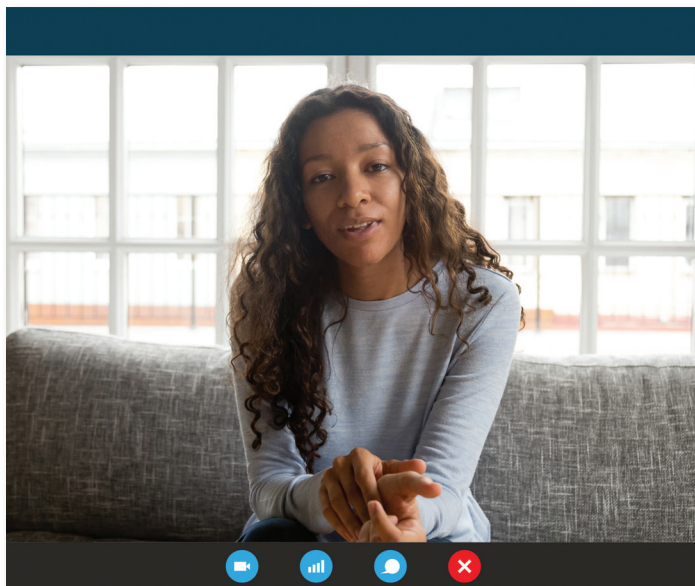
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**Identify your support system. ...
Make sure that you're hearing the
voices and seeing the faces of the
people who care about you – even
if it is over the phone.**





Behavioral Health Thrives in Telehealth Boom

By Capital Blue Cross

Telehealth is hardly new – the idea of patients consulting with their doctors remotely arose shortly after the telephone was patented – but its use has rapidly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evolution of technology means people can now connect with a medical professional by smartphone, tablet, or computer in real time 24 hours a day, seven days a week. J.D. Power recently described telehealth amid the global pandemic as “a bright spot in the ‘new normal.’”

“Even in challenging times such as these, some silver linings can emerge,” said Dr. Jennifer Chambers, chief medical officer at Capital BlueCross. “During the pandemic, social distancing has pushed innovation that has allowed doctors and patients – even those who were previously hesitant to do so – to connect virtually. This means continued care for patients, and that’s a good thing for all of us.”

The American Medical Association reports that doctors during COVID-19 have seen between 50 and 175 times more patients via telehealth than they did prior to the pandemic.

And use of Capital BlueCross’ Virtual Care app has increased 278% during the pandemic. That’s only a snapshot of Capital BlueCross’ surge in telehealth claims and visits, since the app represents only 2% of the insurer’s total telehealth use.

Suited for mental health



If virtual healthcare is riding a wave, behavioral telehealth is riding a tsunami. Mental health visits via Capital BlueCross’ Virtual Care app are up 439%, a jump mirrored nationwide.

According to the technology platform company Kareo, the majority of mental health providers it surveyed in June attributed much of their surges in 2020 patient visits to telehealth. In all, 97% of those practices told Kareo they now use telehealth, versus 22% who did in 2019.

Capital BlueCross Director of Behavioral Health Karie Batzler said her regard for behavioral telehealth has risen during the pandemic.

“My answer may have been different before the pandemic,” Batzler said. “So much of behavioral health is the face-to-face nature of the work: reading body language, being able to match the body language with the word choice. That’s kind of been baked into behavioral health all along.”

Now, she said, she and much of the industry have come to recognize that behavioral telehealth appointments ensure safe social distancing, increase patient access, and ease some stubborn stigmas still connected to in-person therapy. “In the pandemic, many patients can either receive behavioral healthcare telephonically or virtually, or they are not going to receive it at all unless it’s an emergency,” Batzler said. “It’s put our industry into a position of having to rethink, ‘Where does telehealth fit into the behavioral health continuum?’”

Batzler cautioned that immediate crisis situations related to mental wellness might not be suited to telehealth, but the technology is otherwise serving patients fairly well.

“Now that we’ve been forced past the initial uncomfortableness and are more accustomed to either telephonic or visual virtual care, we’re recognizing the value and adjusting the techniques required to perform the service,” she said. “It’s a more convenient and accessible way to receive outpatient behavioral health services.”

Advantages for children’s therapy



Virtual care also has swept across children’s behavioral health during the pandemic, said Steffi Devine, a child therapist with Comprehensive Care Counseling, LLC, of Harrisburg, Pa.

“Since telehealth has been allowed (by the Pennsylvania Legislature), and is being reimbursed by insurance companies, it has skyrocketed,” Devine said.

Devine said virtual sessions offer several benefits to children’s therapy:

- Parents, often pulled in multiple directions, sometimes struggle to get children to in-person appointments.
- Kids are generally more comfortable in their home.

- Children are more accustomed to, and at ease with, the virtual atmosphere than adults.
- Therapists get to see a sliver of the child’s home environment.

“For us, the vast majority of the children have felt comfortable, and it’s actually enhanced the therapeutic process for a lot of the kids,” Devine said. “And I get to see an aspect of their lives I wouldn’t have been able to see in the counseling room.”

There are challenges, of course. Devine said telehealth appointments can become a restraint or source of anxiety for those children already in challenging home environments. She also said some children who attend school virtually may feel as if a telehealth therapy session is just one more person on one more screen.

“With kids who really struggle with emotional regulation, they really benefit from being in person and allowed to process all the emotions and feelings that haven’t come forth,” Devine said. “They really need space in the therapy room to act that all out.”

After COVID-19

While post-pandemic telehealth may not match its current volume, early indications are that it will remain popular.

A new survey by telehealth provider Amwell says 62% of mental health patients “would actually prefer to see a doctor virtually, even after it is safe to visit a doctor’s office in person.”

In the Kareo survey, 88% of all responding practices and 67% of mental health providers said they plan to continue using telehealth after COVID-19, while 53% of the mental health respondents said the changes they made to telehealth during the pandemic likely will be permanent.

The Business Group on Health predicts that telehealth will continue to intensify its focus on mental wellness as the

pandemic has pushed employers to find new strategies to meet behavioral health needs.

“I think it’s really a necessity,” Devine said. “So many of the children I see are dependent on their parents, and parents really sometimes have trouble getting to appointments for a variety of reasons. Telehealth also allows for consistency that builds a trusting relationship with the therapist long-term, and that really benefits the children.”

Capital BlueCross’ Batzler predicts some post-pandemic drop from telehealth’s current levels, but also expects the platform to gain permanent ground from its 2020 surge. She foresees roughly half of behavioral health visits eventually being done via telehealth.

“I think the bottom line is that if it means more people are accessing behavioral healthcare, then we’ve all won,” Batzler said. “We’ve all benefited.”

Capital BLUE

For more than 80 years, Capital BlueCross has served Central Pennsylvania and the Lehigh Valley by offering health insurance products, services, and technology solutions that provide peace of mind to consumers and promote health and wellness for its members. The company delivers innovative solutions through a family of diversified businesses to create healthier futures and lower healthcare costs. Additionally, the Capital Blue Connect health and wellness centers provide in-person service and inspiration to help people reach their health goals. Capital BlueCross is an independent licensee of the BlueCross BlueShield Association.





Impact of COVID-19:

NAMI

By Dr. Dennis J. Geiger

One word captures the impact that COVID-19 has had on our lives ... **“STRESS.”** All of us have experienced the strain of adjusting to the abrupt life alterations caused by the pandemic. We have had to change how we work, go to school, shop, socialize with friends and conduct normal leisure and business routines.

During this pandemic, people report experiencing more frustration, anger, fear, boredom, depression, and symptoms of PTSD, according to an article published recently by the Pennsylvania Psychological Association. During non-pandemic times, approximately 20% of Americans experience some form of a mental health disorder. Anxiety and depression comprise the majority of mental disorders and have intensified to even higher levels. Uncertainty about finances, concern for the welfare of older relatives, and the added dilemmas of child care and schooling can trigger anxiety and negative thoughts, which can lead to depression.

When the shutdown began in March, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) quickly shifted its programs to online platforms to meet the rising needs outlined above, allowing people to be socially and emotionally connected while physically distancing. All of NAMI's programs are evidence-based and free of charge. Individuals with lived experience with mental illness are trained to lead peer programs and trained family members who are caretakers lead family programs.

Our local affiliate, NAMI-Lehigh Valley, increased the frequency of our support groups from monthly to weekly and looked for other ways to facilitate interaction within this new format. Services we provide include:

- **Online peer support groups.** With the added pressure of this pandemic, mental conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, delusional disorders and eating disorders are likely to escalate. Moreover, for individuals who have paranoid thoughts and fears, the mixed messages about how to protect yourself can produce dread and mistrust of imposed guidelines—even those that are well grounded in science. NAMI has developed a format for online support groups, addressing concerns about confidentiality and making sure sessions are attended by appropriate participants (e.g., avoiding “Zoom bombing” through common-sense policies and procedures).
- **Online family support groups.** COVID-19 is especially hard on caregivers. Under normal conditions, attending to the needs of vulnerable and challenged persons can be frustrating and exhausting work; the unpredictability of the pandemic takes an additional emotional toll even on the strongest caregivers. They too need to take time to protect and care for themselves, which means expending more energy and staying more vigilant. It is crucial that we support caregivers. Encouraging them to talk can allow feelings to be expressed and balance to be restored. Our weekly family support groups provide a safe, confidential setting that may be even more crucial when isolation makes it impossible to take a break or take advantage of other usual supports.
- **General online support.** We are adding a support group for people who don’t necessarily have a mental health diagnosis but may be experiencing symptoms like anxiety and depression for the first time due to the many disruptive events of 2020. Each meeting will begin with a brief presentation on a set topic, which will lead to a general discussion that is an opportunity to share and

exchange successful coping strategies. Participants can decide for themselves if they want to speak or to just listen.

- **Education courses.** When a family member is diagnosed with mental illness, the individual and their family are not sure how the illness may affect their lives. (Just what a person needs during a pandemic, more uncertainty!) Participants in our *Family-to-Family* education course learn about various diagnoses and medications, the latest brain research, new communication skills and more. *Peer-to-Peer* education course participants also learn about medications, diagnoses and similar topics, and they are given tools to build a support network and stay on the road to recovery. A major takeaway for both peers and family members is realizing they are not alone as they cope with mental illness.
- **Ending the Silence program.** In this program, aimed at high school students, a psychologist uses visual aids and tells how to recognize signs of mental distress and suicidal intentions and how to respond. A young adult who is in recovery tells their personal story managing mental illness in order to succeed in life.
- **Other programs.** Our community presentations have switched to virtual formats also. NAMI’s *Faithnet: Bridges of Hope* talk explores how faith communities can help individuals and families touched by mental illness at a time when they may need an extra layer of support. We continue to provide presentations for groups in behavioral health units at local hospitals. The presenter, who also lives with mental illness, provides tips and resources to use after discharge.

In order for our virtual offerings to be as inclusive as possible, they can be accessed by computer, smartphone, or by calling in on a phone line. Using technology may be a barrier for some; however, for others with transportation issues, caregiving responsibilities or reluctance to leave home, online meetings can be a godsend. As a result, we expect to continue offering online options even when it’s safe to meet in person.

We also have produced a Public Service Announcement, “**Mask Germs, Not Emotions,**” emphasizing the need for staying socially connected while physically distancing. It demonstrates that many individuals living with mental illness have much to teach others about how to maintain good mental health in the face of crisis. (You can watch it at <http://www.nami-lv.org/mask-germs-not-emotions/>.)

While NAMI’s programs are tremendously valuable supports, anyone struggling with persistent anxiety, depression, or irrational and disturbing thoughts should contact their primary health provider. Persons living with the challenge of a mental health condition need to continue their treatment regime, consulting with medical providers when needed. In addition to seeing patients in person, some offer teletherapy or virtual therapy sessions. Fortunately, most insurance companies will now pay for those services.

Good mental health is sustained by feeling secure, being emotionally stable, thinking realistically, and interacting safely with others as well as feeling in control of our lives. These keep us steady even during difficult situations. Now in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must consciously prioritize staying safe and healthy and contend with unknowns from day to day, and NAMI’s variety of programs can help those in need do just that. ◀

Dr. Dennis J. Geiger has had a 30-year career working as a psychologist with the seriously mentally ill at Warren State Hospital in Warren, PA. He retired in 2007 but has maintained his private practice as a licensed psychologist. Dr. Geiger is a board member and past president of NAMI Lehigh Valley. www.nami-lv.org

SL



SUCCESSFUL FOSTER PARENTING AND COVID-19



By Elizabeth Lunney

Children who enter the foster care system have been exposed to unthinkable traumas - including physical and sexual abuse; physical, emotional and medical neglect; exposure to domestic violence; and parents who are suffering from addiction. Grief and loss issues resulting from placement can tip the scales for children who find themselves suddenly separated from all that they've known. The resulting physical and mental health needs and behavioral and educational challenges call for foster homes that provide stable care and nurturing, within a consistent daily living structure that offers physical and emotional safety. In the day-to-day effort to accomplish this, a successful foster parent must maintain their own good mental health in order to draw upon the qualities that are needed - such as a positive attitude, empathy and patience, flexibility, creativity, problem-solving ability, and sound time management.

For foster parents across the country on any given day, the COVID-19 pandemic has added additional layers of complexity to an already challenging system of care, stretching many to their limits...

Most of the more than 400,000 children who are in foster care in the United States entered the system with an initial goal of returning to their family of origin. Reunification requires a carefully

orchestrated collaboration of activities between foster parents and agency caseworkers with the birth family at the direction of a court, and include among other things frequent community-based in-person family visits and a potential plethora of mental health, education and healthcare services. In March of 2020, foster homes across the country became the hub of a new "virtual" system of care, with foster parents assuming a variety of demanding new roles.

While technology has been the saving grace for many during this pandemic, it's placed additional demands on the finite time that foster parents have to manage their responsibilities. It's these superheroes who have been asked to coordinate, host, and supervise virtual visits, while also working remotely at home, and simultaneously overseeing their children's work in the virtual classroom, virtual counseling sessions, and caseworker appointments between meals and housework. Maintaining realistic expectations and establishing boundaries is important, especially when interacting with multiple agencies and individuals.

"Not The Same ... But Still Supported"

Darren, a pastor in a small rural community, and his wife Christine, a former pre-school teacher, were approved as foster parents in 2018 and have fostered 11 children to date - including at the time of this writing

two seven-year-olds and a 20-month-old. Darren indicated that his family was "in a pretty good foster care groove" in the early spring of 2020; they'd settled into a routine with their foster child who seemed to be adjusting, and had formed great relationships with the foster care agency staff.

"And then COVID-19 hit."

According to Darren, at that point life became even less predictable. Caseworker visits and visitation between the foster child and his parent were suddenly occurring over a new video conferencing system called Zoom. Darren found himself having to set up Zoom meetings for visitation between his foster child and the birth family several times each week (formerly the responsibility of agency staff). In a sudden role shift, he had become the facilitator, supervisor and moderator between this birth parent and her child for these remote calls.

Darren admitted that visits with Zoom are very time-consuming and can be overwhelming, but he's learned not to sweat the small stuff. While some agencies have kept the standard two-hour time frame for parent and child Zoom visits, others have moved to visits that are shorter in duration, but held more frequently during the week; this arrangement seems to be more manageable for all involved. Conversations during these remote visits

can be awkward, yet Darren observed that one of the weekly highlights of visiting virtually is that Zoom allows his foster child to see his home and his bedroom, with reassurances that all of his belongings are still there. Home visits aren't possible for many children in foster care, which contributes to issues of loss and grief. In this situation, Darren's foster son's sense of loss has been diminished with the increased visual connection he has with his home.

In addition, virtual visitation has allowed other family members the chance to connect which otherwise would be impossible due to geographic distance or schedules. An uncle for one of the children has recently begun visiting with very meaningful interactions in a blossoming family connection, and a grandmother who otherwise would have been too far for an in-person visit has been getting to know her grandchild via these remote sessions. In Darren's view, these positive outcomes and the hope they're offering as a result of technology has made it worth the effort to face the new challenges.

Like many parents across the country, virtual schooling has added a new dimension to parenting. Foster parents caring for children with mental health-related learning needs such as ADHD or ASD have to devote additional time and effort to offer emotional support and to stage behavioral interventions to assure the children stay on task. Without prior educational experience in these areas, virtual classrooms have become a source of conflict and frustration for many foster parents and children alike. Getting through the school day can be a challenge, and successful foster parents have learned that sometimes you just have to pick your battles. At the end of the longest days, foster parents often have nothing left to give—yet will tell you that it's all worth it when they can celebrate the little “wins.”

Successful foster parents will often credit their success to the support that they are provided by the agencies who place the foster children in the home. When multiple agencies are involved, communication, coordination and teamwork is critical.

Prior to COVID-19, caseworkers from the three involved agencies visited Darren and Christine's home frequently, and the team was far more actively engaged according to Darren. Zoom has supplemented the in-person interaction when face to face time hasn't been safe.

“It's just not the same as it used to be,” said Darren. “There's nothing like being face to face.”

“We still feel supported, though,” he said. “Two weeks ago we had a crisis and we tried unsuccessfully to contact our caseworker who was dealing with another emergency. The Program Manager stepped in, emphasizing to us the importance of teamwork, and people pulling together.

“Now that things are opening up again, we're seeing the agency staff in person and that makes a huge difference in our family.”

Stresses brought on with the challenges related to this pandemic are real. However, there are a number of things that foster parents like Darren and Christine can do to manage their own wellbeing in these trying times.

- **Stay connected with family, friends, agency supports and other foster parents** who can offer help and support, and suggestions for overcoming challenges and barriers. Talk openly about frustrations, fears, and concerns. Remember - you're NOT alone in this strange new world of ours!
- **Look for signs of stress** - including increased irritability, difficulty sleeping, feelings of being overwhelmed, changes in appetite, anxiousness and heightened emotions. Ask for help!
- **Establish and follow routines.** Daily routines help everyone feel safer and more secure. Create a daily schedule that includes waking and dressing for the day; setting regular mealtimes when the family can eat together; conducting work and learning time in an area designated just for those activities; remembering the importance of fresh air and play time; limiting screen time for everyone; and scheduling naps and routine bedtimes.

- **Be prepared.** Have a contingency plan in the event of illness, quarantine, or isolation. Be sure to also communicate with your foster care agency to make sure the designated back-ups are able to serve in that emergency role.
- **Limit chance for exposure.** Make sure you have an adequate supply of masks and hand sanitizer. The best location for a visit is outside whenever possible. When a visit takes place inside, follow current CDC guidelines and local protocols for wearing masks, physical distancing, and practicing good hand hygiene. When in-person visits cannot be done safely, ensure that children can have virtual visits that are developmentally appropriate for them.
- If virtual visits are stressful, **ask your foster care agency for help.**
- **When asked to consider new placements, make safe decisions.** Ask about known exposure, positive test results or symptoms of COVID-19. Everyone (child, former caregiver and household members, and child welfare professionals) should be screened for COVID-19 exposure or symptoms before entering the home.

Above all, remember that self-care is essential for successful foster parenting. Get plenty of rest, make healthy food choices, ask for help if you need it, and don't sweat the small stuff. ◀



Elizabeth Lunney, MSW, LSW has worked at KidsPeace since 1985 in a number of positions of increasing responsibility for efforts to grow the organization's foster care and community programs in Pennsylvania and beyond. Currently she serves as PA FCCP State Manager, overseeing nine offices that provide foster care, adoption and a number of community-based mental health services throughout eastern and central Pennsylvania. Elizabeth holds a master's degree in social work from Marywood University, and lives in northeast Pennsylvania.

Peer Programs Helping Schools Tackle Student Depression, Anxiety

E



By Tim Walker

According to new data released last month by the Centers for Disease Control, the suicide rate for young people age 10-24 soared by a staggering 56% between 2007 and 2017. In California, the number of high school students who are thinking about suicide is alarming: one in five, according to the state's 2019 School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey.

In the absence of comprehensive mental health supports in schools, signs that the stifling pressure, anxiety or trauma have become too much for a student can be hazy, often undetectable. How and when do suicidal thoughts or ideation lead to suicide attempts?

"We're racing against the clock with a lot of our students," says Gavin Santillan. "It doesn't take much before they decide to take that step, that sudden act. And the masks they wear obscure what they're really feeling inside. It's fortunate that we have a space at our school where many students feel safe and can talk."

That space is Room 401, the Peer Counselor Center at Garey High School in Pomona, California. Any time during the school day, a student who is struggling can walk into this comfortable, uncluttered suite and sit with

a fellow student who is there to empathize, to ask questions – and most importantly, to listen.

Although no student has committed suicide over the past five years, the school's student population is far from immune to the stifling pressures and anxieties that have plagued U.S. teenagers across the nation, says Santillan, Garey High's peer counselor advisor. "Too many of our kids are in crisis."

Roughly one-third of the 1,800 student body has used the program over the past school year. For some, peer counseling became the last line of defense.

"A couple of students have told us that they were on their way off campus to take their own life," Santillan recalls. "But they stopped into the office on their way out, just curious enough to see if this was a place where they would hear something different.

"Luckily, it was."

Just Talk To Someone

Leveraging students as sources of support for other students is hardly a new idea. The increasing suicide rate and emerging focus on student anxiety and trauma, however,

has sparked new interest in peer-to-peer programs. Furthermore, budget cuts and a lack of trained counselors and other mental health professionals - along with lingering stigmas around mental health - has districts scrambling to close the "treatment gap."

That's a burden students shouldn't be taking on, says Margo Ross of the Center for Supportive Schools. Where students can and should make an important difference, however, is closing the "mentoring gap."

"Peer mentoring helps schools create safer and more nurturing school environments to help support students' social and emotional needs and general well-being," Ross explains.

Santillan makes sure students interested in participating in the program understand the boundaries of their role. It's not the peer counselor's job to fix the students' problems; it's to listen, ask questions, and, if necessary, refer them to an adult who can help.

"They don't dispense advice, or offer solutions," Santillan says. "That's not our business. We drill that into the students on day one."

Students do have a way, however, of creating trust and putting at ease their colleagues who may be struggling. “We’ve had students that refuse to talk to anyone else - parents, adults. They want to talk to us. So we take time with them to make sure trust is established,” said Garey peer counselor Lyann.

Garey has a formidable team of between 80 and 90 peer counselors, each one handling ten clients. Each undergoes training in empathy, active listening and basic social and emotional skills. The school invites Pomona County mental health agencies to speak to the students, and local parent groups are brought in to talk about red flags and warning signs that can be easy to miss. “We do a lot of role-playing,” Santillan says.

A peer team often includes students who have struggled with anxiety or depression themselves, but who have since overcome their problems. “I went through a lot early in high school and I wanted to make sure that no other student goes through it alone,” says Lyann.

When Red Flags Appear

The students who need peer counseling don’t fit one particular profile. “They come from different social groups, different academic backgrounds and have different issues,” says Santillan. “Sometimes it’s just a student who is having a bad day, just needs a time-out. But then it can move into darker territory and we’re dealing with self-harm, suicide ideation.”

Students who need help come to the program through referrals from teachers, counselors, or they just walk into the office asking for help.

“Walk-ins have increased dramatically,” Santillan reports. “We do everything we can - posters, flyers, word-of-mouth - to let every student know that we are here, and they can come in anytime.”

“This is an invaluable resource for our students because they often have an easier time talking to their peers,” says Liliana Fasting, one of Garey’s four school counselors. “But conversations can get tricky. If red flags appear, then a staff member gets involved.”

Santillan sees himself as the “air traffic controller” when additional support and resources are required. Should a counselor be brought in? Should the district mental health office or a county program be contacted?

Psychology interns from nearby Claremont Colleges volunteer their time every week. “They take some of our tougher cases, students who have just returned from hospitalization,” says Santillan.

Being alert and responsive to individual student needs doesn’t prevent more strategic approaches to ongoing challenges.

Last year, Santillan distributed students who had at least 3 F’s among the peer counselors to help identify what was going outside of school that was disrupting their schoolwork.

The failing grades were a symptom of “the bad things that were happening in their lives,” says Ashley, a peer counselor.

What comes next may involve interventions that don’t involve the peer counselor, but the importance of the work in helping colleagues open up can’t be overstated, adds Santillan.

“That’s where it can start: students just talking to students.”

Breaking The Silence

Student leadership was instrumental in getting a peer-to-peer program off the ground at Brunswick High School in Brunswick, Maine. Junior Nicco Bartone brought the idea to his guidance counselor, who then reached out to *Sources of Strength*, a suicide prevention program that trains “peer leaders” to work with adult advisors in schools to help students deal with difficult issues, or as founder and executive director Mark LoMurray says, “the rough stuff.”

In 2018-19, *Sources of Strength* trained 30 Brunswick students to serve not only as resources for their peers, but to design school awareness campaigns around trauma, mental health, and suicide prevention.

The idea, explains Brunswick counselor Mary Kunhardt, is to help create a positive school culture that breaks the silence around these issues and “recognizes that everyone has ups and downs. Peer leaders listen, connect to adults and spread hope.”

The *Sources of Strength* program identifies potential student leaders from every school social group. “We know that students most likely talk with their friends before talking with adults,” Kunhardt says. “So, if at least one friend from each group has ears on their peer group, they will be the first to hear if a person is struggling.”

Sometimes students are more peer “advocates” than peer “counselors.” That’s the focus of the program designed by the Depression Center at the University of Michigan.

In 2009, staff members teamed up with Ann Arbor public schools to launch the Peer-to-Peer Depression Awareness Campaign.

Every year, ten to 20 students from participating schools attend an all-day group training session led by social workers and psychiatrists. In addition to learning about mental health, coping skills, and active listening skills, the students are also trained in social marketing and communication strategies.

Students team up with mental health professionals to create publicity campaigns, which are presented and displayed throughout the school. The goal, says program manager Stephanie Salazar, is to find “creative ways to convey their knowledge about these issues throughout the school and help reduce stigma and remove barriers to help-seeking.”

After a campaign, says Salazar, schools have seen noticeable shifts in school climate and students’ comfort level in talking about mental health with their peers. “Year after year, their knowledge about these issues improves and students say they are more likely to seek help.”

Students do have a way, however, of creating trust and putting at ease their colleagues who may be struggling.

(Continued on page 28)

Empowering Empathy through Education, Experience & Example

P



By Terry Sears, LCSW

It is easy to lose sight about what truly matters in the blur of our fast-paced world, full of technology and isolation, but helping our children to become caring and responsible young adults should be a priority for every parent and caregiver.

At its core, empathy is simply defined as understanding how someone else feels, but its true meaning goes far deeper and has the power to change the world. By shifting our focus and perspective from our own wants, needs and/or desires to the inner pain, struggle, and triumphs of others we encounter, we gain joy and wisdom that cannot be found or bought anywhere else. “Walking in someone else’s shoes” symbolizes a desire to experience the thoughts and emotions of another. Rather than judging others, we seek to understand, to find compassion and to encourage, to accept others for who they are and to appreciate the unique gifts they have to offer.

As parents, we want our children to be successful, to achieve their dreams, to have abundance, happiness, and hope.

At times, such goals have caused us to promote competition and create a single focus with our eye on the “prize” by conquering anything or anyone in the path. In a desire to connect with their children, parents mistakenly replace conversations and cherished memories with electronics, fashion trends and desired objects. But imagine what kinds of world could we create if we took the time to teach our children how to connect at a deeper level with others, which also would allow them to truly understand and appreciate themselves. Empathy then becomes a much greater prize and could begin to heal what is broken in the world today.

Give The Experience Of Empathy

Although empathy seems elusive, there are many ways parents can encourage and model empathy daily.

- The first step to teach empathy is to model it with your children by slowing down the fast-paced world around you to actually notice what matters to them, to listen to their true heart’s desires and to experience their pain and joy through

their eyes. Too often, we jump in with advice or perceived words of wisdom that only serve to close the bridge to new discovery and understanding.

- Taking a genuine interest in their hobbies and unique strengths and empowering them to pursue their life’s passion instead of a paycheck is a priceless gift and lesson. Ask them about their daily “highs and lows” so that they will reach out when they need to and know that there is always a foundation of love to return to.
- To feel empathy for others, one must first feel valued and understood and then seek to understand. Make them a priority by shutting off your cell phone, turning off the television and laptop and truly being in the moment with them.
- A key component of empathy is understanding emotions. Our children’s ability to identify and regulate their own emotions and to understand the connections between thoughts, feelings and choices is essential. Without such skills, their ability to have empathy for others is blocked. Teaching them valuable

regulating skills such as deep breathing, muscle tensing and relaxation, meditation and mindfulness will allow them to truly connect with and understand themselves and others. Being able to interact with others in a loving and compassionate way and resolving differences and conflict through compromise and conversation are skills that will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives.

- Conduct family meetings to discuss concerns, challenges, and creative ideas. Practice truly “hearing” others’ thoughts, ideas and perspectives by utilizing fun games and activities to assess their level of skills over time.

Teaching Through Example

Becoming an example of empathy involves how we, as parents and teachers, treat others we encounter along the journey. This can include simple things like noticing that a server at a restaurant is having a hard shift and encouraging them and validating their experience and feelings while trying to bring a smile to their day. We can teach fear and judgment, or welcome new friends and neighbors who are different but just as special as we are. Invite someone new to a holiday dinner or choose to volunteer as a family instead of preparing a fancy meal at home. Encourage children to write cards or draw pictures for members of the military, the elderly or pediatric cancer patients to lift their spirits and renew their sense of hope. The gifts they will receive in such acts far exceed any trinket that can be purchased online.

We can own our mistakes and model forgiveness and compassion instead of promoting revenge and hatred. We can educate our children to understand that they and we are human and will stumble

and doubt and lose faith when times are tough. We will all make mistakes along our path to peace and purpose, but we can focus on the lessons that life presents to us and always try to leave the stops along the journey better than we found them.

Be an advocate of personal reflection and self-care. Building in moments of mindfulness, stillness and peace can counter the pressures and temptations of life that can become overwhelming at times. Plan a family hike to notice fall foliage, listen to some soothing music together at the end of a long day and leave little notes of encouragement wherever you can. Kids may act as though they are too cool or too grown up for such things, but at the core of their essence, they need those experiences to truly survive and flourish.

We must instill core values of caring and compassion, of acceptance and inclusion. Helping our children find a balance between contribution and competition is essential. Praise their random acts of kindness, encourage them to reach out to those who might be feeling rejected or alone and remind them that we all have unique challenges and talents to share.

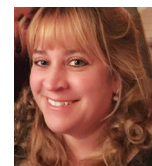
Empathy As Exercise

Empathy is a skill that requires practice and patience. It is important to model active listening and communication that is receptive and engaging. It is equally important to use teaching moments of insight to point out to children when they lose sight of others and focus only on themselves, when they act in hurtful or hateful ways to fit in with others they desperately seek acceptance from, and when they judge instead of seeking to understand. Remember to empathize with the struggles they face as they try

to discover who they are and who they want to become. Help them to use those struggles for enlightenment and to build self-worth.

Although the world can be a scary and confusing place, it is also filled with wondrous possibilities and adventures. Spend time in new parts of your area and visit different restaurants, parks, and stores to give your children a variety of experiences and new perspectives. Help them understand the struggles others face that may be different from their own, and teach them the value of connection and support in hope and healing. Talk about local news stories or community events and encourage them to share their thoughts and perspectives.

We all have the potential to practice, empower, and enhance empathy through education, experience, and example. Together we can truly be the difference that we wish to see in the world. We can begin to heal the harm that has been done and to teach our children about what truly matters: living a purposeful life, making valuable contributions, and cherishing connections along the journey. It may not always be easy, but it will always be worth the investment! ◀



Terry Sears created the KidsPeace Sexual Issues Treatment & Education Program in 1997. She currently serves as the clinical program manager for the SITE Program and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Her passion is transforming trauma through hope and healing. Terry holds a master's degree in social work from Marywood University.





By Chris Sylvester

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TRICARE Certification Expands at KidsPeace Residential

When KidsPeace initially became a TRICARE-certified provider nearly 10 years ago, our focus was ensuring we offer excellence in the treatment and care we provided to military youth and their families. At the time we secured approval for two of our therapeutic residences to be available for TRICARE-funded youth, one for females, and the other for males.

As noted in previous editions of *Healing Magazine*, our programs have provided TRICARE-funded youth the opportunity to find Hope, Help and Healing and start to build a foundation for a successful life:

"In the safe therapeutic environment, (the TRICARE client) worked with her clinician to develop her personal trauma narrative, which allowed her to finally connect with her past, and all the feelings that she had been holding down for so long ... Simultaneously, her clinician worked with her grandparents to help them understand her past, and how those experiences led to the current behaviors. In the final sharing, the client shared her story from beginning to end with her grandparents, who listened, validated, and supported her. The family confirmed that this was the first time that there was open and honest

discussion of her past experiences, and all were grateful for the opportunity for deeper understanding and connection."

"... Originally, this client would become argumentative and would become impatient, stating that he did not understand why therapy was taking so long to help him or why I, as a therapist, had not "fixed him" yet. As I became gentler in my challenging of this client in sessions and I ultimately became more of a support for him in his eyes, he seemed to become more patient with the therapeutic process... He was eventually able to communicate his needs appropriately to the treatment team and to his family, and was able to make progress - for which he was positively praised, gaining the attention he had been hoping for all along. "

"...There were still challenges, of course; longstanding struggles, particularly those related to behavioral/mental health, are not resolved overnight. However, once the youth and her family were able to recognize the possibility of change, success, and hope, things did progress in a more positive direction. Ultimately, she was discharged back home, to her family, with less restrictive aftercare services in place..."

Although proud of the treatment work accomplished by the youth in our program, we knew there were many TRICARE-funded youth requiring other treatment needs – which prompted KidsPeace to pursue TRICARE certification for all our Residential Treatment Programs at the Orchard Hills Campus in Orefield, Pennsylvania. The expanded certification was granted in late summer of 2020.

Expansion of TRICARE certification allows us to treat males as young as seven and females at age ten. For those TRICARE youth requiring short-term stabilization in a psychiatric setting, the TRICARE-certified KidsPeace Hospital is located on the same campus housing our residential programs, providing fidelity with continuity of treatment.



Our TRICARE-certified residential programs include:

TRICARE Intensive Residential Treatment

*Staff-to-Client Ratio 1:3
(males/females age 13-18)*

Designed to treat and meet the needs of youth who require, or can benefit from a program offering clinical, recreational, and educational services and supervision, the treatment program incorporates evidence-based, culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions, milieu supervision, master level individual and family therapies, behavior analysis, case management, education, recreation, nursing, psychiatry, spirituality, and psychology into interagency team approaches and treatment plans for the youth in residential care with an emphasis on the youth and families driving the treatment.

Specialized Behavioral Disorder Treatment

*Staff-to-Client Ratio 1:3, 1:4
(males age 12-18)*

This reality and cognitive behavior-based treatment helps youth accept responsibility for inappropriate behaviors, identify maladaptive behavioral patterns, increase social sensitivity, develop empathy for victims and learn pro-social skills and long term accountability and self-discipline.

A.S.P.I.R.E (Adolescent Sexual Preoccupation, Intervention, Responsibility, and Education)

*Staff-to-Client Ratio 1:3, 1:4
(males age 13-18)*

The PRTF-certified ASPIRE residential treatment program provides structured, staff-secure, intensive residential services

for male adolescents who are exhibiting high-risk sexualized preoccupations and behaviors. The team utilizes a trauma-informed approach to help youth understand and accept responsibility for inappropriate behaviors; identify behavior patterns; increase social sensitivity; increase emotional regulation/ expression; increase impulse control; gain understanding of healthy sexual development and relationships; develop empathy for abuse victims; and learn long-term accountability and self-discipline.

KidHope Intensive Residential Treatment

*Staff-to-Client Ratio 1:3, 1:4
(males age 12-18)*

The PRTF-certified KidsHope Treatment Program provides structured, staff-secure, intensive residential treatment services for male adolescents with IQ scores between 50 and 70. Limitations in adaptive functioning that prevent a child from being successful in less restrictive settings are identified and targeted. Interventions address improving a youth's impulse control, social judgement, emotional regulation/ expression and interpersonal skills to enable and support the child to transition to a less restrictive setting.

KidsPeace Trauma, Resiliency, Empowerment, and Elevation (T.R.E.E.) Residential Program

*Staff-to-Client Ratio 1:3
(males ages 7-18, females ages 10-18)*

The PRTF-certified T.R.E.E. Program uses a holistic approach that combines the principles of community interaction, trauma-informed evidence-based interventions, and life-skill development. T.R.E.E. is designed to address emotional

and/or behavioral acuity in child/adolescent females and males whom have experienced complex trauma, including Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (C-SEC), which cannot be treated in a less restrictive environment. Goals of this program include teaching healthy relationships / sexual development, emotional regulation, cognitive coping, self-empowerment, family/support building, and community reintegration.

Family-focused care and treatment

Family and youth engagement is vital to achieving positive outcomes in residential treatment. KidsPeace understands when one member of the family is in crisis, it affects all members of the family. The culture, ideas, beliefs, religion, and values of family members play a critical role in the success of the youth and are utilized to support and guide the treatment. Family support is offered via on-campus visits, family therapy (therapist of choice on or off campus near family), and Family and Community Time.

For additional information regarding our TRICARE-certified programming or to make a referral, our Admissions team can be reached at 1.800.854.3123 or email at admissions@kidspeace.org.



Chris Sylvester joined KidsPeace in 1992 as a direct care worker at the Graham Lake Campus in Ellsworth, Maine, advancing to take on a variety of roles and responsibilities. In 2014, Chris became National Customer Relations Liaison for KidsPeace covering the Northeast Territory, which includes all of New England and New York, to ensure customers are aware of the KidsPeace Continuum of Care and the treatment services offered for youth and families.



5. Self Help Hold for Understanding

There is so much conflicting information out there that it can be overwhelming to understand and find what applies to you. Digestion doesn't just happen with food, it happens for us emotionally as well. If you find yourself feeling emotionally overwhelmed, try this simple hold for digesting your experiences.



- Simply cross your arms and hold opposite elbows or forearms.

Practicing these holds will help you pacify fear in your body, therefore helping clear the mind. When we calm the mind and body, we are giving ourselves signals that we are safe and protected. This increases the immune system and contributes to whole-body health. Ultimately, the antidote to fear is staying present and aware. These five holds will help you build a new way to respond to the world rather than react. It may even help you see another perspective and a way ahead towards thriving in a pandemic. ◀

Hillery Woods is a licensed massage therapist, registered yoga teacher, Jin Shin Jyutsu practitioner, and Ayurvedic wellness counselor. In her practice located in Quakertown, she focuses on providing services for healthy aging through preventive, restorative and lifestyle wellness. www.hillerywoodswellness.com

“We Will Always Need This Program”

Some peer programs - an outreach campaign to students, for example - can be implemented at a relatively low cost and with minimal hassle, says Salazar. Challenges inevitably arise, however, around creating the infrastructure necessary to sustain them long-term. Are staff members trained? Are they committed to the program? Are the resources that started the program always available?

A lack of program advisors and scheduling obstacles can prevent schools from “providing the appropriate frequency and dosage of program activities to see a significant impact,” says Margo Ross at the Center for Supportive Schools.

“Effective student peer counseling programs, while cost-effective, do require a deep investment by schools into training both the mentors and the adults who support them.”

Still a relatively new resource, Garey's peer counseling program is bolstered by deep support inside the school and in the community. Parents in particular have been encouraged by positive changes they have seen in their children.

Encouraged by the program's impact, Santillan flinches a bit when he hears the word “success.”

“It's just sobering to think about,” he says. “I wish they didn't need to, but more and more students are using peer counseling. We've seen an increase in walk-ins. We had more hospitalizations in the last school year. The wheels are turning. So we're helping catch them.”

“It would be great if we could double or triple the number of psychologists and counselors in our school,” Santillan adds. “But if we want to reach all our kids who are in crisis, we will always need this program.” ◀

Tim Walker is a senior editor/writer for the National Education Association. This article was published in November 2019 on the NEA Today website, and is reprinted with permission.

References:

Center for Supportive Schools (www.supportiveschools.org)

Sources of Strength (sourcesofstrength.org)

The Depression Center at the University of Michigan (www.depressioncenter.org)



A resource for teens seeking help.

teencentral.com



The Conversations with KidsPeace podcast brings the views and expertise of professionals in the mental health and child care fields right to you.

www.kidspeace.org/conversations-with-kidspeace-podcast

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Greeting Cards Bridge Generations to Fight Loneliness



Loneliness has proved to be a “side effect” of our society’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the summer of 2020 youth in KidsPeace’s residential treatment programs in Pennsylvania recognized they shared this experience with elderly residents of local nursing homes.

“Our kiddos felt as though they could genuinely relate to individuals in nursing homes because neither group has been able to visit with their families in person due to COVID-19,” said Stephanie Kerns, director of recreational therapies and enrichment services at KidsPeace’s Orchard Hills Campus.

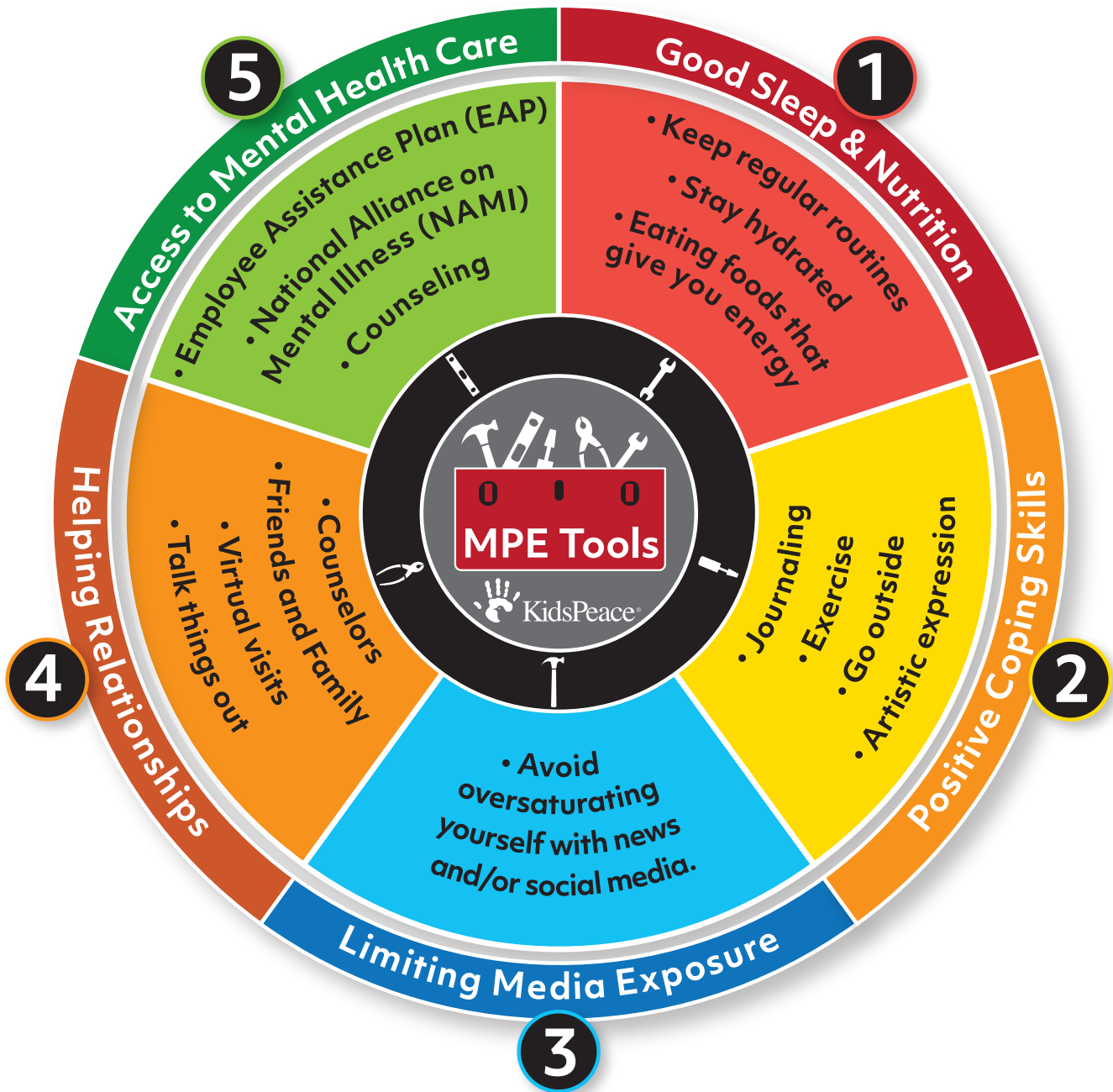
To ease that loneliness, the KidsPeace youth made handmade greeting cards to be delivered to the nursing home residents, including positive and upbeat messages of hope and inspiration (mixed in with some silly jokes). “This is something many of our own residents have struggled with, and they tried to share that message through the cards - writing things like “We are in this together” and “You are NEVER alone!”” Kerns added.

In total, KidsPeace clients created 80 cards that were sent to Country Meadows and Cedarbrook, two nursing homes in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. Country Meadows’ Director of Dynamic Living Wendy Balik confirmed the cards were a big hit among their residents. “Our folks loved them; they read them out loud to each other,” she said. “They were really touched by the messages, especially coming from children, and they did recognize they share with the KidsPeace kids the experience of being away from family.”

Kerns added that she and her staff were genuinely surprised by the compassion of the KidsPeace youth. “I think the most impressive component of this entire activity was seeing how many of our youth felt compelled to participate while expecting nothing in return for doing so... (just) hoping that when the residents read these messages, they would feel just a little more hopeful, a little less lonely, and a whole lot more special.”



KidsPeace Mental Health Protective Equipment (MPE) Toolkit



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