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Listening to the Voices of Adolescents who had Mental Health Problems in the K-12 Years

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How Can Schools Better Support Students with Mental Health Problems?

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Session overview

Mental health problems among K-12 students: What do we know?

Listening to student voices: Review of preliminary survey results

What does it all mean? Implications for how schools and school counselors can support students with mental health problems

Questions/Discussion



Mental health and K-12 students

Why is it important to pay attention to children's mental health?

- Almost 1 in 5 youth aged 9-17 have a diagnosable mental disorder with at least minimal impairment; 1 in 20 with extreme impairment (Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health, 1999)
- A recent survey found about half of American adults will meet criteria for a mental disorder at some point; onset is usually in adolescence (Kessler et al., 2005)



Mental health and K-12 students

If prevalence rates for childhood mental disorders were projected onto a school with 1,000 students:

- 130 would have an anxiety disorder
- 100 would have a disruptive behavior disorder
- 60 would have a mood disorder

Shaffer et al., 1996



Mental health and K-12 students

Some subgroups of youth have even higher rates of mental health problems:

- Youth in the juvenile justice system
- Youth in substance abuse treatment programs
- Youth exposed to mass violence or natural disasters
- Youth experiencing victimization
- Youth who are suspended from school



Mental health and K-12 students

Many youth have undiagnosed mental health problems; many youth with diagnosed mental health problems do not receive treatment

- Studies of urban and rural youth found that less than half who had mental health needs received treatment
- Depressive disorders seem to be particularly undertreated



Mental health and K-12 students

Children's mental health disorders come with increased risk for an array of negative consequences:

- Academic failure
- Impaired social relationships
- Stunted emotional development
- Poorer long-term educational and career outcomes
- Substance abuse



Mental health and K-12 students

One more negative consequence: A pervasive sense of pain, discouragement, and frustration, impacting the youth with the mental health disorder and radiating to his or her family and teachers

Teachers' perspectives on student mental health

Reasons Elementary-Aged Students with Mental Health Issues Fall Through the Cracks

	Agree or Strongly Agree
Inadequate prevention programs for externalizing behavior	67%
Inadequate prevention programs for internalizing behavior	62%
Inadequate screening and prereferral programs	46%
Lack of ongoing monitoring of students with mental health needs	45%
Inadequate early intervention programs	44%

Reinke et al., 2011

Teachers' perspectives on student mental health

Teacher-Reported Barriers to Supporting Student Mental Health Needs

	Agree or Strongly Agree
Not enough school-based mental health professionals	82%
Lack of training for dealing with students' mental health needs	78%
Lack of funding for school-based mental health	66%
Competing priorities take precedence over mental health needs	59%
Difficulty identifying students with mental health needs	51%
Mental health problems do not exist and are just an excuse	19%

Reinke et al., 2011



What do students say? Eight themes from a phenomenological study of 5 depressed adolescents

Dispirited weariness

“You just cry a lot. That’s all you can do.”

“I’d sit there from hours and get, like, two math problems done.”

Emotional homelessness: A sense of aloneness

“When you’re depressed you feel like you don’t have anybody.”

“I felt like everybody just kind of put up with me, even my friends.



What do students say? Eight themes from a phenomenological study of 5 depressed adolescents

Emotional homelessness: No safety where expected

“I think she [mom] kind of resented me because I got along better with [step-dad] than she did.”

“They always say ‘I love you’ and things, that stuff you know, to him [brother] but not to me. I really hate that.”

Unrelenting anger

“I would always just stay mad. I couldn’t stop being mad.”

“I hated myself, I hated who I was, I hated everything about me....”



What do students say? Eight themes from a phenomenological study of 5 depressed adolescents

Parental break-ups: Caught in the middle

“....you don’t want to take one person’s side but....if my mom asks me to go over there with her but I’m with my dad, I don’t want to make him feel bad. And then if I don’t go with my mom or I leave my dad then they feel that I’m really picking sides or picking favorites.”

Continuum of escape from pain

“I didn’t feel good physically and I didn’t feel good mentally....Like, I don’t really have a place to lead a productive life so let’s just end it.”

Farmer, 2002



What do students say? Eight themes from a phenomenological study of 5 depressed adolescents

Friendship: Roles and reactions

“[My old friend] would always sit with her other friend Kristen on the bus and she would just always talk with Kristen. So I was being replaced by Kristen.”

“I get along with most of my friends....they’re usually the ones who notice first when something’s wrong. They talk to me about it and just see what’s wrong. And I guess that kind of helps because I get it out of me.”

Farmer, 2002



What do students say? Eight themes from a phenomenological study of 5 depressed adolescents

Gaining a sense of getting well

“I feel better but not completely better because I’ve only been better for like almost four months. So I feel better but not totally.”

“I don’t really think you can explain it to somebody if they don’t...if they haven’t experienced it or someone they’re really close to has experienced it.”

Farmer, 2002



Mental health and K-12 students

Conclusion:

Large numbers of students in K-12 schools have mental health needs, and many are not getting the support need. And the perspective of students is missing from the mental health literature.

Survey

Introduction/Parameters:

- Students at MSU, Mankato
- Participants identified by Office of Disability Services as having a mental health diagnosis
- Email invitation and reminders
- Questions pertaining to diagnosis, impact (personal/social, academic, career), and interventions

Survey (Preliminary findings: Impact)

Area of Impact	% indicating some negative impact	Mean Rating (1-7)	Range
Daily work/homework	85%	2.22	1-7
Satisfaction w/ school	82%	2.81	1-7
Relationships w/ classmates & friends	81%	2.48	1-7
Grades	78%	2.56	1-6
Ability to manage academic challenges	74%	2.81	1-7
Standardized Tests	74%	2.52	1-6
Attendance	63%	3.15	1-7
Career aspirations	56%	3.15	1-7
Relationships w/ adults @ school	48%	3.67	1-7
Relationships b/t parents & school	44%	3.59	1-7

Survey (Preliminary findings: Experiences)

Experience	% of Respondents
Suicidal thoughts	67%
Victim of bullying	44%
Suicidal behavior	37%
Self-injurious behavior	33%
Substance/alcohol abuse	22%
Victim of physical abuse/assault	22%
Victim of sexual abuse/assault	22%

Survey (Preliminary findings: Interventions)

Intervention	% of Respondents
Medication	60%*
Outside therapy	52%
Individual counseling w/ school counselor	41%
Modification in regular education classrooms	33%

*Medication effectiveness (scale of 1-4), $M=2.61$

- 50% marked "Very effective" or "Somewhat effective"
- 50% marked "Minimally effective" or "Not effective"

Survey (Preliminary findings: Support)

Adults at school:

- 48% indicate that their teachers knew about their diagnosis
- “How well did your teachers support you?” (scale of 1-4)
 - $M=1.88$ (44% selected “Not at all”)
- “How well did your SC support you?” (scale of 1-4)
 - $M=2.4$ (30% selected “Not at all”)

Survey (Preliminary findings: Support)

Adults at school:

- “Did any of the adults in the school understand what you were going through?”
 - Yes, definitely: 4%
 - Somewhat: 52%
 - Not at all: 41%

Survey (Preliminary findings: Support)

Peers:

- 48% indicate that their close friends knew
- No participants reported that their classmates knew
- “How well did your peers support you?” (scale of 1-4):
 - *M=1.84 (48% selected “Not at all”)*

Survey (Preliminary findings: Support)

Peers:

- “Did any of your close friends in school understand what you were going through?”
 - Yes, definitely: 19%
 - Somewhat: 37%
 - Not at all: 41%



Survey (Preliminary findings: Support)

Where are students getting support?

- Parents
- Self
- School staff member



Implications

- Students with mental health problems are not themselves (e.g., façade of anger)
- Schools may not know which students have mental health problems
- Mental health problems can be consuming
- Most students with mental health problems do not feel supported
- Many students with mental health problems feel alone



Thank you....

Thank you for attending this session!

Feel free to send us comments or questions:

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