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Empathy and Empowerment

BY CHRISTINA UTICONE

School nutrition professionals can help raise awareness of youth mental health concerns and become a source of support.

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Content Warning:

This article will discuss aspects of mental health and includes mentions of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, please visit <https://988lifeline.org>.



EXPERTS ACROSS A VARIETY OF PROFESSIONAL SEGMENTS AGREE: The United States is experiencing an escalating mental health crisis, particularly among our youth. Reported rates of depression and anxiety are on the rise for all age groups, with one in six young adults, teens and children experiencing a diagnosed mental health disorder. An even more sobering statistic: Suicide is now the second-leading cause of death among children ages 10-14 and the third-leading cause of death for those 15-24.

You don't have to be a mental health expert to know this is an enormously troubling problem—or to play a role in strategies designed to help reverse the trend. In fact, in some ways, school nutrition professionals are uniquely positioned to help.

Cafeteria Counselors? Not Quite!

Mental health experts agree that mental and emotional health issues among young people were on the rise even before the chaos of COVID-19 disrupted all aspects of life, including academics and social engagement. It was around 2017 when Colorado District 49's Director of Nutrition Services Monica Deines-Henderson, MBA, SNS, had her attention sparked by the passing reference of a

conference speaker to "youth mental health." She made a note to do more research on the concept when returning home to her district. What Deines-Henderson discovered in her online research, especially about the harmful effects of bullying and the rates of teen suicide, was surprising, disturbing—and galvanizing.

There's one fundamental truth about the vast majority of school nutrition programs: Nearly every



“ Students are in crisis, make no mistake about it. ”

Students *are* in crisis, make no mistake about it. The list of factors currently having a negative effect on youth mental health is fairly mind-blowing: food and/or housing insecurity, social media, school violence, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic and/or partner violence and so much more—with the pandemic itself an exacerbating factor. Making school a safer space for students, rather than an echo chamber of stressors, is up to the adults.

“When you have a couple hundred students in one location, the lunch monitor can miss things,” Deines-Henderson notes about incidents of cafeteria bullying. “In that environment, it can be easy for those children who want to find a victim to find a victim. So, if there are more eyes to prevent such acts, it helps. Even though cafeteria staff aren’t in a position do a lot of interaction, we can at least do some interception.”

student in a school building passes through the cafeteria at some point during their day. What better place to check in on them? (Not to mention the sad fact that the cafeteria can be a common site for bullying.) Deines-Henderson began to shape a vision for action. Professional development training focused specifically on youth mental health could give school nutrition staff the tools they needed to intercept trouble, and to help spot students in crisis in order to connect kids with the supports they need.

BY THE NUMBERS

1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year

1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year

1 in 6 youth (17%) aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year

50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14

Suicide is the 2nd-leading cause of death among individuals aged 10-14 and the 3rd-leading cause of death among those aged 15-24

The average delay between the onset of mental illness symptoms and treatment is **11 years**

160 million people live in a designated “Mental Health Professional Shortage Area”

LGBTQ+ youth are nearly four times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth

High school students with significant symptoms of **depression** are more than twice as likely to drop out of school compared to their peers

Among people in the U.S. under age 18, **depressive disorders** are the most common cause of hospitalization (excluding pregnancy/birth)

Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org



“Our folks are silent witnesses to all kinds of thing that are going on in the cafeteria.”

Elevate Awareness

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, school staff are crucial stakeholders in youth mental health initiatives. The agency recommends schools provide critical supports and services for students' mental health, starting by establishing safe and supportive environments—and doing so typically involves staff training. Back in 2017, Deines-Henderson realized training her own staff on youth mental health could allow her team to become one of these critical supports in District 49.

“Our folks are silent witnesses to all kinds of things that are going on in the cafeteria,” she notes. “I was looking for something to empower my staff and to give them the voice to help students they see hurting every day.” Deines-Henderson reached out to the district counselor for

recommendations of potential trainers in this arena and subsequently organized a full-day, in-person student mental health awareness training for her entire staff, some 100 strong at the time. The impact of that training continues to resonate today among individual participants.

Role playing in various scenarios was a key aspect of the workshop. “The training included group discussions and small group breakouts, and we acted out different scenarios that the trainer would propose,” details Deines-Henderson. “For example, ‘One person be student X who always comes to school with dirty clothes and never has food, and the rest of you be the other students who interact with that individual. What do you do? What do you say?’

Deines-Henderson reports that the training “got very emotional” when the discussion turned to suicide. The instructor asked how many participants had been affected by suicide in their personal lives and/or knew a student who had died by suicide. “I would say about 90% indicated they had in some way been touched by somebody’s suicide,” she reports.

Despite the high emotions of the day, feedback from the group was meaningful and enthusiastic. “There were tears—there was a lot of opening up and sharing throughout that entire day,” Deines-Henderson says. “There were some who left quietly but reached out later to say, ‘Thank you, I really needed that.’ or ‘Thank you, my eyes are open and I can see this student or this person in my life who is struggling and needs help.’”

Empower Action

“That training empowered the staff; it gave them the basic tools to feel confident with identifying students who may need intercession,” reports Deines-Henderson.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

GrievingStudents.org

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students is a collaboration of professional organizations representing a wide range of school stakeholders with the mission of providing support and care to grieving students.

SchoolCrisisCenter.org

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement is located at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. It offers numerous online resources.

2021 Surgeon General Report

In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General released an Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health. It includes action steps for young people, adults and school stakeholders.

"They were given the authority to get involved and told where to go—notably the counselor in the school building—to get help."

The school nutrition staff training soon became a model program for the district. Student mental health was already a strategic priority for District 49 leadership during this time, Deines-Henderson notes. So, when she presented her annual report to the board of education, they were inspired to take swift action. "They jumped on it right away as a good training for *all* employees district-wide. Now, youth mental health training is offered for [at least] 50% of our professional development days," she says. "It is highly encouraged by our school board. As for my own staff, I always have someone who asks, '*Can I take that training again, please?*' and I say, '*Sure, take it all you want!*'"

A Whole Village for Each Child

All professional development training opportunities are valuable, but youth mental health training has the added benefit of helping to elevate the role of school nutrition professionals—not only in the eyes of others, but in the mirror. When your staffers can envision themselves

as an integral part of advancing student wellness, physical and mental, it boosts personal morale. When your school nutrition staff can demonstrate to other stakeholders that they are an integral part of student wellness, it builds community.

Consider taking time this summer to reach out to the counseling services team in your school district to inquire about and collaborate on a training program that will help give cafeteria staff the awareness, the skills and the authority to assist their most vulnerable customers. Even just one successful intervention in the life of one child is well worth the time spent to develop such a program.

"Our kids are struggling like kids all around the nation right now; I can't pretend this mental health crisis hasn't touched District 49 in Colorado Springs, because it has," says Deines-Henderson. "But because the school board has made mental health a strategic priority for our kids—even before COVID—we are lucky to have more tools available and more people able to intercede with our students who need help earlier." **SN+**

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MORALE BOOSTERS FOR SCHOOL NUTRITION STAFF

Showing colleagues and staff that you value *their* well-being, as well as that of your student customers, improves workplace mental health and morale and creates a safe space for staff to address difficult topics. This can be accomplished in many ways, including:

- » Recognizing individual and team accomplishments
- » Promoting mental and emotional wellness in the workplace
- » Providing, requesting or taking professional development training on mental wellness topics
- » Encouraging open lines of communication and providing colleagues with opportunities (e.g. meetings, town halls, office hours) to discuss problems
- » Contacting your local health department for mental health resources and training opportunities

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