



# WELLNESS COMMITTEE

WINTER 2014

## *Notes on “Youth & Mental Health: Balancing the Wellness Wheel”*

*The Public Schools of Brookline’s Wellness Committee examines and supports a variety of programs addressing student health. Now entering its seventh year, the committee addresses a range of youth serving initiatives in areas of nutrition, fitness/recreation, mental health, chemical health, teen dating violence, and climate change awareness.*

### **WELLNESS COMMITTEE SUMMIT ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**

On Dec. 5, 2013, Brookline's Wellness Committee summit, **“Youth & Mental Health: Balancing the Wellness Wheel,”** gathered together a select group of school administrators and staff, public health professionals, community members, Brookline parents and students to generate strategies to develop a "whole child" approach to youth mental health and overall wellbeing. Brookline’s recent Student Health Survey, given to all 7-12 grade public school students every two years, reported high rates of anxiety, stress and depression. Yet according to DrugFree.org, less than half of teens with mental health disorders get the help they need, and suicide rates for Americans rose 28% over last decade. More people now die of suicide than in car accidents. Recent events in the media, including suicides in Newton, highlight some of these student mental health issues, which often result in high rates of self-medicating among students suffering from depression

This is a major concern impacting our children’s wellbeing, and the summit brought together many of the members of our community who are leading efforts toward teen mental health issues. This fostered a cross pollination of ideas with two primary goals -- identify risk and protective factors specific to Brookline that contribute to the high rates of stress and depression among youth, and brainstorm potential strategies to promote positive mental health. Participants included representatives from Public Schools of Brookline administration, health, and guidance, B-PEN (Brookline Parent Education Network), Brookline Teen Center, Brookline Recreation, Brookline Mental Health, parents and students.

### **WHAT IS BROOKLINE DOING SO FAR?**

Much is already being done in Brookline to promote wellness, including:

- Health curriculum in the schools, gr. 7-9
- B-PEN forums and parent education projects
- Peer Leader campaign to reduce stigma around getting help for mental health issues
- Teen Center and Recreation Department programming for teens that provides healthy outlets
- BHS Guidance Department staff trainings on mental health topics
- Brookline Mental Health Center Liaisons in every school

- A task force to look at mental health services in the schools



## CONTINUING STRESS AND ANXIETY

Despite a number of ongoing programs and initiatives, however, stress and anxiety continue to be significant concerns. On the recent Student Health Survey, 75% of all Brookline High School students (93% of girls) reported they felt overwhelming stress or anxiety. At the middle school level, 69% of all students (87% of girls) in grades 7 and 8 reported stress and anxiety, which often leads to a number of health risk behaviors, such as bullying, relationship violence substance abuse. The surprising difference between boys and girls reporting stress was noted.

Primary sources of stress at BHS:

- Schoolwork: females 46%, males 43%
- Future (college, job): females 14%, males 11%
- Family Issues: females 11%, males 7%
- Self esteem: females 8%, males 4%
- Peer issues: females 3%, males 2%

Similar statistics were noted from the middle schools, with a big concern that 10% of girls at this age report issues with self-esteem.

## DEPRESSION

While stress and anxiety are a normal part of the human condition, they can also lead to or exacerbate depression, which is defined as “feeling sad or hopeless for a period of two or more weeks such that you stop doing your usual activities.” In the elementary schools, 16% of 7th and 8th graders reported symptoms of depression, while at BHS, it ramped up to nearly a quarter of all students. Even more troubling, 25% of BHS girls and 17% of BHS boys reported they felt suicidal during the past 12 months.

## THE BIG DISCONNECT

While nearly three-quarters of Brookline 7-12 graders admit to overwhelming stress and anxiety, often leading to depression, less than a quarter are actually getting help. This a big gap between student needs and seeking service, and the result is that often students are turning to often self-destructive forms of self-medicating. More than half of students reporting depression report binge drinking, which is more than three times more than kids who aren't depressed. 32 % of heavy marijuana users at BHS reported symptoms of depression (compared with 24% of the population as a whole). Prescription drug abuse undoubtedly factors in as well.

## EXPERT ADVICE – Dr. Joshua Eagle

### ***What do we need to know?***

According to Brookline Community Mental Health Center Child Team Coordinator Joshua Eagle, normal anxiety has evolutionary value pushing us to move toward goals and change. Optimal anxiety helps us prepare for the future but doesn't impact day-to-day functioning. Managing anxiety is the goal, and for teens, that may be something as simple as reducing academic or activity commitments. But often, anxiety and stress levels are more severe, requiring attention and intervention.



Compounding stress levels in youth is the overwhelming prominence of social media, which has a major impact on teen depression and stress. Studies show young people today spend about as much time involved with some form of media as they do sleeping, especially if you consider they are often using more than one form of media at a time. This daily overuse can make kids more prone to anxiety and depression. Though a balanced use of different media can have positive effects, such as helping introverted kids learn to socialize and providing a variety of tools for learning, it can be very distracting and impact academic performance. It can also make kids feel very exposed, under the microscope all the time, allowing secrets to go viral at any moment. They can feel there is no down time, that they are never “off,” which can produce great anxiety and exacerbate normal feelings of stress.

### ***What are the warning signs of too much stress?***

The warning signs of someone in trouble vary from child to child, but one of the major cues is a change in functioning across various domains – family, school (attendance, grade drops), peers (less socializing, different friends, etc.) and waning interest in activities. A child’s peers and friends may be the best source of information on behavior and offer an entrée into opening up parent/child conversation.

Note -- depression looks different in teen boys than in girls. Boys often appear angry, irritable, easily upset, qualities that are easier to show than fear or sadness and may mask deeper issues underneath. And in everyone, depression can manifest not only emotionally but physically as well, such as in sleep changes, dietary concerns ( eating less or more, major fluctuations from norm) somatic symptoms -- headaches, stomach aches, undifferentiated pain, etc.

### ***How can we promote resiliency?***

The best thing we can do for our youth is to encourage them to be well rounded. Sometimes the simple elements that we take for granted – exercise, good nutrition, proper sleep – are taken for granted and fall by the wayside. However, they remain at the core of basic health. As adults, it’s important to model good habits ourselves.

But if a young person needs help, we need to overcome barriers like stigma, access, and cultural differences to get kids proper attention, such as therapy. While many kids will be resistant, which is normal, parents need to take charge and communicate that therapy, even just a couple of sessions, can be the gateway to figuring out what’s going on. At some places, including the Brookline Center, a referral isn’t needed most of time, and insurance should cover mental health just like physical issues.

A primary care doctor is a good first contact. In addition, guidance counselors, school psychologists and school social workers can assist with the referral process and recommend appropriate services. Growing enrollment and the increased severity of mental health issues presenting in schools continues to stretch the limited resources available, particularly in the elementary schools. Assistant Superintendent for Student Services Dr. Karen Shmukler has convened a task force to address this issue and to put together a resource guide for parents and teachers tailored to each school.

## SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

A critical component of the Wellness Summit was breaking into table top brainstorming sessions to process shared information and come up with new ideas for addressing issues of teen anxiety/depression from four different vantage points: school, family, social groups, and community. Strategies included:

### SCHOOL

- Study/review how AP classes cause stress and consider ways to address
- More education with parents, less scare tactics, more *reality* about college
- Peer-led support groups
- Guidance seminars on how to decrease stress
- Homework policy → limit amount
- School-wide investigation on “time” and how we use it
- Mental health support in elementary schools
- Use media to reach kids
- Focus on the arts as a means of emotional regulation/wellness
- Teaching coping skills as curriculum (health class)
- Survey Brookline grads in college to find out what about their school experience was helpful
- Include mental illness in “learning about disabilities curriculum”

### COMMUNITY

- Community coordination position to do outreach
- Intramurals → for all abilities
- High School mentors for 8<sup>th</sup> graders
- Friday night dance parties
- “Bulletin board” of community activities

### PEER/SOCIAL

- Keep bullying education program fresh and relevant through grades
- Make info about infraction (substance use, etc.) consequences more clear
- BHS students come and have discussions at middle schools
- BRYT (Brookline Resilient Youth Team) program for middle school
- Show middle schools *Break Free from Depression* video
- Increase clinical staff in middle school
- BETCO (Brookline Educational Theater Company) performances
- Peer group workshops → drugs, alcohol, peer pressure (9th & 10th grades)
- Teaching coping skills as a curriculum (health class)
- Planned Parenthood peer educator program (healthy relationships and sex)
- “To write love on her arms” depression campaign

### FAMILY

- Focus on family routines (i.e., family meetings, dinner, recreation)
- Productive communication (family, school, student) – “motivational interviewing” workshops, peer panels to encourage
- Mental health support for families
- Develop incentives for kids to enter short term psychotherapy
- Support group for kids of divorce
- B-PEN partnering with PTO over student/parent panels around parenting