

Fall 2023



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS CONTINUED

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## STATEMENT FROM CHRISTINE MACBETH:



We are thrilled to present *Community Conversations Continued*, a quarterly newsletter that builds off of our well-received lectures series held earlier this year. We hope this can be a valuable format for sharing information that will enable our community to better understand the mental health and substance use issues that impact many of us and the resources that will help. At Brien, we are committed to ending the stigma that challenges behavioral health care, so that we all can lead happier, healthier, and more productive lives.

Christine Macbeth, ACSW, LICSW  
President and CEO  
The Brien Center

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## What to Know about Youth Mental Health

*by James Muscia, LICSW Former Director of Child & Adolescent Division*

Prior to the pandemic, youth of all ages were already spending an alarming amount of time on social media. In addition to the “typical” forms of social media (Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok) there was a larger number of online social interactions via gaming platforms. When the pandemic began, schools shut down and engagement in community activities stopped. We essentially sent youth “to their rooms,” resulting in the isolation of an entire generation.

Youth crave social interactions, so they find these through digital formats. Not only were they exposed to the harmful effects of social media, but peer relationships also became “digital.” Youth were no longer interacting in person. The result was substantial increases in anxiety and depression. This trend, while improved since the end of the pandemic, continues.

## Youth Mental Health (cont.)

While social media can offer some benefits, the Surgeon General's recent advisory on social media use spelled out the increasing evidence that social media is having a profoundly negative effect on our youth's mental health.

- Social media use in youth is nearly universal with up to 95% of young people ages 13-17 reporting a social media platform, and more than one-third saying they use social media "almost constantly."
- Children are exposed to harmful social media content, ranging from violent and sexual content to bullying and harassment.
- Recent research shows that adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety. Yet, one 2021 survey of teenagers found that, on average, they spend 3.5 hours a day on social media.
- Social media may also perpetuate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviors, social comparison, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls. One-third or more of girls aged 11-15 say they feel "addicted" to certain social media platforms and over half of them report that it would be hard to give up social media.
- Additionally, 64% of adolescents are "often" or "sometimes" exposed to hate-based content through social media.
- Studies have also shown a relationship between social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth.

Youth mental health had already been declining prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the CDC, there was a 40% increase in high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness since 2019. Isolation, online schooling, and increased reliance on social media throughout the pandemic has exacerbated these already-increasing concerns.

In 2021, more than 37% of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the pandemic and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year.

**There is a national crisis in health care and behavioral health care. Finding a good therapist can be difficult. Persistence and advocacy are unfortunately important. It is OK to politely push and nudge for an appointment. What to look for:**

- **A therapist trained and experienced working with youth, including adolescents. Children are not "little adults;" the issues are very different. The interventions are different.**
- **A youth therapist should be trained to work with the whole family.**
- **Include the child in the decision on who to see; a good match is important.**
- **Telehealth can work, but in-person is more effective.**

## ***DID YOU KNOW?***

**Below are some early signs and symptoms of a possible mental health concern for youth. While some of these characteristics and behaviors can be a normal part of childhood development, they could be indicative of a more serious problem if they are interfering with the youth's normal daily functioning.**

- **Difficulty attending school, significantly lower grades, problems at school**
- **Worry and anxiety, loss of friends**
- **Isolation (including overuse of social media and online gaming)**
- **Frequent outbursts**
- **Changes in sleeping and eating habits**
- **Mood swings, irritability, depressed mood**
- **Trouble concentrating**
- **Use of drugs or alcohol, risky behaviors**

Reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors and positive activities are key in promoting mental health in youth.

### **Risk factors include:**

- *Low self-esteem*
- *Anxiety and depression that is above typical levels*
- *Insecure attachments*
- *Parental mental health problems*
- *High levels of parental conflict/divorce*
- *Abuse and neglect*
- *Lack of supervision*
- *Difficult peer relationships including bullying*
- *Poverty*
- *Traumatic events*

### **Protective factors and positive activities include:**

- *Stable and nurturing family and environment*
- *Secure attachments, positive relationships with peers*
- *Positive and safe school environment*
- *Focusing on the youth's strengths and interests*
- *Providing structure, routines, and positive limit setting*
- *Providing consistent and clear expectations*
- *Physical exercise and healthy diet*
- *Engagement in community activities such as sports, music, theater, youth groups, religious or faith-based activities*
- *Writing, journaling, reading, listening to music*
- *Limiting access to social media and online gaming*

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## **How to Contact Brien Center**

**Mail:** PO Box 4219 Pittsfield, MA 01202-4219

**Main Number:** 413-499-0412

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**General Inquiries:** [mary.murphy@briencenter.org](mailto:mary.murphy@briencenter.org)

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