



MENTAL HEALTH MONDAYS



Key Takeaways – May 11, 2020 | 5 p.m.

Carly McGovern, local student and mental health advocate

“The New Normal: Supporting teens in a time that is all but ordinary.”

1. **There really is no “normal” and that’s okay.** Whether you have a teenager you’re worried about and can’t see face-to-face, you’re a parent of a teenager who’s home and can’t go to school, or you’re a teenager worried about some of your peers who you can only talk to on the phone, our lives have changed in so many ways during COVID-19. However, what can be comforting to realize as we’re talking about this “new normal” during the pandemic, is that “normal” doesn’t exist. Life is never “normal.” People are not “normal,” and that’s a good thing.
2. **Teenagers often find it difficult to talk to an adult about their mental health.** While people are talking more about mental health overall, many teenagers are a lot more comfortable talking to their peers about their mental illness than a trusted adult. Talking to peers can be a great outlet and source of support, but we need to make sure that our teenagers feel comfortable reaching out to trusted adults because they are the ones who can provide resources. Common reasons for not talking to adults can include fear they will disappoint them or that adults are too busy to help. I think it’s really important that we start thinking about how to make sure our teenagers feel comfortable confiding in adults.
3. **How to approach someone with a mental illness.** There is a lot of fear that goes with talking to someone about their mental illness, including concern about crossing boundaries or upsetting them. My experience is that the effort of approaching them never goes unappreciated. I can tell you personally and from hearing from other teenagers, that even if the concern is met with a negative response, that reaching out and asking if someone is okay is always appreciated and always a great first step. We also need to make sure that if we’re offering support that they understand what kind of support that we can offer. Instead of saying something general like, “You can call or text me anytime” maybe ask something like “Can I call you every day?” or “Can I do this for you?” They will tell you “yes” or “no” and again, if it’s a negative response, it doesn’t mean that that person didn’t appreciate the effort. This may help alleviate some feelings of being a burden for reaching out to you because it is no longer something the person may think you were obligated to offer them. It also encourages healthy boundaries by making agreements on what both parties are able to commit to.

4. **There's no expectation for you to "fix" your child when they are confiding in you. Just listen and remain calm.** As parents, teachers, and trusted adults, I think it's very important to show compassion and make sure that that person knows you're not going to wig out on them. Teenagers often feel, especially with our parents, that they have a desire to fix and take away whatever problems that we're dealing with. It's well intended, but it doesn't necessarily follow the rule of remaining calm. It's usually hard enough to communicate what you are feeling without worrying about how another person will react. As a result, the most important thing you can do is listen. When a child tells you that they're struggling with something, or when anyone tells you that they're struggling with something, it doesn't necessarily require an immediate response of "We need to get you help!" If a child tells you they are physically sick, in most cases you wouldn't rush them to the emergency room, or lash out at them because they've done this before, or even not believe them entirely. If you did, the child would never tell you they are sick. Instead, listen, ask appropriate questions, and help them figure out what steps are necessary for getting better.

5. **There are resources out there to help somebody who is sick, struggling, and dealing with a significant mental illness.** We have made a lot of progress in this area. Kids' Minds Matter is doing a lot of work in spreading and adding new resources. Another great first step is to get connected with somebody. Whether it be your school guidance counselor, somebody at Kids' Minds Matter or a therapist at a mental health treatment center, get connected with somebody and say, "I'm looking for somebody to help me." There might also be fear that **asking for help will result in being sent away or having intensive therapy**, but that's not always the case. If you have the flu, you don't have to undergo chemo, but there should also be no shame if you do need that intensity of care. I think we can normalize this conversation by being more open about what we think will help the person that is struggling.

On the topic of resources, there's really a lot to be done in terms of what we're building out, and what needs to be fixed at our school and in our health care systems. I think and I hope resources will be improved alongside normalizing the conversation around mental illness. There's a lot of ways we can normalize the conversation around mental illness, and it doesn't take an expert. Anyone can be compassionate. Anyone can listen.

6. **What is Normal is Overrated?** Normal is Overrated is an event that we created to normalize the conversation surrounding teenage mental health. Last year was our first event, and with the help of Healthy Lee and Kids' Minds Matter and so many others, we were able to reach 130-140 community members with speeches from 3 local teenagers with experience with mental illness who shared their experiences as well as answered questions.



This event also included 26 local vendors of mental health resources as well as therapy dogs. We are currently planning our second “Normal is Overrated” event for September 12, 2020. We are accepting applications for student speakers at the event and in the future. We are always posting updates on our social media. You can follow our Facebook and Instagram pages, which are both “@fortmyersprogress.”

Questions from viewers:

Q: How much time is too much time on video games or to have screen time?

A: I think that goes along with the idea of having open communication with your child. If you notice that your child is spending too much time on screens, tell them. You can say, “I think you’re spending too much time here, what can we do?” It might look ugly, but I think it’s important to understand that it may be a struggle for that child to talk about it in the first place. Even if they reject your help at first, it may at least show them that you have noticed their struggles and are interested in helping. Ask them, “Do you have enough time to do your homework?” or “Would you be willing to spend only this much time?” It’s important to show them that you trust them to take this conversation seriously. I think that sort of conversation can be really powerful and can be applicable to a lot of different scenarios.

Q: Any tips on best way to approach a teen who gets angry or won’t engage?

A: I think this is a really common fear, especially if you’re a parent or a teacher, and you have a child that you just know is going to lash out if you say something about a habit of theirs that is problematic. I think it’s a valid fear for adults but doesn’t necessarily mean that the child is saying that they don’t want help or that they’re never going to cooperate. It may be the child communicating “This is *really, really* hard... Maybe I’m not ready, but I need you to keep trying.” Lashing out and getting angry is not who they are, they are not defined by what they may be dealing with. They’re just having a tough time. One thing that may be helpful is therapy that incorporates the parents or even the entire family.

Q: Kids and adults can struggle feeling unmotivated in this environment. Any advice when “we don’t feel like doing anything” and still have to do schoolwork?

A: I tie that back a lot to the idea that we keep saying, “This is the new normal” or “This is not what we’re used to,” and longing to be back to “normal.” Clearly, life is never normal. For me personally, it has been really easy to fall into the mindset of, “I have to fix my entire life because I’m home now and I finally have time to” or even the opposite “I don’t usually do this, so I don’t need to do anything.”



I think that the things that motivate us in our day-to-day “normal” (pre-quarantine) lives are going to be the same things that motivate us now. That could be being outside, exercising or listening to music. For me, I feel like when I get in the rut of not doing anything, it’s usually because I have another pressure going on inside of my head of all the things I feel I *should* be doing. I think we also need to be more forgiving with ourselves and set realistic goals of what we want to do each day.

Q: Has virtual learning increased anxiety levels? What have your peers done to manage their stress?

A: I think for a lot of kids there can be an anxiety of not being in routines. It probably differs for everybody, whether it’s the virtual learning causing anxiety, or “I can’t go to the gym” anxiety, “I can’t do this” anxiety, or “everyone’s wearing a mask” anxiety. There’s a lot to be anxious about in the world right now (and always!!) especially now that we are home and potentially in environments we typically avoid. If healthy routines help you manage stress, know that you have the power to create routine in your life—like planning regular times to go for a run or for a bike ride. Use your planner to create structure and routine like you do during the school year. A lot of us teenagers have of course been trying our best to do some of these things to keep anxiety at bay, while also trying to keep up with friends via Facetime!

Q: Can you talk about what impact you’re seeing with social isolation of the quarantine in terms of mental health, depression, anxiety?

A: I’ve seen a lot of what you might expect from teenagers—lack of motivation, sleeping a lot without anything else to do, and a very strong desire to cut or dye hair a crazy color. I think that it’s all an impact of boredom. The best thing that we have done in my friend group is group FaceTime and accepting that we’re all in this together. It’s given us a lot of things to bond over. I don’t think that we should ignore the fact that it’s impacting us, and I think that when we go back, we will be so much more aware of how much we need people.





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About Kids' Minds Matter

The goal of Kids' Minds Matter is to raise awareness about the need for pediatric mental and behavioral health care services and to raise the funds required to make these services available in the region through Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida and Lee Health. An estimated 46,000 Southwest Florida children are impacted by mental and behavioral health disorders like anxiety, depression, eating disorders, psychosis, substance abuse, autism, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. As part of the region's strategic solution to the children's mental and behavioral health epidemic in Southwest Florida, Kids' Minds Matter is dedicated to fostering partnerships that support existing services, identifying and filling gaps in the continuum of care, and innovating new treatments.

Philanthropic support for Kids' Minds Matter has allowed Lee Health and Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida to: implement a tiered model of care that clinically aligns community, inpatient and outpatient care; hire additional psychiatrists, child advocates and other mental health professionals; offer Mental Health First Aid training to local pediatricians, emergency service providers and others who work directly with children; renovate an outpatient center in Fort Myers where a child's needs can be addressed in a therapeutic setting; and launch a first-of-its-kind Pediatric Digital Cognitive Behavioral Health diagnostic and treatment protocols interlaced with Tele-Psychology support to treat anxiety, depression and trauma. Most recently, Kids' Minds Matter introduced mental health care navigators into Lee and Collier County schools who will help families find resources and care to address their child's mental healthcare needs.

The "Mental Health Mondays" segments are a public forum, designed for open discussions that benefit a large audience, and to provide real-time resources and advice from pediatric mental health professionals and advocates. The information shared on this platform is intended for general public consumption and not intended for individual treatment. The views, advice, and resources shared by each guest speaker are solely their own and are not endorsed by Lee Health, Golisano Children's Hospital of Southwest Florida and Kids' Minds Matter. Kids' Minds Matter is dedicated to raising awareness and essential funding to enhance pediatric mental & behavioral health programs, services and access to care in Southwest Florida. To learn more about Kids' Minds Matter, visit KidsMindsMatter.com.

