

Children's Mental Health

There is a lot of rhetoric around the world these days about the mental health crisis, specifically the youth mental health crisis. As a society, we are often more astute at identifying societal issues than we are at understanding their causes and implementing change. There is a plethora of data identifying the mental health crisis in our country, but there is less agreement on the causes and wide-scale solutions. Our SDWD School Counselors and School Psychologists are continually working with staff, families, and students to identify needs and ways in which we can better support mental health needs in our community.

Research indicates that in 2022, 48,183 people died by suicide in the US. Suicide rates have steadily increased since the early 2000s. According to the National Institute on Mental Health, Suicide is the second leading cause of death in 10 to 14-year-olds and the third-leading cause of death in 15 to 24-year-olds. The first leading cause of death for both age groups is an accidental death, and the second leading cause for 15 to 24-year-olds is homicide. Out of 53 countries worldwide, the US has the 9th highest suicide rate. Results from the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed that 52% of youth in Wisconsin reported significant feelings of anxiety and depression. Females and LGBT youth reported significantly higher percentages of hopelessness. Not only do we see these increased feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and suicide rates, access to mental health services is limited for many kids and families. Families who seek help often find themselves on long waiting lists for evaluations and therapy.

The causes behind the increase in mental health issues are complex with widely varying viewpoints. Some psychologists point to the rise in time and frequency youth spend on social media. We know that exposure to social media plays a role in youth mental health. Its impact is multi-faceted. Youth spend less time with face-to-face interactions than ever before. Social media posts often present the best version of oneself, the perfect pose, vacation, family event, flawless skin, etc. During adolescence, youth are developing and growing into their unique selves. Being continually bombarded with the perfect images on social media can lead to unrealistic expectations for their own lives. While research is not solid on the impact of social media on our current mental health crisis, there are some things we do know for sure. Kids are spending more time on social media than ever before, they are getting less exercise, less sleep, less face-to-face interaction, and eating more processed food than ever. We do know that each of these factors does have an impact on neurological development and can impact overall health.

In the school system, many of the above issues are not in our control, however, we are focusing on what we can do to support youth. The SDWD received a mental health grant from Mile Bluff Medical Center, and with this grant we are training all of our teachers and support staff in Mental Health First Aid. Mental Health First Aid is a course that teaches participants how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. The training

gives participants the skills needed to reach out and provide initial help and support to someone who may be developing a mental health or substance use problem or experiencing a crisis. Our teachers and support staff are the individuals who spend the most time with individual students, so we are working to give them the tools to support all students. Our Middle School and Elementary counselors meet with individual classes each month to address topics such as bullying, healthy life choices, and peer relationships. They also provide small group and individual support to students who are struggling in the school setting. Each building continues to focus on our SDWD mission of connecting with every student; building leaders work to ensure that every student has someone within the building that they are connected to, trust and feel they can talk to if needed.

The SDWD also uses a program called Gaggle, which monitors students' computer use and alerts counselors and administrators when students are writing, emailing, researching, or chatting about hurting themselves or others or being hurt themselves. The counselor or principal then reaches out to the student and family as needed. These alerts come across 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. This is just one tool we can use to support a student who may be in crisis. Our continual goal is to support students' needs before there is a crisis.

Our counseling team has put together a resource book that lists a variety of services and support resources throughout the five countries the SDWD serves. Our school counselors and school psychologists are great resources and are here to help all of our students. If your child or someone you know is struggling, do not hesitate to reach out.

Family Resources:

<https://www.sdwd.k12.wi.us/Page/99>

<https://www.sdwd.k12.wi.us/Page/94>

<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/>

Reference Articles:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html>

<https://www.axios.com/2022/12/14/poll-finds-youth-mental-health-crisis-is-not-getting-better>

<https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html>

<https://www.nami.org/Blogs/From-the-CEO/April-2022/The-Crisis-of-Youth-Mental-Health>

<https://www.tpoftampa.com/increase-in-adolescent-mental-health-issues/>

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide#part_2557

<https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2022/youth-risk-behavior-survey-wisconsin-mental-health>

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/newsroom/docs/factsheets/dash-mental-health.pdf>

<https://www.apa.org/news/press/op-eds/youth-mental-health-crisis>