

Community Trauma: Navigating a Pandemic  
*Article #8: Innovation + Imagination=A Great Partnership*  
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Recently through a state of Michigan grant, Child and Family Charities and the Waverly Community Schools have created a partnership to bring mental health counseling directly into the schools with a dedicated therapist working out of a clinic within Waverly high school. This is a new and innovative movement designed to provide mental health access and resources right within the community. This grant was developed out of a need to provide more intensive direct services to students within the school community. More often than not school counselors and social workers are stretched thin just trying to help students apply for college, take the appropriate classes, and navigate the tricky waters of adolescence. Which leaves precious little time to do any real mental health counseling or interventions that most school personnel know is needed and wanted.

Here are some alarming statistics:

- 1 in 6 youth aged 6-17 in the United States experienced a mental health disorder in 2016 (7.7 million youth)
- 70.4% of youth in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosed mental illness
- Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death among people aged 10-34
- Suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the United States
- The overall suicide rate in the United States has increased by 31% since 2001.

One of the areas psychologists and therapists have been watching with concern is the decline in the mental health of our youth. There are a number of reasons for this decline especially among high school, I am convinced that social media, though useful in so many ways, has also had a negative impact on our youth. At a time when our young people are trying to figure out who they are and where they belong, the *popularity game* that was present before social media has been supercharged and often times behind a cloud of anonymity. Many individuals (young people among them) can be cruel and vicious at times and that kind of constant threat from so many people on so many different platforms is a recipe for disaster. I would not want to be a teen whose self-worth is tied to getting as many "likes", "hearts" and "shares" as possible in order to be considered one of the "popular kids."

**With all of this said, I have some real fears regarding the kinds of trauma we may see after the experience of the pandemic.**

It is going to take a lot of patience and real work to help bring some normalcy back to a lot of young people. To complicate things even further, those young people who have been quarantined during the virus with an abusive parent or sibling are going to need special attention. I cannot imagine the terror of having no way out and no place to go except a place you hate and a family member who is abusing you.

**Let's bring Kids back to school slowly and with intention!!**

We cannot bring 2500 youth back to a school location without helping them process what they went through and being comfortable with their mental state. I would be hesitant to bring a whole school back on the same day or even the same week. It is my hope they we take in consideration how similar world traumas like a war-torn country or a major natural disaster has affected children to better understand the challenges that we will be faced with after the pandemic subsides. Children who have lived through such things have proven resilient, but not all will fare as well as others. When a person has had previous mental health issues before a major traumatic event, they are way more likely to experience the new trauma or traumas more intensely. We need to plan well as we move toward a new social normal in order to mitigate the shock. We should consider re-introducing students to school either slowly by grade or group with intentional care and expertise.

Child and Family Charities have built a trauma informed team to partner with Waverly Community Schools to implement this exciting new resource within the community.

This is why am excited about this new partnership that will put a mental health professional right in the school. The end result would be a self-sustaining mental health clinic which will grow to include more therapists in order to address the mental health needs of the youth and their families. I am convinced this is the right movement and partnership for creating environments where youth thrive and form healthy psycho-social skills, which will then allow them to focus their energy on learning and less on surviving.

One of the greatest gifts we can give a child or youth who has experienced trauma is the ability to feel **safe** both in the environment they inhabit and with those who are charged with their well-being. Safety needs to be the underpinning of all our efforts. Once safety is established then trust can be built.

You will continue hear more about this amazing partnership as it grows and develops.

**Remember, we humans are Resilient.**