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Are the kids alright? Not really.

The mental health of children and young people has become a national emergency. While youth mental health has been getting worse since 2019, it has truly become a crisis since the onset of COVID-19 in 2020.[1] The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey between January and June 2021 and found a number of concerning issues around the mental health of American adolescents.[2] One of the more disturbing statistics was the increasing trend of high school students who had considered attempting suicide; from under 14% in 2009 to just under 19% in 2019 to 19.9% in 2021. Almost half of those individuals actually attempted suicide in 2021 – 9% of high school students.

Mental health in American adolescence has been a public health concern for years before the onset of the pandemic.[3] Almost all major statistics demonstrate a decline in the emotional state of young people, from rates of depression and hopelessness to rates of sui-

cidal ideation and attempts.[4] However, many of those already declining rates were accelerated with the onset of COVID-19. Many factors may be used to explain why youth mental health worsened, including lockdowns, remote schooling, health risks, deaths, and diseases of loved ones; but one thing is obvious, they all made youth mental health worse.

The Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey from January to June 2021, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is one of the first major analyses of how much worse this problem has become.[5] This survey was conducted over a six-month period and included 7,705 students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The survey used sampling to match the ages, demographics, and geographies of the United States high school population. Seven measures were utilized to understand the state of youth mental health, as well as understand any impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey answers demonstrated a significant problem with the mental health of American youth.[6] 44.2% of youth reported feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the prior 12 months, showing increases in depression rates. Further, the survey identified suicidal ideation in 19.9% of students with almost half – 9% - actually attempting to commit suicide. They also identified numerous demographic drivers within marginalized groups demonstrating higher rates of depression.

Connectedness to others was another driver that was identified as having an impact on youth mental health. Less than half of students (46.6%) agreed that they felt connected to other people at their school. Those who did not feel connected had higher rates of poor mental health.[7] A major concern here was the lockdowns and virtual schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic that broke some connections between students at their schools.[8]

Aside from connectedness, one concern that existed even before the COVID-19 pandemic was the ability for adolescence receive appropriate mental health care.[9] Numerous reasons have been given as to why care is difficult to receive, including costs, lack of providers and insurance coverage limits.[10] With more American youths needing mental healthcare and no major improvements to the care system, receiving necessary care has become more difficult and impossible for some.

One potential solution to the systemic problems is to utilize digital technology to provide mental health care to children and young people. With their recent release of programs for children and teens, as well as their caregivers SilverCloud Health could be a viable way to scale mental healthcare and provide access for many more individuals than can currently be supported by the U.S. mental healthcare ecosystem.

The Family Bundle from Amwell's digital mental health solution, includes a number of programs for children and teens, as well as programs to better help caregivers provide necessary support. These programs incorporate elements of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) such as psychoeducation and relaxation, to increase awareness and gradual exposure, with the aim of being able to manage anxiety or depression. The SilverCloud programs have been proven to be effective in reducing symptoms and improving quality of life. While the programs do not directly manage suicidal ideation, these programs can be an early intervention tool to manage depression and anxiety before they escalate to more serious events.

With CBT, participants will better understand their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and learn how to make positive changes. CBT is proven to reduce symptoms and allows individuals to better manage their mental health and wellbeing. Participants walk away with the tools to better control their mental health now and in the future.

Amwell digital mental health programs can be done at scale to improve population access to mental health tools. With these tools, children, teens, and their caregivers will be able to better manage symptoms of depression. Improvement of depression symptoms can lead to improved overall mental health, with earlier intervention leaving to better outcomes.

1. Panchal N, Kamal R, Cox C, Garfield R, Chidambaram P. Issue brief: mental health and substance use considerations among children during the COVID-19 pandemic. San Francisco, CA: KFF; 2021. https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/mental-health-and-substance-use-considerations-among-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/external icon

2. Panchal, et. Al.

3. Panchal, et. Al.

4. Jones SE, Ethier KA, Hertz M, et al. Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness Among High School Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic — Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021. MMWR Suppl 2022;71 (Suppl-3):16–21. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a3

5. ABES

6. ABES

7. ABES

8. Panchal, et. Al.

9. Panchal, et. Al.

10. Improving Access to Children's Mental Health Care, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/access.html