

Supporting Children’s Mental Health in a Pandemic

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About the presenter:

- Licensed in the State of Montana as an LCPC and LAC
- Credentialed through NAADAC as a MAC
- Opened a private practice in November of 2019 (Coffee Date Counseling Services, LLC)
- Spent 10 years prior to private practice working in an agency setting with teenagers with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders in residential and outpatient settings
- Prior to that worked as a direct support staff member in another residential treatment center for teenagers with SUD for three years



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Objectives

- Give frame work for understanding how the pandemic is impacting children’s mental health
- Identify ways to support care giver and children’s mental health

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Same Storm: Different Boats



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I heard that we are in the same boat.
But it's not like that.
We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat.
Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be.

Or vice versa.
For some, quarantine is optimal: a moment of reflection, of re-orientation.
For others, this is a desperate crisis.
For others it is fading loneliness.
For some, a peace, rest time, vacation.
Yet for others, Torture: How am I going to pay my bills?
Some were concerned about a brand of chocolate for Easter.
Others were concerned about the bread for the weekend, or if the noodles would last for a few more days.

Some were in their "home office".
Others are looking through trash to survive.
Some have experienced the near death of the virus, some have already lost someone from it, some are not sure their loved ones are going to make it, and some don't even believe this is a big deal.

Some of us who are well now may end up experiencing it, and some believe they are infallible and will be blown away if or when this hits someone they know.
So, friends, we are not in the same boat.
We are going through a time when our perceptions and needs are completely different.
And each one will emerge, in his own way, from that storm.
Some with a tan from their pool. Others with scars on the soul (for invisible reasons).
It is very important to see beyond what is seen at first glance.
Not just looking. More than looking...
Seeing.
See beyond the political party, beyond religion, beyond the nose on your face.
Do not underestimate the pain of others if you do not feel it.
Do not judge the good life of the other, do not condemn the bad life of the other.
Don't be a judge.
Let us not judge the one who lacks, as well as the one who excesses.
We are different ships looking to survive.
Let everyone navigate their route with respect, empathy and responsibility.

-Author Unknown

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



- Original Study conducted at Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with two waves of data collection
- 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members participated in the confidential surveys about childhood experiences, current health status and behaviors and completed physical exams

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- Verbal, physical, sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Emotional Abandonment
- Stress in the family system (i.e. divorce, substance use/MH issues, separations, etc.)



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Not All Stress Responses Are Equal: The Science of Toxic Stress



- **Positive stress Response:** moderate and short lived.
- **Examples:** brief heart rate increase, mild changes in stress hormone

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- **Tolerable stress Response:** stress response system is activated to greater degree due to more severe, longer lasting difficulties (i.e.. Death of loved one, natural disaster, etc.).
- If activation is time limited and child has a supportive relationship available to them to buffer impacts, often brain and other organs recover from potentially damaging impacts.

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- **Toxic Stress Response** -strong, frequent, prolonged activation of body's stress response in absence of supportive relationship
- Studies show these can have adverse impact on brain architecture, especially during early sensitive periods of brain development.

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Brain Development

- Critical periods of Development
 - 0-3 years
- Bottom-up development
- Experiences: Serve and Return
- Puberty:
 - Myelination and pruning



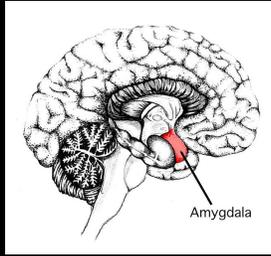
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Stress Impacts Development

- Creates stress response systems that will be overly reactive and/or slow to shut down.
- Increases risk of stress related disorders, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, stroke, etc.
- Children may be prone to being reactive and responding impulsively

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Brain structures: 101



- Prefrontal Cortex
- Amygdala

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Impacts of Prenatal Stress



- Increased risk for emotional problems, ADHD, Conduct Disorder, impaired cognitive development
- Stress is associated with altered brain structure and functioning

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Resilience: what is it and how do support it?



- Adaptive response to adversity
- Requires supportive relationship and opportunities for skill building
- Can be developed at any age, but earlier is better

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Pandemic Time Stressors

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Impact on care givers



- Parents have often times lost their "village"
- Financial hardships and uncertainty
- Anxiety and fear for physical health/well being
- Increase anxiety/fear about negative impacts on children and other family members

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Disruption of consistent routines and expectations



- particularly hard for younger children and older children who already struggle with adjustment to change
- Routines help children establish a world view that the world is a safe predictable place

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Reduced Access to Typical Supports



- School
- Sports
- Community activities
- Camps
- Daycares
- Church activities

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Grief/loss



- Death of family members
- Loss of connections
- Loss of expectations: graduations, significant events, etc.

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Pre-Pandemic Numbers

- 23.4% of students seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months
 - 19.5% went so far as to create a plan
 - 10% had actually made one or more attempts
 - 3.7% of those reported that their attempt resulted in the need for medical attention

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Anecdotal Observations

- Isolation
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Increase in mental health related ER visits in pediatric populations

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How can care givers support kids through the pandemic?



- SELF CARE
- Be present and engaged
- Listen
- Seek appropriate help (earlier is better)

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The dirty word: SELF-CARE



- What is self care?
- Why is it important?

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What does self-care have to do with supporting kids?



- Co-regulation
- Teaching/modeling

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Basics of Self-care

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Sleep



- Adequate quantity AND Quality
- Sleep Hygiene Tips:
 - Routine
 - Eliminate Blue light
 - Sleep Cool
 - Resist the Urge to Self-medicate

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Nutrition and Hydration



- Research is clear that proper nutrition supports mental and behavioral health.
- Dehydration increases your risk of depression and anxiety.

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Adequate Body Movement



- Impacts mood
- Impacts sleep
- Bonus if activity is outdoors

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Engage in Supportive Relationships



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Induce Relaxation/Build positive experiences



- Hobbies
- Interests
- Meditation, deep breathing
- Activities that replenish and restore

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Monitor and clean up your thinking



- Tune into you thoughts/feelings: Negative focus? Worry focus? Negative self-talk?
 - Journaling
- Reach out for support
- Adjust your focus
 - Practicing mindfulness
- Challenge negative self-talk

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Age Specific Considerations

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Young Children: the “unseen”



- more in tune that we are aware
- Routines, Routines, Routines!
- Can't always hide stress from them
 - communicate hope and optimism
 - Age appropriate discussions
- communicate stress in the form of behaviors and skill regression
- The power of unstructured play
- co-regulation

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Teens



- Significantly impacted by disruption of social life
 - “Normal” development: high value on being with peers
- Specific coping strategies:
 - Open communication
 - Sleep, Nutrition, Exercise
 - Creative Socialization: if can't be in person-encourage reaching out to friends via phone, face time, Zoom, etc.

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Signs my kid may be struggling:



- Significant and/or sustained Regression
- New behavioral issues
- Sleeping problems (too much or too little)
- mood swings
- New academic problems

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Seeking appropriate help



- Support through the schools
- Evaluations
- Counseling services
 - Telehealth
 - In person
- EAPs
- Consulting Pediatrician or family physician

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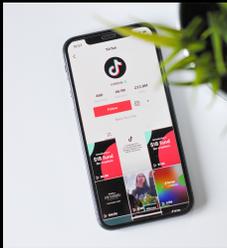
Parent concerns: What about Screen Time?



- ABCD study findings
- American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations
 - Develop a family plan for screen time

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Parent Concerns: What about Social Media?



- The positives
 - gives teens a way to stay socially connected during time of physical distancing
 - kids that struggle with social skills, social anxiety and face to face interactions may find connection and support (caveat)
 - marginalized groups may find more access to support outside of what is immediately available in their community (i.e. LGBTQ youth, those with MH disorders, etc.)
- The cons:
 - cyberbullying
 - focusing on "likes"
 - fake friends
 - constant comparisons
 - less time spent in face to face interactions-if lacking social skills, may avoid developing these
 - "support" for undesirable behaviors (i.e. self-harming, substance use, etc.)

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More Questions?

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