Social Isolation and Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Many students have been or continue to be isolated at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most have also been exposed to frightening information about the pandemic on TV and online. Some have been directly impacted or even suffered the loss of a loved one as a result of Covid-19. These experiences, along with the anxiety of the unknown, can result in grief and trauma. "Since the start of the pandemic, the National Alliance on Mental Illness has heard from many young adults experiencing anxiety and depression, which the organization attributes partly to social isolation. The group has cautioned parents and teachers to look for warning signs, including severe risk-taking behavior, significant weight loss, excessive use of drugs or alcohol and drastic changes in mood."
Source: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/health/covid-teenagers-mental-health.html

What is Social Isolation?

Social Isolation is a lack of social connections and an absence of relationships with family, friends, neighbors, peers and/or society at large. When socially isolated, children and adolescents are more likely to experience high rates of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

Why is it a problem?

o   Studies have found established links between loneliness and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.[1]
o   There has been a 22% decline in college enrollment from 2019 to 2020.[2]
o   Teens between 14 and 17 years-old that spend 7+ hours a day online are twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression.[3]

Recognizing Youth Experiencing Problems

Whether students are attending school traditionally or virtually, students may have difficulty focusing on their schoolwork or completing assignments. To effectively address students' academic needs, their social-emotional needs must be met to help avoid feelings of depression and/or hopelessness. It is important to pay close attention to changes in student's participation level in class or drastic grade changes.

Using Trauma-Informed Principles

Key principles in trauma-informed care state that students benefit from opportunities to regain a sense of personal safety and may need help or assistance with self-regulation. While it is important for students to have structure and hold them to high academic standards, it is also important for students to build relationships, make connections, and know that others care about their well-being. Being flexible and empathetic is key when holding students accountable. A student's distractibility and inability to complete assignments may be due to a personal or home situation; however, sharing this can be difficult. Students may feel vulnerable and embarrassed to share, which then perpetuates their isolation.

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1.   Teens in Covid Isolation: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/health/covid-teenagers-mental-health.html
2.   National Student Clearinghouse. https://www.studentclearinghouse.org/blog/high-school-class-of-2020-college-enrollments-decline-22-compared-to-2019-class/
3.   Twenge, J. M. & Campbell, W. K., *Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study*. Preventive Medicine Reports, Volume 12, 2018, Pages 271-283, ISSN 2211-3355. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003.

Resiliency and Relationships

For students to cope with trauma and to overcome feelings of social isolation, it is critical for them to find ways to connect with others. It is important to allow students opportunities to see, hear, and interact with each other and their teacher. Here are some ways educators can connect with students:

o Take turns sharing one tough moment and one hopeful moment of the day.
o Create conferencing sessions for students and/or opportunities to connect privately with School Counselors or other Safe Adults.
o Schedule a virtual scavenger hunt that allows students to see, hear, and interact with each other and their teacher.
o Assign groupwork or start a book club to provide students the opportunity to collaborate.
o Find the positive and share inspirational stories with students to help foster hope.
o Have students share positive affirmations and/or things that they are grateful for each day.
o Encourage spreading Kind Vibes to others.
o Provide students with healthy coping strategies.

Supporting Students at Home

When children are stressed, they may have difficulty controlling their emotions and communicating effectively, especially with adults. However, connections with adults at home are more important than ever during difficult or stressful times. Encourage parents or guardians to make time each day to be available to talk, play, do an activity together, or just be in the same room and help them understand signs of stress to watch for. Signs of stress look different based on age and developmental level, but may be displayed as:

o Changes in sleeping, eating, or other normal habits/behaviors
o Headaches, stomach aches, weight loss, or other physical complaint.
o Risk-taking behavior, use of drugs or alcohol, or drastic changes in mood.
o Spending large amounts of time alone.

Additional Resources

In addition to concerns about youth mental health, many children have been isolated at home with an abuser. Many organizations report a decrease in child abuse reports since the pandemic began and children were out of school. Now more than ever, it is critical that all youth be provided with personal safety education. **MBF Prevention Education Programs** educate and protect children and teens from all types of bullying, abuse, and victimization. MBF also provides *MBF Mental Health Matters*, supplemental lessons for *MBF Child Safety Matters*® and *MBF Teen Safety Matters*® that address mental and emotional health and substance use and abuse. They are developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and include the same MBF 5 Safety Rules to educate and empower students to develop coping skills, recognize mental health issues, prevent substance abuse and learn how to seek help for themselves or a friend. For additional information, support, and resources, visit www.mbfpreventioneducation.org.

Resources for Educators

https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/learn-more/online-training/
https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/resource-type/educator-resources/
https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/news_item/ten-ways-overcome-barriers-student-engagement-online/
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/trauma_informed_school_strategies_during_covid-19.pdf

Resources for Parents

https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/learn-more/online-training/
https://www.mbfpreventioneducation.org/resource-type/parent-resources/
https://parentandteen.com/coping-skills/
https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/education-awareness/shareable-resources-on-coping-with-covid-19.shtml
https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/stress.html