

MENTORING AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

The Role of Strong Relationships in Supporting Positive Mental Well-Being for All Young People



Cover Art by Abigail, 9th Grade Carmichaels Student

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I. Introduction

Mental well-being is an essential component of a person's overall health – mental health *is* health! Mental health has been top of mind for many of us lately, especially when it comes to the young people in our lives. According to Mental Health America's "The State of Mental Health in America" report, more than 2.5 million youth in our country have severe depression. A global pandemic, gun violence, social unrest and the prevalence of social media platforms are just a few issues exacerbating youth mental health challenges today.



Mental health challenges are on the rise for youth. No other age group has seen significant increases in the number of mental illnesses and suicide rates as high as our nation's young people have. While the COVID-19 pandemic was a leading cause in recent diagnoses of mental illness, the **Surgeon General's 2021 Report** underscores that mental illnesses were an issue for youth even prior to the pandemic. 1 in 5 US children ages 3 to 17 reported having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder prior to any mention of the pandemic. In 2019, the number of high school students admitting to having persistent feelings of hopelessness or sadness increased by 40% compared to 2009. In that same year, **1 in 6 youth** reported making a suicide plan, and estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics suggest that there were more than 6,600 deaths by suicide in the 10-24 age group in 2020.

BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth are at even greater risk for mental health challenges. **Mental Health America** reported that 17% of African Americans, 15% of Latinx/Hispanic Americans, 13% of Asian Americans, 23% of Native Americans/Alaskan Natives, and 25% of Multiracial individuals suffer from a mental illness. They also **shared** that 39% of LGBTQ+ youth have reported having a mental illness.

As much as things seem to be in a never-ending state of change, one thing remains constant: **the power of relationships**. Now more than ever, many of us are realizing the important role relationships play in our lives. Connection is critical, especially for young people who have been dealing with isolation and massive upheaval in their daily routines.

Relationships play a large part in helping youth feel supported. That's why it's important for caring adults to know *how* to show up for the young people in their lives – and that's what this guide is for! We'll share information and resources about youth mental health and the unique role adults have in supporting wellness for all young people. In addition to the resources we include throughout this guide, check out our website:

[MentoringPittsburgh.org](https://mentoringpittsburgh.org). You'll find additional information on relationships, youth mental health and our Mentor Chat podcast.

II. Mental Health and Relationships as a Protective Factor

While not a cure-all for mental illness or challenges, relationships can be an important protective factor when it comes to supporting youth mental health and well-being. When a young person is surrounded by caring adults, they have an infrastructure of support to lean on during challenging times. In offering support, adults can listen, reassure and encourage. However, it's important to note that mentors should not be diagnosing or trying to treat mental health issues or challenges. In instances where professional support is needed, mentors should make referrals and connections to proper professional support and resources.



“It’s always good to be there for your friends and family. Being there for them is the biggest and main priority...building relationships with the people around you is a big thing.”

--Student Mental Health Advocate

We all have a role to play in building and nurturing caring relationships for young people – and that happens everywhere – in formal, structured programs, at school and out in the community! In fact, every caring adult has the opportunity to offer mentor-like support to the young people in their lives. We call this Everyday Mentoring ®! You can learn more about it [here](#) and you can even sign up for weekly tips to help you become more intentional in your interactions with the kids you see regularly.

Peer relationships are another huge source of support for young people. In a peer relationship, youth can ask a trusted friend for advice or lean on them to lend a listening ear. Sometimes peer support makes people feel the most comfortable since they are talking with someone who is on the same level as they are.

“Well-being looks like being able to do things and not making excuses to do everyday things. I’ve always struggled with my mental health, so from personal experience, I know that you may not really have the motivation to do anything. I would make excuses to not brush my teeth, shower, or even eat, so being able to get up and do those everyday necessities is GOOD mental health!”

-- Student Mental Health Advocate

III. Program Spotlight: UpStreet



UpStreet provides individual outpatient therapy and therapeutic groups in schools and in partnership with other youth-serving organizations. This Pittsburgh-based program offers a live chat on its website where young people can talk to a therapist in real time without needing to be an existing client or needing to schedule ahead of time. This is a great resource not just for youth, but also for parents, youth-serving professionals and school staff, who can use the chat to ask questions or seek guidance. UpStreet also has a peer mentoring program.

UpStreet centers youth voice through its Youth Advisory Board – consulting them on everything from how their website looks to what questions their chatbot should ask. The program also activates the power of peer mentoring by training and supporting youth mentors who then provide support to their youth mentees via text message.

UpStreet carries its programming into local schools by facilitating therapeutic groups. Topics include healthy relationships, trauma, grief and loss, emotion regulation, and mindfulness.



To learn more about UpStreet and its programming, visit UpStreetPGH.org.

IV. Championing Relationships to Support Youth Mental Health

Caring adults don't have to be medical professionals or licensed clinicians to support a young person's mental health and well-being. Below are some tips to help all adults center relationships to support positive youth mental health. (Source: [Protecting Youth Mental Health-The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#))

1. **Practice empathy:** Pay attention to how young people are expressing their feelings. Offer support by validating their feelings and emotions.
2. **Listen without judgment:** Allow young people to share without making any judgements or trying to offer a solution.
3. **Model "self-care":** Young people pay attention to and model behaviors of adults. If they see you modeling good habits (exercising, sleeping, eating balanced meals, attending doctor appointments, etc.), then they are likely to learn from you and adopt those behaviors.
4. **Encourage healthy relationships with peers:** Peers can be a tremendous support in creating a sense of belonging and acceptance.
5. **Promote healthy use of technology:** Encourage social media breaks. Ask young people about how they are spending their time on social media.
6. **Be a mental health advocate in the community:** Talk openly about matters of mental health. Advocate for more funding for youth-serving programs.
7. **Pay attention to warning signs and seek appropriate help if needed:** Pay attention to body language and change in mood. Ask young people about their feelings.
8. **Create space for youth to express their emotions:** Ask questions that make youth feel safe to share.
9. **Reduce stigma:** Be mindful of the language you use when referring to mental health. Avoid calling behaviors "crazy."
10. **Ensure regular check-ups with a PCP:** prioritizing mental health is just as important as prioritizing physical health.

It's important for young people to have consistent and caring relationships with adults. Having someone who says, "**I see you, I hear you, and I value you,**" has the ability to transform lives.

As caring adults, our role is to be present and provide support for young people. When children are dealing with mental health challenges, don't try to diagnose what they are going through or offer comparable experiences. Instead, focus on what they need. It's important to note that support looks different for all of us -- some young people may just need a listening ear, whereas others may need to be connected with professional support. Asking youth how you can help and what they need is always more beneficial than assuming.



V. Program Spotlight: Empowering Teens to Thrive (ET3)

The Empowering Teens to Thrive (ET3) Program at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh provides wrap-around support and mentorship for youth who have been injured or impacted by community violence. The program focuses on helping youth get back to feeling healthy and happy. Dr. Alison Culyba, Sarah London LSW, and the team of ET3 mentors support teens who come to UPMC Children's Hospital after violence-related injuries and youth referred through schools and community-based programs.

Embedded within the Center for Adolescent and Young Adult Health, the multidisciplinary ET3 team engages youth and their families based on their individual needs. They connect them to medical follow-up, victim's assistance, emotional support for traumatic stress, brief trauma-focused counseling, school support, legal

advocacy and food and housing resources. They provide each youth the option to engage in one-on-one mentoring and case management services. The ET3 team functions from a healing-centered, trauma-focused lens so each family they work with is empowered to be in control of their healing process. Through mentorship, youth develop skills and harness the transformational power of supportive relationships as they work toward their goals. They continue to make connections, build relationships and provide resources within local communities to ensure all youth have the support they deserve.

To learn more about the Empowering Teens to Thrive Program, visit their [website](#) or call Sarah London, LSW, at 412-692-6269.

UPMC | CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL OF PITTSBURGH

Center for Adolescent
and Young Adult Health (CAYAH)

ET³

Empowering Teens to Thrive

Promoting safety, resilience, and well-being

VI. The Importance of Having a Plan

Unfortunately, mental health challenges can arise at any time and often with little notice. To help keep individuals calm and grounded when difficult situations happen, it's important to have a plan in place before you need it. A Mental Health Safety Plan is a great way to ensure you're prepared and it's easy to put one together with these 4 steps:

1. **Spot the Signs** - Take note of how you feel in the moment. How does your body feel? What thoughts do you have? Do you act differently?
2. **Coping Skills** - What can you do, by yourself, to try to calm down? Research and practice coping mechanisms that can be used in the moment such as **box breathing** or the **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique**.
3. **Social Support** - If you are unable to deal with your distressed mood alone, who are people you can reach out to for support? Keep a list with their names and phone numbers so you know how to contact them - the more, the better!
4. **Seek Help From Professionals** - If your problem persists, or if you have suicidal thoughts, reach out to a professional support system or ask a caring adult to connect you with one.



[Click here](#) to download a template to create your own 4-Step Mental Health Safety Plan. To maximize the benefits of using a Mental Health Safety Plan, practice your plan in a calm state of mind before using it during times of crisis.

VII. Practicing Self-Care and Establishing Healthy Habits

Practicing self-care regularly is a great way to care for ourselves and make difficult times a little easier. However, it can be easy to confuse self-care with self-soothing. Taking a bubble bath or watching TV are self-soothing techniques. Soothing techniques focus more on providing distractions and comforts during difficult times. Self-care, on the other hand, is a routine practice to help maintain good health and manage any active illnesses.

Examples of self-care include:

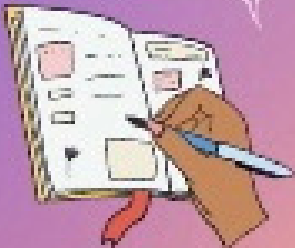
- **Keeping a gratitude journal**
- **Eating a balanced diet**
- **Planning out your week ahead of time**
- **Sleeping when it is needed**
- **Exercising regularly**
- **Focusing on the positives**

What are some other self-care practices that you can help young people incorporate into their regular routines? How can you help them stay accountable?


Practicing Mindfulness:

Gratitude Journal:
Whenever you feel burdened or stressed about a situation, try writing about things that make you feel grateful and fulfilled-- it'll remind you to be mindful about your stressors and see things in a more positive light!

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Letters to yourself/others:
Clarity and communication are important to boosting one's mental health. Rather than keeping emotions in, try writing "letter"-styled journal entries expressing your emotions in order to practice mindfulness and empathy.



*Aneesha Kandala, President of the Aavidum Club,
Susquehannock High School, PA Youth Advocacy Network Member*

VIII. Setting Healthy Social Media Boundaries

One of the biggest self-care practices any of us can do is set boundaries that honor our well-being, especially when it comes to the content we view online. Social media can have a big impact on youth mental health. Like many other factors, social media has both negatives and positives for those who use it. As caring adults, it's our job to help the young people in our lives develop social media habits that are safe and healthy. Doing so allows for youth to have a space where they can express themselves and process emotions safely.

Help youth use social media responsibly by setting boundaries that mitigate their exposure to harmful content or experiences. Research suggests that social media experiences may be more influential to youth mental health than the amount of social media use, so make sure to listen to their concerns and allow them to lead discussions around social media.

Cyberbullying, which can take place via computer, cell phone, or other electronic devices, has been up since the pandemic. It's highest among younger adolescents (<15) and trans youth.



Help teens foster safe and healthy online spaces for themselves by sharing these tips:

Use the account and privacy settings within each device, app, or network to control who can contact and interact with you and who can read your online content.

Protect your private information on public sites - avoid using your name, posting photos, etc.

Check your mood before going on social media.

Develop a relationship with a parent/trusted adult to talk about online experiences.

Prioritize supportive friends, and unfriend/block/unfollow individuals who can be toxic.

IX. Program Spotlight: Carmichaels School District

Carmichaels School District, together with The Mentoring Partnership, designed The Mikes Mentoring Program to establish, nurture and grow connections between its staff and students. The program started with a group of staff members who recognized how disconnected they had become after the pandemic and wanted to volunteer their time to build trusting relationships with their students.

The Mikes Mentoring Program was started by 21 staff members, with the complete encouragement and support of the district's superintendent and administration team. They have built the program into their curriculum for 30 minutes each week and have included every student in the middle and senior high school.

The program was designed to give students the chance to submit their top 6 mentor choices to facilitate the mentor/mentee relationship without regard for the peers within each group. Program administrators continuously collect input from staff and students to ensure they are addressing the most common concerns and challenges.

What started out as an idea to ensure each student had the support of a trusted adult has evolved to include Mindset Training, Teambuilding, Social Skills, Acts of Kindness and many more objectives.



The main purpose of the program is to create a community atmosphere that is safe, transparent, supportive, informed, non-judgmental and accepting to all students and staff. It reinforces core values needed to thrive in life and makes sure everyone has the chance to speak and be heard. The program fosters an environment where adults are teaching students how to overcome their own challenges. They connect students to the community to encourage fellowship and pride for where they live and gratitude for the people who help them succeed every day. Additionally, the program creates a space where students can contribute and learn that no matter how someone may look on the outside or what they think they know about someone, we all have sources of pain and sources of strength we can share with each other to know we are not alone.

*Artwork by Harlie, 10th Grade
Carmichaels Student*

X. Being an Advocate: Surrounding Young People With Support

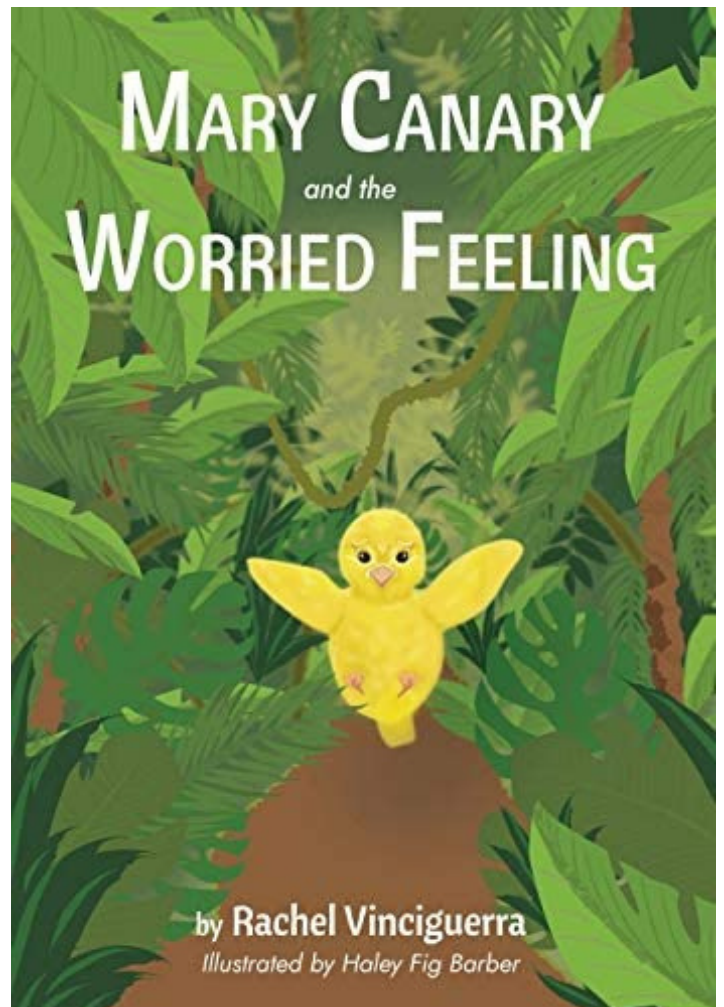
It's important to advocate for youth mental health support where young people need it most – and that's everywhere they are! How can we as caring adults better advocate for support in schools, in the community and at home? The Mentoring Partnership teamed up with Jewish Healthcare Foundation, Allegheny Family Network and WQED to host a screening of the documentary **Hiding in Plain Sight: Youth Mental Illness** (PBS). After the screening, mental health professionals serving on the screening panel shared some tips for how adults can be effective advocates for youth mental health and wellness:

1. **Youth Voice:** Create space for young people to share their needs/feelings and believe what they tell you. Validate their feelings. Don't disregard youth—listen to them, trust them and believe them.
2. **BIPOC Support:** Advocate for mental health professionals that look like BIPOC youth, live in the same community and are familiar with the struggles they are facing.
3. **Community Training:** Advocate for mental health training for police officers, teachers, guidance counselors, public servants and others so they know how to respond to a mental health crisis.
4. **Normalize Mental Health Breaks:** Champion the idea of mental health rest days, both in schools and in the workplace. Stop glamorizing the grind - rest is important!

Mary Canary and the Worried Feeling

It's never too early to encourage young people to explore their feelings! Rachel Vinciguerra, Director of National Programs with Hello Neighbor and a Technical Assistance Consultant with TMP, is the author of *Mary Canary and the Worried Feeling*. This book tackles worried feelings head-on through the eyes of Mary Canary and encourages young people ages 5-9 to learn more about understanding and managing their worries.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the book and purchase your own copy!



XI. Resources

We all deal with mental health issues differently and there is nothing to be ashamed about when reaching out for support. Free and confidential support can be found both nationally and locally.

National Resources

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline): Call or text 988, or use their **Lifeline Chat**
- Black Emotional and Mental Health Collaborative - <https://beam.community/get-help-now/>
- Black Girls Smile: <https://www.blackgirlssmile.org/>
- Crisis Text Line: Text SIGNS to 741-741
- Mental Health America: mhanational.org
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: Call 1-800-799-7233 or text LOVEIS to 22522
- National Child Abuse Hotline: Call or text 1-800-4ACHILD (1-800-422-4456)
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or **chat online**
- Trans Lifeline: 1-877-565-8860 (press 2 for Spanish)
- The Trevor Project's TrevorLifeline: 1-866-488-7386
- Work2BeWell - <https://work2bewell.org>
- MENTOR: mentoring.org

Spanish Language Resources

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline): Call or text 988
- Crisis Text Line: AYUDA to 741-741, or text 442-AYUDAME
- National Mental Health Association Help Line: 1-800-969-6642
- **BIPOC Mental Health in Spanish**

Local Resources

- Center for Victims: 866-644-2882
- Friendship Circle - (412) 224-4440 - <https://www.fcpgh.org/about-us/>
- Mental Health Association PA: <https://mhapa.org/>
- ReSolve (Allegheny County): 888-796-8255
- PA Youth Advocacy Network: <https://www.payouthadvocacy.org/>
- Stand Together Initiative: <https://standtogether.againststigma.org/>
- Steel Smiling: 412-532-9458, info@steelsmilingpgh.org
- UpStreet Pittsburgh: call or text 412-586-3732, or chat online at <https://upstreetpgh.org/#instant-chat>
- Hugh Foundation - (412) 973-5053
- The Mentoring Partnership of SW PA: mentoringpittsburgh.org

Find Treatment

- **FindTreatment.gov** - find a provider treating substance use disorders, addiction, and mental illness
- **American Psychiatric Association Foundation** - find a psychiatrist
- **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry** - find a child and adolescent psychiatrist
- **American Psychological Association** - find a psychologist
- Mental Health America - take their **MHA Screening** and find out what support might be best for you

Toolkits

- **BIPOC Mental Health Toolkit**
- **Self-Help Tools**
- **Back to School Toolkit (English and Spanish)**