

## CRISIS

## In crisis: Youth need to know help is available



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**BLOOMINGTON** — An epidemic of anguish is sickening teens and young adults in McLean County and beyond.

There are several reasons for the rise in mental health crises, Central Illinois mental health professionals told The Pantagraph.

The good news is more high school and college students are seeking help. The challenge is many

more need to know that resources are available.

"We are seeing more students in crisis and it seems to have started earlier (in the school year)," said Meghan Moser, crisis program manager with the Center for Human Services, McLean County's mental health agency.

"I want to tell students, "Don't be afraid to reach out for help," Moser said.

The evidence:

- For the Center for Human Services (CHS) crisis team, comparing the first eight months of 2014 with the first eight months of 2015, contacts with 15- to 18-year-olds increased from 60 to 71, contacts with 19- to 21-year-olds rose from 93 to 120 and contacts with 22- to 35-year-olds jumped from 319 to 372, Moser said. "And September, October and November are busier months for young adults to call in," she said.
- PATH (Providing Access to Help) fielded 16 calls during August and September 2014 from 14- to 24-year-old McLean County residents considering suicide, said Executive Director Karen Zangerle. During August and September of 2015, PATH helped 19 suicidal young people she said.
- During the three months ending Sept. 30, PATH handled 359 calls from McLean County residents of all ages contemplating suicide. "Our quarterly average in McLean County is 90," she said.
- At Illinois State University's Student Counseling Services, during the first six weeks of this semester compared with the first six weeks of fall semester 2014, there was a 23 percent increase in the number of daytime emergency contacts and a 37 percent increase in sessions of any type, said psychologist Charles Titus Boudreaux.
- At Illinois Wesleyan University's Counseling & Consultation Services, the number of students seen this semester as of Oct. 20 was 25 percent higher compared with the same time period last year, said licensed clinical psychologist Annorah Moorman. Crisis appointments are up 28.4 percent compared with the same time period last year.

"I would anticipate the numbers increasing as the stress increases as grades become more important during the second half of the semester, as the days become shorter and as the weather gets colder," she said.

Chris Cashen, licensed clinical professional counselor with OSF Behavioral Health in Normal, sees problems beginning with elementary school and junior high students.

"I get some fairly anxious kids," Cashen said. "I'm seeing some kids who are in grade school and junior high who have said, 'I'm supposed to have it all figured out.'"

An emphasis on test scores and increasing specialization in sports add up to anxious adolescents who are missing out on the diverse experiences that come with trying different activities and scheduling down time.

Down time allows kids to relax and be creative, he said. Meanwhile, an increase in social media to the detriment of face-to-face conversation mean some kids aren't learning social skills that include face-to-face conflict resolution, Cashen said.

"I tell people, 'Don't get into text or Facebook wars,'" Cashen said. "When people attack you on social media, don't respond. Talk with the person face to face."

Young people whose brains are still developing may not have coping strategies and perspective of older adults. So their mental health can go awry when their grades are tanking and they are facing numerous deadlines while dealing with relationship and family issues, financial worries worsened by the state budget crisis, societal problems including an increase in school violence and sexual identity questions.

"When you're feeling overwhelmed, you may not know where to turn," Moorman said.

Mental health issues also are more prevalent because there are more students — thanks to medication, therapy and support — who are attending college with anxiety disorder, clinical depression, mild autism and other disorders. These students may not have been able to attend college a generation ago, Moorman and Boudreaux said.

The problem is when some of those students lose their home support system, stop going to therapy or stop taking their medicine. Students need to find where counseling is available on campus and where they can get their prescriptions filled.

Moorman wants students to round out their identity.

"You are not just a letter grade and not just a time in the 100-yard dash," she said, adding she encourages students to set realistic goals and avoid being perfectionists.

"I want students to consider who they are in aspects of their lives that aren't evaluated," meaning sons, daughters, members of a particular organization, a lover of music or a particular genre of film or literature, etc., she said.

Students who need help should consider what resources are available to them, including a counselor for high school students and — for college students — their academic adviser, tutoring services, office of residential life, student health service, student counselor services, campus recreation, etc., Moorman and Boudreaux said.

Beyond school resources, students need to reach out to others who can help, including parents.

"I tell students, 'A true sign of strength is recognizing when we need help,'" Moorman said.

"Don't be afraid to reach out for help," said Moser. "Mental health is a continuum. Everyone needs help sometime."

Students need to consider what strategies have helped them in the past, Boudreaux said. It could be taking a break and going to their favorite restaurant, re-joining a registered student organization, returning to church, talking with a trusted friend, walking outside, bicycling, playing a musical instrument or writing poetry.

"People forget that our brains are organs," Boudreaux said. "We need to take care of them."

## Help is available

- Warning signs of a teenager or young adult experiencing mental health problems include sleeping too much or not enough, decreased appetite, isolating themselves from family and friends, changes in behavior such as no longer doing things they used to enjoy, increased irritability, trouble concentrating, engaging in risk-taking behavior and expressions of hopelessness.
- If your high school or college student tells you that he or she is considering suicide, take it seriously. If they don't tell you they are suicidal but you think they are, ask them. It's a myth that asking about suicide will put that thought in someone's head.
- Listen without judgment. Let them know you are there for them.
- If the person is at immediate risk, call 911 or take them to a hospital emergency department.
- Other resources include PATH at 211, Center for Human Services at 309-827-5351 and the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-TALK (8255).
- With support, therapy and appropriate medication, students can get better.

*Sources: Charles Titus Boudreaux, Chris Cashen, Annorah Moorman, Meghan Moser, Karen Zangerle*