

Dioceses acknowledge youth mental health crisis, help parents, teachers, pastors take action

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Suzanne Krumpelman, counselor at St. Joseph School in Fayetteville, Ark., reads to first graders about friendship Feb. 9, 2022, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Catholic mental health professionals and diocesan officials, young people face considerable mental health challenges — and the adults in their lives need to listen. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Travis McAfee, *Arkansas Catholic*)

(OSV News) — When pop punk band Simple Plan sing their platinum-selling hit tune “I’m Just a Kid,” adult listeners might be forgiven for thinking the lyrical angst of “I’m just a kid / and life is a nightmare” is a bit of exaggerated artistic license.

But according to Catholic mental health professionals and diocesan executives, young people face considerable mental health challenges — and the adults in their lives need to listen.

Through a variety of programs and initiatives, many dioceses are taking action to equip parents, teachers and pastors with much-needed tools to respond to a growing mental health crisis among young people.

“It was clear that there was a huge pastoral need to do something about this,” said MC Sullivan, chief health care ethicist for the Archdiocese of Boston. Sullivan told OSV News the archdiocese came up with the “Kids Healthy Minds Initiative” in response.

A school-based mental health education program in partnership with Boston’s Franciscan Children’s hospital, Kids Healthy Minds is designed to educate, support, reduce stigma and help school staff, teachers and parents to recognize early warning signs of mental illness in young people before a

situation is critical. Franciscan Children's also has a long-term care facility providing psychiatric health services for children and adolescents.

Increased exposure to violence and trauma, social media and cyberbullying, and overscheduled parents and children are all factors impacting the mental health of young people today.

A JAMA Pediatrics journal report, studying the data of 217,000 children (3-17 years old) seen at 38 U.S. children's hospitals from 2015-2020 found mental health visits to pediatric emergency departments rose an average 8% annually — far above the average 1.5% annual increase in emergency department visits overall — with 13% revisiting within six months. The top mental health diagnoses for children were suicide ideation or self-harm (28.7%); mood disorders (23.5%); anxiety disorders (10.4%) and disruptive or impulse control disorders (9.7%).

A 2019 Pew Research Center study indicated 70% of teens identified anxiety and depression as a "major problem" among people their age in their community. Pew noted these concerns were shared "across gender, racial and socioeconomic lines."

However, mental health care for youth is lagging. The Annie B. Casey Foundation noted that in 2019, "only 43% of youth ages 12 to 19 with a major depressive episode received mental health treatment."

The reasons for that can be complex, including lack of access, costs, and relationship issues.

"Hopefully, kids have a good enough relationship with their parents" to ask for help, Sullivan said. "But oftentimes they don't." Children may also be embarrassed, or don't want to burden their parents.

The Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, responded to Mental Health Awareness Month in May with a special video message from Bishop Michael F. Burbidge.

"As I travel across our diocese, I meet people of all ages dealing with this issue — so the video is to say you're not alone," Bishop Burbidge shared. The diocese is hosting a special Mass Aug. 26 dedicated to solidarity with those experiencing mental health challenges.

"I speak with counselors in our high schools and in our grade schools, and they're seeing an increase of young people needing to speak with them like never before," said Bishop Burbidge. "And that's a good thing, in many ways — young people realizing they're not alone, and there are professionals who are there to help them." Bishop Burbidge encouraged young people to "see our counselors and mental health professionals as God's gift to us."

Loneliness and isolation can complicate healing, so Bishop Burbidge is emphatic about the need for accompaniment.

"I think that's the biggest message that we have to send out: that we are not alone," he told OSV News. "God is with us, but we are here to accompany one another in the healing process. ... Let's walk together."

At the Diocese of Arlington's St. Louis Catholic School in Alexandria, Virginia, a pre-K through eighth grade school with approximately 500 students, mental health is on the classroom lesson plan throughout the year, explained counselor Jennifer Cotnoir.

"I think it's really important to teach these things to children when they're young. We don't just do it one year, and then we're done. We keep doing it, year after year," Cotnoir told OSV News. "When they're young, they're more open and willing to talk about it."

Counselors also brainstorm lists of anxiety-coping strategies with students. "It's so cool to see the list of ideas the kids will have, and always — 99.9%, maybe — prayer comes up," Cotnoir noted. "And that comes from them."

Beth Bostwick, school health and wellness coordinator in the Diocese of Arlington's Office of Catholic Schools, told OSV News any diocese can implement a basic mental health toolkit for schools.

"You start with a needs assessment. You find out what resources you do have," she said.

At a minimum, there are two widely used mental health assessment training tools Bostwick proposes all faculty and staff — and even parents — can learn from: ACE (which helps users to recognize and prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences) and SafeTalk (a suicide prevention program).

"Those are two things that are easy to implement," Bostwick said.

The key to effectively addressing kids' mental health, Bostwick emphasized, is collaboration.

"It's not a school problem. It's not a parent problem. We could argue it's a societal problem," she said. "But the solution, if we want to engage families and our faith, has got to be a collaboration between the two."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide rates among young people ages 10-24 increased 52.2% in the U.S. between 2000 – 2021.

"What COVID did was to layer a pandemic on top of an epidemic," Roy Petitfils, a counselor and author of *Helping Teens with Stress, Anxiety, and Depression: A Field Guide for Catholic Parents, Pastors, and Youth Leaders* told OSV News.

Petitfils is quick to note that "this isn't because we've got a generation of weak kids, or a generation of weak parents. That's not what this is about. We really do have a real mental health crisis on our hands."

When the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island, launched a Youth Mental Wellness Task Force in 2022, church officials also were responding to awareness of that emergency.

"It was primarily reports coming to us from national and local mental health organizations that were indicating the seriousness of this problem among our young people," said Michael Hansen, who chairs the diocesan task force, pointing to "escalating rates of depression and anxiety; suicidal ideation; and actual suicides."

The task force includes diocesan directors of programs that provide mental health services, with subcommittees for schools and parishes. Development of resources and training assist personnel to identify and respond to mental health situations.

"I'm aware that there are only a handful of dioceses that have addressed these concerns," Hansen told OSV News. "But it's certainly our hope that this effort can be generalized to dioceses across the country. Because it's certainly not limited to our diocese — it's a national epidemic."

For local churches contemplating a mental health program launch, the Boston Archdiocese's Sullivan readily invites inquiries and offers a word of encouragement.

"It's not rocket science. It just takes the will of people who are in decision-making capacities to say, 'This is a problem,'" she said. "The response to and the resolution of that problem are pretty much the same thing. And it's not expensive in terms of human or financial resources. Why are we not doing this?"

"The return on investment is immense," Sullivan said. "And more importantly, it's the living out of our values and our teaching as a Catholic Church."

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