

The Daunting Mental Health Impact of COVID

KIDS ARE ESPECIALLY HARD HIT

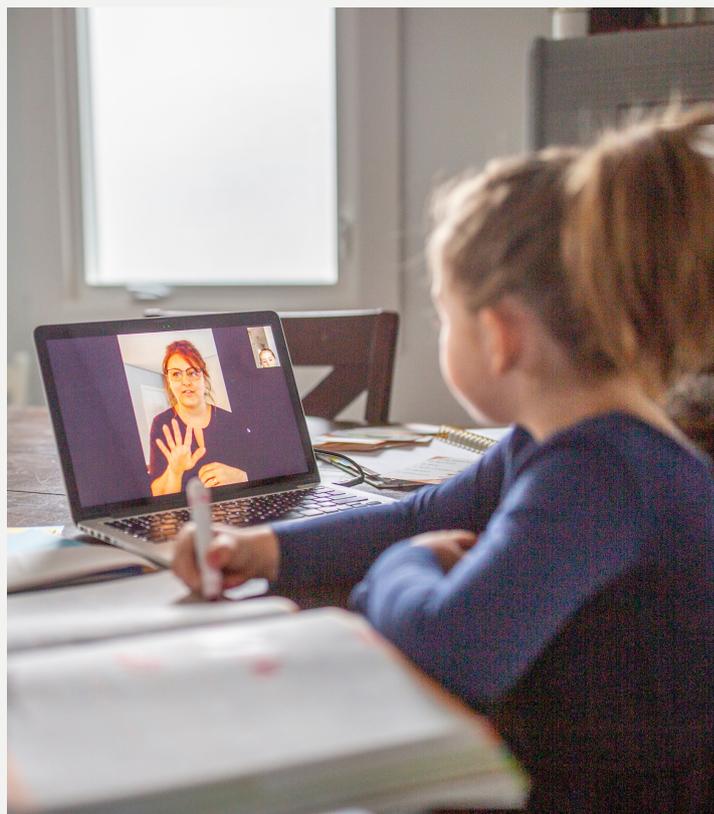
Written by Alan Johnson, NAMI Ohio

Kristan Runyan expected the break from in-person teaching due to the COVID19 pandemic would be short-lived when she gathered up her supplies and left Tecumseh Middle School in Clark County in March 2020.

She had no idea she wouldn't be returning to her classroom for four months and that "normal" wouldn't be back nearly two years later.

When teaching shifted to the virtual classroom, not all of Kristan's seventh-grade social studies students had video cameras or turned them on.

"Some of them were just a little icon on the screen," she said with sadness in her voice.



"It's like a blur. It feels like school has never ended since March 2020. As a teacher, you kind of define things by school year. That has disappeared. Our attendance sheet looks like swiss cheese."

Things feel like a blur for many people who are feeling anxious, worried, depressed, and angry. Two years into the pandemic, the deadly virus is taking a huge and sometimes unseen toll on Ohioans' mental health.

The physical damage is obvious, with deaths and hospitalizations soaring, but the mental health dangers are just as alarming.





In Schools: students are feeling stress and anxiety switching back and forth to virtual learning while losing extracurricular activities and social contacts. Teacher shortages add to the pressure as administrators are pressed into teaching duties. There is an on-going shortage of bus drivers. The unrest has spilled over to more student fights during school hours.

In Business: the workforce is depleted and staffing shortages are causing restaurants, businesses and factories to cut shifts or shut down. "Help Wanted" signs are every, yet paychecks suffer and workers fret about making ends meet.



In Healthcare: doctors, nurses, and other health workers are weary from the strain of working long hours dealing with severely ill and dying patients. They worry about their own health and that of their families.

At Home: violence has increased, with homicide rates skyrocketing and domestic violence on the rise. Drug overdose deaths are increasing.



“There is a hyper-alertness, the sense that nothing is quite predictable,” said Director Lori Criss of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. “There is a heightened sense of anticipating what could be next.”

Director Criss said there are many signs of pandemic weariness, including emotional outbursts, sleeping too little, increased risky behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse, as well as anxiety and depression.

“These are signs it’s time to reach out and connect, perhaps talking to a mental health provider to get some help,” she said.

Statewide, officials are seeing an increase in demand for mental health and substance abuse services, as well as a jump in emergency room visits.

The state is trying to build mental health care resources in a variety of ways, including using \$5 million in federal CARES Act funding to give financial awards to 115 organizations to invest in their workforce.

Behavioral health centers can use the money to pay retention bonuses of up to \$2,500 to medical, administrative, and various treatment professionals who stay on the job during the federal COVID-19 public health emergency.

But help is a phone call or text away.

People can call the Ohio Careline – (800) 720-9616 – staffed by behavioral health care professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“It doesn’t have to be a crisis,” Director Criss said. “It’s a great place for parents to ask questions and get tips if they see their kids aren’t like themselves.”

Another free option is the confidential Crisis Text line, where texting “4HOPE” to 741741 will result in connection to a crisis counselor within five minutes.

Ohio's CareLine is available 24/7 and is staffed with licensed behavioral health professionals.

1-800-720-9616

Ohio Department of Health
Ohio Mental Health & Addiction Services

COVID-19 AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

“At the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Summit County, “the crisis lines are lighting up,” said Executive Director Leslie Powlette Stoyer.

“There are really long wait times for children to get help. We’re seeing a lot of kids, particularly in the Akron City School District, who were remote last year, and now they are in school and showing lots of aggressive behaviors and other problems. It’s very concerning.”

Wait times for kids can be up to three months, Leslie said.

“We’re working with what we have. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of mental health care providers and an influx of kids and adults into the system who were managing before the pandemic hit.”

“I’m an eternal optimist,” Leslie said. “This is making people recognize the need to get help for a mental health condition when they didn’t before. We’re getting the people with acute needs to the top of the list.”

TROUBLE BREWING WITH KIDS

Jose Flores worries that school-age students have lost so much because of the pandemic.

As director of Community Education and Prevention Services for The LACADA Way agency in Lorain, Flores and his staff have a front-row seat for what’s going on with youth in the county.

“We know the kids are impacted when you take them out of the structured school environment. Kids don’t rely solely on schools for education but also for learning boundaries and social interaction. If there are some unhealthy things going on in their home like neglect, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, it’s even worse.

Students are missing the positive influence of a teacher, coach or counselor at school, Flores said. “This has an unfortunate side effect on kids’ mental wellness.”

“We’re seeing kids in schools with very complicated mental health conditions.”

For students looking to move on to college from high school, the track for scholarships or financial aid is now rocky, Flores said.

“We’re in a tight spot,” he said. “But there is hope. The state recognizes the capacity shortage and is putting more money into the system so schools can have help from prevention specialists.”

KIDS LEARNING TO COPE

Kayla Kubi, 13, and Cameron Evans, 17, are like so many students in Ohio and the nation who are facing a world very different from what it was just two years ago.

“I struggle with losing motivation,” said Kayla, an eighth-grade student at Johnson Park Middle School in Columbus. “I am easily distracted. But I’m back in school and trying to stay on track.”

“A huge impact on me was not being able to play my sport, basketball, which is very therapeutic for me,” said Cameron, a senior at Canal Winchester High school. “It really affected my mental health. I was really angry, and I was upset and really frustrated, so I had to find another outlet. So I resorted to video games.”

Kayla and Cameron have struggled but have benefitted from being members of the Franklin County Youth Council <https://franklincountyyelp.org/fcyc> an organization that empowers youth people with the help of a broad range of community agencies including NAMI and United Way, among others.

“There’s so much uncertainty for children,” said Susie Shipley-Norwood, director of the council. “Most children were used to consistency five days a week, but two years later, we’re still in this place of uncertainty and they don’t know what to anticipate.”

While things have improved somewhat, Susie said many schools often don’t have enough teachers or bus drivers. Kayla, Cameron and other members of the Youth Council have taken special training in mental health assistance and suicide prevention. They also made and delivered “care packages” for patients at hospitals.

Cameron said he listens to music to calm his mind – and often cleans the house while doing it!

“I had a couple of friends that struggled with mental health in the last couple of years,” he said. “Sometimes people just need someone to talk to.”

COVID19 SILVER LINING

While a silver lining is hard to see in the current pandemic, everyone interviewed for this article sees things improving, if slowly.

“We are all much more attuned to mental health,” Director Criss said. “It’s okay not to be okay, and it’s okay to ask for help.”

Director Criss sees the advent of increased use of telemedicine in mental health as a positive development that will outlast the pandemic.

Back in the trenches of teaching in New Carlisle schools, Kristan Runyan still frets about her kids – the now-seventh graders who haven’t had a normal school year since graduating from fourth grade. All middle school youngsters still can’t eat lunch together because of COVID19 restrictions.

As a 17-year veteran teacher, Kristan is committed to her job and her students. She sees the face of unstable home lives showing up more in the classroom. A few parents died from COVID19. Overall, it has been a “huge emotional trauma,” she said.

But at the end of the day, there is hope - The Hope Squad, an extra-curricular group Kristan runs for middle schoolers to help them express their feelings and get a more positive outlook.

“I do feel like things are getting better,” Kristan said. “We’re back in school, and kids are getting a chance to be kids sometimes.” “Mental health as a true issue has come to the forefront, and it’s not seen as a weakness. My kids are a lot more willing to discuss it when they are feeling overwhelmed.”

Resources to find help:

*NAMI Ohio HelpLine:
1.800.686.2646*

*Ohio CareLine:
1.800.720.9616*

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
1.800.273.8255*

*Ohio Crisis Text Line:
Text Keyword 4HOPE to 741 741*

visit www.namiohio.org for more info