**This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at www.ksre.k-state.edu/news/stories/2021/09/teen-mental-health-during-COVID.html**

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**Experts share insight on how COVID-19 has affected teens’ mental health**

One state group sees increase of kids who have not previously sought treatment

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Even as many parts of society begin to return to near normal routines, mental health specialists continue to monitor how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the mental health of Americans.

Elaine Johannes, the Kansas Health Foundation Distinguished Professor of Community Health at Kansas State University, is especially interested in how teenagers are adjusting to new rules and ways of doing things.

“Many of us have had kids at home and we’ve raised some teenagers into adulthood and we understand what happens in that developmental stage where maybe the young person is not sure of their identity, not sure of how well they’re performing compared to peers, and maybe they’re not comfortable in their own skin because they’re growing so quickly – and that all creates anxiety,” Johannes said.

In the first few months of the pandemic, the National 4-H Council commissioned a survey that concluded that more than 7 in 10 kids between the ages of 13-19 are struggling with their mental health.

Those numbers have seemingly not gotten better in the year since, as the global pandemic creeps toward two years of changed routines.

James Roberson, the vice president of programs and innovation for KVC Hospitals -- a system that provides children’s psychiatric treatment at facilities in Kansas City, Wichita and Hays – said his organization is seeing an increase of kids who have never sought treatment for mental health previously.

“The scary part is what we know about mental health,” he said. “It's a little different from physical health because we don’t just look at the organic. We look at the context of the child in their environment, and the pandemic has really changed all of their environments.”
Roberson said support groups like KVC are working to become more visible in communities, break down the stigma of mental illness and work directly with families.

“I have not met a family yet that has regretted having their child engage in therapy,” he said. “The opportunity to get your child in front of a professional who can do an assessment and tell you that everything is okay, keep doing what you’re doing -- or to let you know that what they’re feeling is clinical -- I think that is really valuable.”

Johannes said parents are key to their child’s mental well-being.

“It’s really up to the adults to understand their role in modeling, coping, talking about and helping the child to become resilient,” she said. “It’s the adults that can look for positive behaviors that they can support.”

Roberson added: “You don’t have to sit back and say, ‘is my child resilient or not resilient?’ No matter how old your child is, they’re actively developing resilience. If you’re present in their lives and you are helping them navigate the problems that they’re facing at school or in relationships…every time you help them solve problems, you’re building their resilience.”

Johannes said K-State Research and Extension is working to provide a mental health curriculum to Kansas 4-H Clubs that is a self-guided study on how children can recognize behavioral health in themselves.

KVC Hospitals also is hosting a free, three-part webinar series beginning Sept. 13 to help families recognize and cope with mental health issues. That series also is offering free continuing education units for professionals.

Recognizing and treating mental health, “is just not that clean and simple,” Roberson said.

“We want people to have a sophisticated understanding of how they’re experiencing the world and how people around them support that. And I think teens are ready for this; they’re eager. We as providers and as a state system owe them solutions so that they can be their best selves and live a happy, long life.”

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
KVC Hospitals, https://hospitals.kvc.org
Kansas 4-H, https://www.kansas4-h.org/

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