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Adolescent Girls' Mental Health

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH ARE INCREASING, and with rising concern due to the effects of the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these mental health issues present themselves differently between men and women. Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable to having their symptoms of anxiety and depression overlooked before their daily lives are majorly impacted. By increasing conversations around mental health and implementing regular screenings, young women will be more likely to receive the help they need to treat mental health issues.

Mental health issues are presenting themselves in children and youth at younger and younger ages. According to Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth, Texas, as well as studies from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), suicide rates among 10–24 year olds have increased 57.4 percent from 2007 to 2018 (Worth). Presumably, rates have been exacerbated by the current pandemic life that we are all adjusting to, where children are facing more isolation, anxiety, and fear as their daily lives have been disrupted for more than a year. By the end of October 2020, Cook Children's saw 192 children for attempted suicide, while during the same period of time in 2015, the hospital saw 88 patients (Worth). These statistics from the hospital point to a haunting truth, where many children are driven to suicidal ideation, which may point to an underlying increase in mental health issues for younger children. According to Dr. Heidi Nelson, a professor at the Oregon Health & Science University School of Medicine, "anxiety occurs in women at nearly twice the rate of men . . . hormones play a role and women and girls face unique societal pressures that can put them at greater risk for anxiety, including sexual harassment and assault" (McCammon). This trend has been seen in Cook Children's Medical Center data, where the vast majority of patients

treated for self-harming are girls, typically between the ages of 13 and 15, and there are patients as young as 4 years old talking about wanting to die (Worth). The exact reasoning behind these trends is not completely clear. Some claim that the uptick is solely due to an increase in technology and access to social media at younger ages, while other researchers are not so confident in that assessment, even though social media use is a contributing factor explicitly cited by many children and youth (Worth). However, researchers agree that increased mental health issues for children and youth are a public health crisis and that people need to be united in order to combat this crisis. As we see young children and youth having more mental health struggles, it is important to create points of intervention and to help adolescents understand the feelings they are having in order to receive proper treatment.

Mental health issues disproportionately affect women and girls. In our society today, discussing these struggles is often seen as a taboo topic, or as being too mature for children and young people to discuss. At the same time, these issues are struggles that many children and young people face every single day. Sometimes discussing difficult topics such as mental health is seen as a risk that could lead to increased ideation of self-harm or suicidal thoughts. “Research into sensitive topics, while encompassing potential risks, can be of great importance for policy and practice with children and young persons, whereas neglecting such research may contribute to avoidance and stigma at a societal level” (Demkowicz). A well known TV series and novel, *13 Reasons Why*, controversial for a myriad of reasons this analysis will not go into, highlights the disconnect between youth and adults on these issues, and how discussion between the two groups rarely overlaps. As a society “we need to engage with adolescents in meaningful and equitable dialogue, instead of placing adult-based assumptions onto youth behavior. By displaying cultural humility in social work practice with adolescents, we may begin to repair our current, adult-centric systems of intervention, making them a place where youth can expect to find themselves supported instead of further victimized” (Jenney). By creating positive environments for conversations surrounding mental health, children and youth will be more comfortable and able to communicate their feelings in a way that will foster a healthy understanding of their own mental and emotional health in the future. Research has found that “asking children and young people about their thoughts and feelings relating to mental health does not appear to cause damage or long-term distress, but instead can be a valuable experience that allows emotional reflection” (Demkowicz). These valuable experiences empower

girls to understand what they are feeling and to create healthy coping mechanisms as they grow older.

These conversations need to occur, as our society has seen that “misogyny and sexual harassment appear to be pervasive among young people and certain forms of gender-based degradation may be increasing, yet a significant majority of parents do not appear to be talking to young people about it” (Jenney). These disconnects only perpetuate gender inequality within society and contribute to the mental health issues that girls face. By having difficult discussions with children and youth, we are equipping them with the tools necessary to be successful and to manage their mental and emotional health effectively in this turbulent world. Women are more often survivors of sexual assault and face more damaging effects of misogyny, so these trends present themselves as a greater threat to women and girls. In an androcentric world, their needs are often overlooked in preparing screening and treatment plans. Continuing to overlook these issues “can be disabling for some patients, interfering with relationships, education and career opportunities” (McCammon). Mental health issues currently permeate the world we live in, and by discussing them we can increase the accessibility and quality of available screenings.

Improving access to mental-health screenings and the quality of these screenings can help young girls receive proper treatment. New guidelines have been released by the Women’s Preventive Services Initiative that recommend primary care doctors and other healthcare providers screen all female patients for anxiety disorders beginning at age 13. This recommendation comes alongside a 2016 recommendation for depression screening for all people, starting at age 16 (McCammon). By actually implementing these regular screenings, healthcare providers will be able to identify girls at risk for these increasingly common mental health issues so that these girls can receive more effective treatment and intervention to stop these issues from having such a large impact on their day-to-day lives. One research group has discovered that increasing the readability of youth mental-health monitoring surveys and providing these surveys within a school context, rather than solely a medical context, increases accessibility to surveys and allows more students to receive help and learn how to converse about their emotional health (Demkowicz). Such conversations will help empower girls to communicate effectively and to be transparent about how they are feeling in order to receive the best possible treatment. When implementing these surveys within a school context, it would be useful to provide easy access to resources for students who realize they need to reach out. Easier access

to screenings and regular self-reflective surveys would help alleviate the struggles of medical professionals who have trouble identifying anxiety in their patients. “The group is recommending routine screening because patients who struggle with anxiety often don't raise the issue with their doctors,” (McCammon). Improving conversations surrounding mental health is an important step to decrease social stigma and to have meaningful dialogue between different groups in order to make treatment plans more efficient for individuals that are in need of help.

By decreasing the stigma surrounding mental health issues, more people will be able to receive needed treatment to improve their quality of life. “Integrating gender in all aspects of quality improvement is necessary and any planning of mental health services or structures must include “women-friendly” aspects at the drawing board rather than as an afterthought. An important step would be open dialogues between different stakeholders about what constitutes a gender-sensitive mental health service for that city or region, as cultural issues and social realities may be different in each context” (Chandra). This is especially important when addressing mental health issues in communities that are unfamiliar or marginalized, where it is important to understand cultural contexts and the stigma surrounding these sometimes sensitive topics. Cultural context will provide important frameworks to truly address the root problems surrounding the stigma of mental-health struggles.

Adolescent mental health issues are becoming a more widespread problem, especially affecting young girls who are at greater risk due to increased use of social media and other societal factors. In order to combat these issues, we need to increase discussions surrounding mental health and increase trust between youth and adults to have these difficult conversations. By implementing more regular screenings in both a medical and school setting, more children and youth will be able to recognize warning signs to help them identify and receive treatment for mental health struggles. These issues affect adolescent girls at higher rates than boys, and by identifying why these issues are more prominent, communities can work towards prevention and early identification tools to provide girls with equal access to care. Mental health issues affecting adolescent girls are more prominent, therefore they require more specific recognition and treatment to help this especially vulnerable population to truly reach their full potential.

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