

Promoting Youth Mental Health and Well-Being through Resiliency and Community Connection



The recognition that you have lived through hard times also drives you to develop deeper empathy, seek more intimacy, value life's sweeter moments, and treasure your connectedness to others and to the world at large.

- Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal (2015)

On Mar 3, 2021, a Youth Town Hall entitled “Promoting Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Through Resiliency and Community Connection” engaged youth leaders from the City of Irvine’s High School Youth Action Team (HSYAT), along with parents and other community leaders, to discuss the mental health impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on high school students. The HSYAT panel discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted them, what resources they use to cope, and what their adult allies can do to support their wellbeing. The Youth Town Hall event was held over Zoom. Participants included district officials, parents from the community, youth panelists from Irvine’s HSYAT, and a variety of school staff and community mental health experts. Breakout sessions were held in the middle of the event to engage three specific affinity groups: youth, parents, and school personnel.

The purpose of this document is to capture one group of students’ perspectives on mental health maintenance during the pandemic; to disseminate the findings across the region; and to build upon this event with continued investment in student voice, including developing additional resources and events.

In general, the event’s youth panelists drew attention to the importance of active listening skills (both between adults and teens, and among teen peer groups) and to the importance of strong community bonds as coping mechanisms during periods of crisis.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUTH IN LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS:

In the U.S. approximately 2.5 percent of students do not live in a stable residence. In the City of Orange specifically, 8.8 percent of households are considered overcrowded, compared to 8.2 percent in California more generally.

Children from lower-income families are more likely to struggle with homework and online courses due to their insecure housing circumstances. For example, in the City of Orange, 26.8 percent of residents encounter “severe housing problems,” compared to 26.4 percent in California more generally and 18 percent in the U.S. as a whole¹.

Children from low-income households are already disproportionately impacted by chronic absenteeism. Missing months of school due to unstable housing or technology will have a far more serious impact. Exacerbating this issue is the student-teacher ratio in the City of Orange, which is 25:7, compared to 23:3 in California overall, and 16:5 in the U.S. generally.

Children from low-income families face challenges when it comes to homeschooling as they may lack access to a computer, or even stable housing.

(from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2021/03/27/covid-19-has-exacerbated-child-poverty-forcing-a-long-overdue-policy-focus/?sh=4a785989740c>):

¹ Conduent Healthy Communities Institute. Community Dashboard. Orange County’s Healthier Together. 2021. <http://www.ohealthiertogether.org/indicators/index/...>

It should be noted that this Youth Town Hall engaged youth from only one of 28 school districts within Orange County, so their needs may not reflect the needs of all student populations. Most of the youth panelists who presented at this event were well-resourced, both at home and at school. In less well-resourced families, schools, and communities, it may not be feasible to implement all the recommendations. But much of the advice these young people offered is relevant for anyone supporting students' return to school.

FINDINGS

- **Physical health challenges encountered as a result of COVID-19. The most commonly noted were:**
 - Irregular diet and sleep patterns;
 - COVID-19 infections, especially for those with family in the healthcare industry;
- **Mental health challenges experienced:**
 - Isolation and disconnection from peers and loved ones;
 - Frustration, especially related to missing out on life milestones (e.g., graduation, school-sponsored social events, and down time with friends);
 - Mood fluctuations: sadness, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation;
 - Increased social media consumption, which students identified as adverse because they felt a tendency to compare themselves negatively to others, thereby internalizing the unrealistic expectations mentioned below;
- **Family and peer challenges:**
 - Tendency of adults to invalidate a teen's feelings, especially with sentiments like, "if you think you're having a hard time now, just wait until you enter the workforce."
 - Unrealistic expectations, such as the expectation to succeed and thrive academically, and the expectation to be happy and carefree;
 - For example, students noted a key frustration with adults who dismissed their stressors with some variation of the sentiment: "you're too young to be stressed;"
 - Unhealthy competition among peers and a tendency to compare each other's struggles. Some students reported a tendency to minimize their own struggles with the pandemic because they knew others had it worse;
 - Toxic hustle and grind culture — the tendency to prioritize external achievement to the detriment of internal well-being;;

Despite these challenges, the HSYAT panelists demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and resilience, and shared a wealth of information about how adults could help, as well as how teens could develop their own healthy coping strategies. The recommendations below came directly from the student panelists, and reflect their personal experiences with parents, teachers, and peers; the resources they have accessed in their schools and communities; and their own contributions, in the form of a podcast, to the wellness community.

METHODOLOGY

This resource was compiled based on reviews of the Zoom recording of the Youth Town Hall; the Zoom transcript of the main session; and conversations with presenters and panelists. The transcript included speakers' words as well as chatbox conversations, both of which are summarized and synthesized into this document. The Youth Town Hall included breakout sessions which were not recorded, but detailed slide decks can be accessed [here](#). Included in the Resources section of this document are some of the key resources referenced in these presentations.

HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP TEENS:



- Let your teen know that their mental health comes first.
- Moderate expectations for productivity.
 - Pushing your teen to excel amid rapidly changing circumstances is physically and mentally exhausting.
- Allow time for rest and reflection.
 - Make sure your teen is getting adequate sleep and downtime.
- Show teens you care about their mental health and wellbeing.
 - Involve teens in your own healthy daily activity (for example, invite them on a walk around your neighborhood, although avoid pressuring them if they need time alone).
- Show empathy.
 - When a teen come to an adult with a problem or challenge, offer a choice and ask “do you want help with problem-solving, or would you prefer comfort and a listening ear?”
- Animal therapy: teens without animals in their own houses might enjoy taking a neighbor’s dog for a walk or making friends with a neighbor’s cat. This creates a connection of care and support for teens’ emotions. For more information on this suggestion, see the Triple P Free Parenting Support link in the Resources section below.

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP TEENS:



- Remind teens that they have a larger social ecosystem, including their teachers and their school counseling department.
- Provide safe breaks throughout your class time and encourage teens to use a brain tool (such as a stress ball) if they are feeling dysregulated.
- Check in and connect with students who are struggling with transition and change. Even just asking how a teen is doing with the transition back to in-person schooling can help.
- Provide as much predictability in your students’ schedule as possible.
- Provide a healthy snack to students or give them a few minutes to put their heads down and rest.

HOW PEERS CAN HELP EACH OTHER:



- Share favorite YouTube videos on health and wellness.
- Share healthy podcasts, including the [Youth Action Talks podcast](#).
- Encourage friends to journal or draw about life challenges.
- Check in with friends and acquaintances and provide a listening ear.
- Use the “Student Mental Wellness Positive Self Talk Coping Cards.”

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- How can you help a friend who is struggling? What resources can you provide?
- What types of resources do our school counselors provide?
- How does bullying factor into COVID-19 right now?
- How can we be a better look-out for our friends?
- For those who don't have the best relationships with their parents, who should they seek out for support instead?
- What are the silver linings you see from the pandemic experience?
- What have you learned about yourself during the pandemic that has surprised you, and how might you use it as a superpower going forward?
- What are some things you do to manage your workload during the pandemic?
- How can we support those youth who have been greatly impacted by COVID but who may not have access to some basic resources (like high-speed internet)?
- What do you think can help you to cultivate a positive mindset post-COVID-19?
- What positive affirmation has helped you maintain a good attitude during the pandemic?
- What simple things could you do on your campus to help people have a conversation and feel less alone?

Students' Affirmations



“ There are so many tools to calm ourselves down when we are anxious and one of them is mindful breathing. It's been scientifically proven that the slower our brain waves, the calmer we become. It sounds simple but initiating that feeling of calmness starts with a solid, deep breath.
-Armita Mirkarimi

“ Journaling gratitude is proven to be a great way to improve mental health!
-Alex Zhang

“ I find that going on walks with my family is therapeutic :)
-Mila Nenadic

RESOURCES:

Below are some resources gathered from the slide decks presented during the Youth Town Hall breakout sessions:

- [Youth Action Talks podcast](#)
- [The 26th Annual Report on the Conditions of Children in Orange County](#)
- [Reset Toolbox](#), a collection of no-cost trainings and resources to build resilience
- [Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom](#), by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall
- [Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal](#), by Donna Jackson Nakazawa
- [Paper Tigers](#) (documentary)
- [Triple P Free Parenting Support](#)
- [Student Mental Wellness Positive Self Talk Coping Cards](#)

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