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How parks and rec can take the lead on mental health

Mental Health Facts CHILDREN & TEENS

Fact: 1 in 5 children ages 13-18 have, or will have a serious mental illness.¹



20% of youth ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition¹



11% of youth have a mood disorder¹



10% of youth have a behavior or conduct disorder¹



8% of youth have an anxiety disorder¹

Impact



50%

50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24.¹

10 yrs



The average delay between onset of symptoms and intervention is 8-10 years.¹

50%



Approximately 50% of students age 14 and older with a mental illness drop out of high school.¹

70%



70% of youth in state and local juvenile justice systems have a mental illness.¹

Suicide

3rd



Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death in youth ages 10 - 24.¹



90%

90% of those who died by suicide had an underlying mental illness.¹

Warning Signs



Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than 2 weeks (e.g., crying regularly, feeling fatigued, feeling unmotivated).



Trying to harm or kill oneself or making plans to do so.



Out-of-control, risk-taking behaviors that can cause harm to self or others.



Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or fast breathing.



Not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight; significant weight loss or gain.



Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships.



Repeated use of drugs or alcohol.



Drastic changes in behavior, personality or sleeping habits (e.g., waking up early and acting agitated).



Extreme difficulty in concentrating or staying still that can lead to failure in school.



Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities like hanging out with friends or going to classes.

4 Things Parents Can Do



Talk with your pediatrician



Get a referral to a mental health specialist



Work with the school



Connect with other families

¹ This document of statistics provided by the National Institute of Mental Health. www.nimh.nih.gov

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Parks and recreation agencies have many ways to reach residents: open space, facilities, activities and classes, pop-up and mobile programming, and more. Their mission isn't limited to recreation, time outdoors or physical health, as the [social equity pillar](#) of the National Recreation and Park Association demonstrates.

The importance of mental health and the value parks and rec can bring to the conversation was the topic of a session last week at NRPA's annual conference in Baltimore, Md., featuring April Chambers of the Florida National Alliance for Mental Illness and Barbara Heller, a consultant with 30 years' parks and rec experience.

First, the scope of the issue: According to [NAMI data](#) presented by Chambers, 20% of American adults experience mental illness annually, more than 18% experience anxiety disorders, while 1 in 25 adults has a serious mental illness. Mental illness is also more likely among people experiencing homelessness, and students 14 or older have high dropout rates when they live with mental illness.

Many adults and youths alike are not being treated for these conditions, and they can also feel isolated as a result. It's here that parks and rec, through its natural role in public space, outreach and activities, can help reach people with mental health services, education and other offerings.

Chambers and Heller noted areas where they saw a role for parks and rec to help people affected by mental illness, as well as to educate the broader community. These areas included:

- Helping people connect with families and others
- Staying positive through messages, people and activities
- [Mental health first aid training](#)
- Providing mindful, contemplative spaces (such as the outdoors)
- Partnerships to provide mental health services, such as to people experiencing homelessness
- Forest bathing
- Mental health days for students
- The [Park Rx](#) and [10-Minute Walk](#) programs

Sometimes these efforts are focused specifically on mental health. Lexington, Mass., has a [taskforce](#) that has trained parks and rec and other staff on detecting and responding to mental health issues, as well as the [question, persuade, refer](#) method of suicide prevention.



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Programs can also be awareness-based, such as the bright yellow benches created through the [Josh's Benches program](#) to publicize information for people in crisis.

Programming doesn't have to be specifically focused on mental health to have an impact, Chambers and Heller noted.

Community gardens, dog parks, the 10-Minute Walk program and other offerings can aid mental health even as they serve other everyday purposes such as exercise, fresh produce and so on.

NRPA will be offering health surveys to assess community needs, Heller said. And that interest extends to the NRPA Board of Directors. [Board Chairman Jack Kardys has said](#), "Park afterschool programs are a vital community resource for educational support, job skills and evidence-based mental health promotion for diverse teens."

Park agencies can also start now, Chambers and Heller said in their presentation slides, by learning what peers and other agencies are doing, by seeking out partnerships such as NAMI, training their staff and promoting available services to the public.



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