

SPRING 2022

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

A collection of themes and recommendations shared by high school students in Lane County



YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS.

A group of high school students in Lane County talked with us about mental health and shared their ideas for how to better support them.

Over the past few years, there has been a concerning trend of worsening mental health among Lane County youth, which has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the status of adolescent mental health, public health and schools have a responsibility to work together to promote better outcomes for all young people across Lane County. Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that helping young people feel engaged and cared for at school has substantial mental and physical health benefits. To determine how to better engage and care for students in our county, Public Health Prevention staff developed a plan to gather input from high school students about the mental health and wellness resources they would like to see in their schools and communities.

In January 2022, 14 youth were recruited for two focus groups. 6 of them were ultimately able to attend, although several others provided feedback via email. Questions focused on how students think about mental health and wellness, what mental health looks like in the school environment, and what they would change to support better mental health.

All quotes in this summary report are used with permission from youth. This report is not all-encompassing or perfectly representative of all youth perspectives in Lane County; instead, it is a starting point for better understanding the current landscape of youth mental health and what their priorities are for the future.



PUBLIC HEALTH
PREVENTION

PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Trusted Adults & Peers

Youth emphasized the importance of having strong social support through connections with adults and peers in their lives.

When asked what helps them to have good mental health, they said:

- "Feeling like you're supported, and able to support people you care about."
- "Connecting with people, having good relationships, being open to engage with others. Community is important."

When asked where they would go for help for themselves or others, they said:

- "I think going to a trusted adult in school...so I have a couple teachers to talk with about literally anything. And people who I have a prior relationship to...I don't know how well I would do with a hotline, 'cause I would rather have a personal connection and have a history with them."
- "Our counselor...she is amazing, for help and things if I needed it or if someone else needed it...I could reference her or HOOTS [Helping Out Our Teens in Schools]. I've had experience and I can trust in them and trust they will treat me and others well."
- "There are a lot of teachers that do a good job at making you feel welcome and like your feelings matter."

Normalizing Emotions

Youth highlighted the value of learning how to understand and process their emotions:

- "It's important to take time to feel feelings and understand feelings are valid and not let others put your feelings down."
- "You don't have to feel great all the time... people think mental health means always being in a good mood but it's not."
- "It's really ok to not be perfectly...especially when we're all going through so much."

Self-Care & Healthy Coping

Youth highlighted the need to take care of themselves and have positive activities to help them cope.

When asked about what they do to support their own wellbeing, they said:

- "Generally taking care of your body, making sure you're eating and sleeping...when you're taking care of your body you're more likely to have better mental health."
- "It's important to take time to yourself... and be aware you just need a break and that it's okay to take that time."
- "Recognizing coping mechanisms and not ones that potentially harm or you or someone else."

Sharing their Stories & Helping Others

Youth expressed the power in sharing their own experiences and helping others feel comfortable enough to open up:

- "I really want to help other people, and being able to start those discussions and be open especially when I have so many experiences, is really important to get stigma lessened, and let others know it's okay to talk about these things."
- "We can learn a lot from people who are struggling, it's hard for them to open up but those are the experiences we need to learn from."
- "I was struggling myself and had to make the jump to ask why am I struggling so bad? It took a long time and a lot of work.. I took the initiative to understand what's going on chemically in my brain and who am I surrounding myself with? And now thinking about how that is going to make an impact to change things."



STRESSORS IMPACTING YOUTH

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Youth described the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted multiple aspects of their lives.

They talked about all of the normal activities they have missed out on in the past few years:

- "it's hard to feel together, and feeling together would benefit talking about this kind of thing. Making an event where we could just...have a group discussion or have a fun dance...Just a lot of the activities that we haven't been able to do, a lot of the things I was super excited to do, I haven't been able to do because of covronavirus...there wasn't enough push to figure out ways to do them safely. Everyone gives up the moment it gets hard."

They also shared about how difficult the transitions between remote and in-person learning have been:

- "I feel like when we came back to in-person learning, we were thrown into the deep end. A lot of us had work piled on top of us really fast."
- "There's no help when you come back, no excusing work, no asking if you need anything. I feel ignored as a student, ignored by my teachers."
- "Teachers are worried about content and curriculum because of what was missed, rather than focusing on developing you as students and whole people."
- "Especially with online learning. I went from middle to high school in a weird transition...I feel like the very beginning of first term they were kind of lenient and they just really aren't now...I don't know how else to put it, but I feel thrown under the bus because I'm not getting the accommodations that I know I need."
- "Going from being on a computer all the time, being there but not being there, sitting down for hours is horrible. Like I've gotten yelled at for fidgeting but I literally cannot sit still. So hard to go from a space where you can chill in your pajamas all day to...have to wake up and go places."

Pressure to Balance Competing Priorities

Youth expressed that they feel extremely overwhelmed by everything they are expected to balance in their daily lives.

They discussed the pressure they experience at school and in their activities:

- "We have to think about student athletes, who practice with both school and club teams. During spring I am gone every weekend...and I have a job. I have to pay for my sports somehow. A lot of us are going to college next year...so we still have to work. I work 30 hours a week, which is a lot for a full time student and a part time athlete, and volunteer...when I get home at 9:30 after my shift, I just want to sleep. I don't want to do 3 hours of homework.. It's almost impossible to balance everything. And to be expected to balance everything as a 15, 16, 17, 18 year old."
- "There's so many things I'm passionate about that I want to do, like this [focus group], that will help others...but I could be doing my economics homework right now. I was feeling a little guilty because it was due yesterday and not done. I want to prioritize the things I want to do, that make me feel good about myself and feel healthy, but you get weighed down by extra stuff. I like school and I like learning but the extra work that you're expected to do, like jobs, sports, it's just too much."
- "The thing is, we have huge projects, and we are doing testing too...I was up till 3am doing homework. I don't have a job yet but I'm on a competitive dance team and we go places, I don't have time to fill out a worksheet when I already understand the concept."



MENTAL HEALTH IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Lack of Awareness of Resources

Youth reported that the general student body lacks awareness of mental health resources, even in schools with school-based health centers (SBHCs).

When asked about supports for mental health at school, they shared:

- "The things that I'm aware at my school... well, we have a SBHC...It has a lot of resources: a therapist, advising, doctor appointments...Although a lot of people don't know about it, so I'm not sure how useful it is for students."
- "As far as mental health goes, we have people who are coming for services, but it's not talked about...it's hidden in the corner, they offer services but they're not put out there."
- "I don't know how easy it is to find resources...it sucked for me to find where to go. There were a lot of issues with communication at least through COVID."
- "We also have HOOTS... and you can make appointments or drop in. They are super supportive, super nice people, The only thing I really have to say is that not many people know about it because it's not really well advertised through the school."
- "I had no idea they [HOOTS] came to [my school] till yesterday. We were talking about that yesterday, I don't know, I feel like I know a lot, and it's an important and useful resource. And if I, a well-educated person about what goes on at my school, then who does? A lot of resources are like that. That could be a really good goal, and we could make it Eugene wide. There are so many resources for MH and I think people just don't know about them."
- "What I know from my school and what I'm hearing is we have resources, and Eugene does too, but it's not talked about. That's one of the biggest issues. It needs to be more advertised."

Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

Youth noted that there is still stigma around talking about mental health in the school environment:

- "Even bringing up mental health is frowned upon, except for the people who advocate – they are really good – but it's put in everyone's back pocket. It's not something everybody thinks needs to happen right now."
- "Not only does stigma affect our school but also our entire community as a whole...A huge stigma in our society that we should push away our mental health just to do work and stuff. I definitely, definitely see that."
- "Many students are even afraid to talk to each other. They are afraid of others' opinions and stuff...Stigma makes it worse and makes it hard to advocate. A lot of people are afraid to speak up."

Barriers to Student Initiatives

Youth described feeling discouraged by the difficulty of gaining school staff support for their ideas:

- "I feel like when students bring up to staff and teachers that they want to advocate for mental health, they shut it down really fast. Like it can't be a student-driven event, can't be other students helping them fight their struggles."
- "We were trying to do a lot of things revolving around mental health... it was so, so hard to get things approved by the district and the school. At the higher level... it is so hard to get things passed even with a solid plan."
- "Students definitely try...we're trying to get ideas and get things going. If we can't get it approved by higher-ups, because they're so afraid of a negative look or backlash, nothing will ever change. Because we can't put together what we need or want to because we don't have the authority or we'll get in trouble."



YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Create Policies for Mental Health Days & Reduce the Workload of Students

Youth suggested school policy changes, such as permitting mental health and wellness days for students:

- "I think we should normalize it in the district by setting aside actual mental health days, like a call in sick kind of day, but not a physical sick day."
- "It is important for teachers to understand when students are unable mentally to attend that class or be ready for that day."
- "It's important to take time to yourself and take time from class when you know you need a break."
- "If I take the day off because I can't mentally be there, the work piles on and I don't want to go the next day. It spirals and then I have an F just because I took a day off. We should be able to take a break."

They also would like to see more reasonable expectations for homework:

- "Make it mandatory to have less homework, and make study halls more accessible."
- "It's hard when you need to be present mentally for all 5 classes...and then the problem with doing it at home is that you just went through an entire day at school and you don't want to do more."
- "Reducing homework and making it mandatory to reduce homework is a huge thing...Studying can help you learn on your time, but homework can cause more stress and make it harder in school."

Provide More Training Opportunities for School Staff

Youth highlighted the need for school staff to be better equipped to help with mental health and know how to direct them to additional resources:

- "I feel like a lot of the time teachers are not well equipped to handle instances of mental issues, I've seen someone break down this semester and they went into the hallway to calm down, but no active help was coming from the teacher. Some teachers are great and will do whatever they can. But more techniques on how teachers can help would be a great thing."
- "I feel like a lot of times schools focus on students, obviously, but teachers don't get enough attention."
- "I feel like for teachers there just wasn't enough training, enough education."

Meaningfully Engage Parents, Guardians, & Caregivers

Youth wanted to see more opportunities to involve parents and guardians in conversations around mental health:

- "I like the idea of communicating with parents and guardians, because I do think it depends on the dynamic. Not everyone has a relationship with their parent where they're able to tell them they need help...but in circumstances where they are actively trying to get help, those are good resources to benefit from."



YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Allow Youth to Lead the Conversation

Youth expressed that they would like to have more independence to create student-led and student-driven initiatives around mental health at their schools:

- "When students talk with other students, they are more likely to relate and listen. They're more likely to tune adults out because it's not as relevant, but they're not going to tune teenagers out."
- "Being able to act together and get resources out has been the best thing, the most positive thing I have experienced."
- "We were talking about the idea of having student-led trainings that are situations-based...like if a student came to you about a specific thing, how would you handle that?"
- "Adults in general need to figure out how they can...trust us, and that we do understand, we do know how to do things, and it is very important."
- "We also have talked about supporting student passions. Like student activism."
- "It's important to share our experiences because a lot of people completely disregard them or think it's not as important as it actually is."
- "Will it be a good outlet for people to get advice from their peers, people of their age, how they can help ourselves and help other people? We are still waiting to see if something like that could happen at school."

Increase Visibility of Resources

Youth recommended increasing the awareness and accessibility of mental health resources:

- "I feel like maybe having things to get people's attention. Not just our resources at school but having help lines written down...We have an entire closet that our Economic Justice League put together, clothes and food, and they can help them get into housing, but nobody ever talks about it. Having a presentation once a month or announcement, or a flyer handout...things we can keep in your pocket. Even if you're scared to ask for help you can have it later if you need it."
- "We printed out 100 flyers and posted them with the HOOTS phone number...and a list of resources the school offers...with a QR code that takes you right to the website, which really helps other kids get help and talk to people."
- "A lot of time tragic things or events will happen and then there's a little more discussion, but we should have a consistent discussion. We shouldn't just talk about [mental health and resources] if something's wrong."
- "Just in general I feel like [mental health] is not really taught enough.. there should be resources we can learn about."
- "The SBHC is there, but not a lot of people know about it, so the fact that we have a resource, but less than 5% of students know or use it...I could see a lot of positivity coming through there if it was utilized."



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Please reach out to Marissa Lovell, School & Community Health Promotion Coordinator at Lane County Public Health, with any questions about this report at marissa.lovell@lanecountyor.gov.

If you are a young person living in Lane County and would like to share your ideas with us, please contact Marissa at the email above or text (458) 239-2684.

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