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Adolescent Depression and Suicidality on The Rise

May is National Mental Health Awareness Month during which mental health organizations and advocacy groups across the country conduct campaigns to educate the public, and to de-stigmatize mental health problems and treatment. This year, in light of an important study that was published in March, 2019, it is even more important for school personnel to help promote mental health awareness among students and their families.

The study, published online in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, was conducted by well-known psychologist Jean Twenge (author of 6 books, including *iGen*) and her co-authors. It reflects some alarming trends in the rates of depression and suicidality over the last 10 years amongst the vulnerable population of 12 to 17-year-olds. The researchers analyzed data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, a survey that has tracked drug and alcohol use, mental health, and other health-related issues in individuals age 12 and over since 1971. The responses from over 200,000 adolescents and almost 400,000 adults (18+) were analyzed for this study.

Consider the following findings about 12 to 17-year-olds, comparing 2005 and 2017 data:

- The percentage who reported symptoms consistent with depression increased by **52%**
- The percentage who reported "serious psychological distress" increased by **71%**
- The percentage who reported suicidal thoughts increased by **47%**

There is no corresponding increase in depression and suicidality rates for adults over the same time period, so the researchers have concluded that the results "suggest a generational shift in mood disorders". They hypothesize that two specific cultural changes contribute to the increase in adolescent mental health symptoms: the increase in electronic mental communication and digital media, plus an overall decrease in sleep duration across the teen population.

While the internet and social media can be used to seek support and decrease isolation, research also indicates that individuals who spend more time on social media and less face-to-face time with others, report lower well-being, decreased empathy, and are more likely to be depressed. Overinvolvement with social media and electronics make teens more vulnerable to cyber-bullying, negative social comparison, decreased exercise, and decreased sleep duration and quality because of the late-night use of portable devices.

School professionals can use the month of May to raise students' awareness about the various threats to their mental health:

- The greatest threat is silence – open up a classroom discussion to convey that mental health symptoms are common and treatable, and to urge students who are struggling to seek help.
- Remind students that poor sleep, unhealthy eating, and the lack of physical exercise all contribute to emotional dysregulation. There is strong research evidence, for example, supporting the mood-boosting effect of movement and exercise.
- Educate students about the prudent use of electronic devices and communication, and how to set limits on their use so as to maintain balance in their lives.
- Contrary to popular belief, suicide rates peak in the spring months, not during the winter holidays. Be vigilant about students' mood changes, indications of hopelessness, withdrawal, risky behavior, increased substance use, or serious losses or disruptions in a student's life. Discuss concerns with ESS or other specialized school professionals.

RESOURCES:

Twenge, J.M., Cooper, A.B., Joiner, T.E., Duffy, M.E., & Binau, S.G. (2019). Age, Period, and Cohort Trends in Mood Disorder Indicators and Suicide Related Outcomes in a Nationally Representative Dataset, 2005–2017. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 128, No. 3, 185–199.

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