



THE
NAMASTE
PROJECT

SUPPORTING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

An Evidence Report, October 2023



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INTRODUCTION

There is growing concern and evidence of a mental health crisis among our youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, over the decade before the pandemic, there was a roughly 40% rise in enduring feelings of sadness, hopelessness, as well as thoughts and actions related to suicide among young individuals (Abrams, 2023).

Mental health issues may also originate from genetic factors, and they can also be linked to childhood trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, and economic stress. These elements can contribute to toxic stress, which can impact brain development and increase the susceptibility to various mental and physical health conditions (Center for Disease Control, 2023).

Students need a system of mental health supports in educational settings. The research outlined in this report discusses the state of youth mental health and ways in which polygaval and somatic teachings can support student mental health.

THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Anxiety and depression affect many children

- 9.4% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 5.8 million) had diagnosed anxiety in 2016-2019.
- 4.4% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 2.7 million) had diagnosed depression in 2016-2019.

Anxiety and depression have increased over time

- Childhood (aged 6-17 years) diagnosis of anxiety or depression increased from 5.4% in 2003 to 8.4% in 2011-2012.

In 2023:

- 16.39% of children (age 12-17) reported suffering from at least one major depressive episode.
- 16.5% of youth identified as two or more races (about 123,000 of youth) showed the highest rates of a severe major depressive episode .



Impact:

Mental health has been a growing concern in the United States. The pandemic brought these concerns to the forefront. Unfortunately, declining mental health negatively impacts youth socio-emotionally and academically (Reinert et al., 2022).

According to the National Center for Health Statistics in 2020, the most frequently identified mental disorders in children are anxiety, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

(Reinert et al., 2022)

SOME ARE IMPACTED MORE

Data from 2011 - 2021 showed:

- Student mental health (i.e., persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness) increased in the last ten years, particularly in Hispanic and multiracial populations.
 - Hispanic students: 33% (2011) to 46% (2021)
 - Multiracial students: 34% (2011) to 49% (2021)
 - Black students: 25% (2011) to 39% (2021)
 - White students: 27% (2011) to 41% (2021)
 - Asian students: 29% (2011) to 35% (2021)

- Black students were more likely to attempt suicide than students of other races and ethnicities.
 - 2011 (8%) to 2021 (14%)

*Data was taken from the Centers for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends Report: 2011-2021 *

FACTORS IMPACTING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES



01 | Socioeconomic Status

- Students in low socioeconomic settings were associated with higher anxiety.
- 39% of Black students and 36% of Latino students 18 years old and younger live in poverty. This is double the rate of non-Hispanic White and Asian populations which were both at 14%.

02 | Gender

- Black males are disproportionately and incorrectly diagnosed with more severe disorders (e.g., schizophrenia) due to psychiatrists' biased beliefs that African American males were likely to be violent, suspicious, and dangerous.

03 | Biases

- Teacher implicit biases affect the disproportionate use of disciplinary actions (i.e., suspension and expulsion) toward students of color (i.e., Black and Hispanic; Morris & Perry, 2016) which can affect mental health.



SUPPORTING TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH

A stressed and burnt-out teacher results in ineffective instruction, poor student-teacher relationships, and more reactive and punitive disciplinary action from the teacher (Kim et al., 2021; Hester et. al, 2020).

Teachers need mental health support and strategies to manage stress, challenging behaviors, and other factors that affect their well-being. Doing so ensures positive rapport between teachers and students and healthy student and teacher well-being (Harding et al., 2019).

Teacher burnout has been associated with:

- Ineffective instruction
- Decreased ability to engage and teach effectively, which may result in poor academic outcomes for students
- Negative teacher-student relationships
- Poor well-being of both the teacher and the students
- Chronic absenteeism
- Understaffing

There is a dire need for teachers to have mental health support in schools to give them the tools and strategies to address pressures, stress, and other demands of the profession.

(Betoret, 2006; Black & Halstead, 2021; Ryan et al., 2017; Sass et al., 2011)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

The use of mental health programs and supports, such as somatic experiencing and polyvagal approaches, can positively impact adolescents struggling with mental health issues. For instance, mental health supports in schools have been found to be effective in addressing behavioral health needs among school-age youth, with significant increases in those experiencing moderate to severe anxiety and depression (Wilson, 2022).



Colizzi and others (2020) found that psychological treatments focused on emotional regulation skill building reduced anxiety, depression, and emotion dysregulation, and improved engagement skills. Additionally, Shanok and colleagues (2020) found mindfulness meditation interventions to lower the neurological risk for anxiety development in pre-adolescent children (aged 7 - 10 years).

BENEFITS OF GROUP SETTINGS

Leading science research has demonstrated that group learning fosters relationships among peers and faculty and boosts psychological well-being.

Academic Benefits: Irrespective of the subject, students acquire more knowledge and retain it for a longer duration when they learn in small groups as opposed to other teaching methods. This approach also improves attendance, efficiency, and persistence (Johnson et. al., 2014).

Social Benefits: Small-group learning aids students in developing social and leadership skills. Students who engage in group problem-solving are more dedicated to their education and are more likely to interact with diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, ability, and gender groups (Millis, 2014).

Psychological Benefits: Small-group learning encourages participation from individuals who might otherwise be hesitant to engage in a larger class setting. It also enhances self-esteem when compared to competitive or individualistic learning environments (Deslauriers et al., 2019).

POLYVAGAL APPROACHES AND SOMATIC EXPERIENCING IN TRAUMA HEALING

Polyvagal Approaches

Polyvagal theory provides insights into how our nervous system responds to stress and perceived threats. Our physiological state can significantly influence our ability to engage in productive, relationship-enhancing conversations (National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, 2022).

Boosting autonomic states that encourage feelings of safety can benefit our psychological well-being, potentially helping individuals who have experienced trauma.

Some studies have found positive impact of polyvagal approaches on trauma healing. It can also treat various physical and mental health conditions, including epilepsy, obesity, inflammatory disorders, depression, and anxiety (Wade, 2023; Neuhuber & Berthoud, 2022).

Somatic Experiencing

Somatic experiencing (SE) is a holistic therapy that concentrates on how traumatic events can affect both the mind and body.

The ultimate aim is to diminish the distress and symptoms resulting from post-traumatic arousal and to restore normal, healthy functioning in daily life by utilizing bodily awareness and employing self-regulation techniques (Levine, 2010; Payne, Levine, & Crane-Godreau, 2015).

Brom and colleagues (2017) found a moderate decrease in both PTSD and depression symptoms after participation in an SE intervention, with 44.1% no longer meeting the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

1 Mental Health Impacts Overall Health

Poor mental health can persist over an extended period and may not fully resolve. In the absence of early identification and intervention, children experiencing mental disorders may encounter challenges in their family life, educational pursuits, and social relationships. Furthermore, these conditions can impede a child's normal growth and development, potentially leading to issues that endure into adulthood.

2 Understanding that Science Supports Implementation

Polyvagal approaches and somatic teachings have been shown to positively impact mental health (Brom et al., 2017). If we know why a particular method or tool works, we are more likely to use it consistently. This is because understanding gives us confidence in the effectiveness of the method or tool. Polyvagal theory emphasizes the connection between the body and mind. More research in this area could support a more holistic approach to mental health care.

3 Developmental and Long-Term Impacts

Adolescence is a critical period of physical, emotional, and social development. Mental health issues during this time can significantly impact a young person's development and future potential. Many adult mental health issues have their onset during adolescence. Early intervention can prevent these issues from becoming chronic and severe later in life. Lastly, mental health issues can affect a young person's quality of life, including their self-esteem, relationships, and overall happiness (Johnson et. al., 2014).

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