

Mental health important during pandemic

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Posted Jun 29, 2020 at 5:30 AM

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JACKSON TWP. When it rains, it pours.

Or as Tina Dutton rephrases the old saying: A tiny snowflake can turn into a massive snowball.

Dutton's 10-year-old daughter, Anna, had been home for a couple of weeks after the coronavirus closed schools when Dutton noticed something wasn't right.

Anna didn't want to do her schoolwork and she was uncharacteristically angry.

"We weren't sure why because that wasn't normal for Anna, and she started crying a lot," Tina Dutton said.

The fourth-grader who liked art and singing, the girl who had gladly shaved off her waist-long curls to raise money for cancer research, was struggling.

Missing the normal school routine was one snowflake. The snowball followed. Dutton's husband lost a quarter of his pay due to pandemic cutbacks at work. The family's only vehicle broke down. They ran out of food and toilet paper.

"Honestly, we all just kind of wanted to crawl into a closet and stay there for a while," Dutton said.

Anna, especially, was having a hard time, so Dutton contacted her daughter's teacher at Amherst Elementary, who put Dutton in touch with the school's guidance counselor.

The family was able to get financial assistance and food. The guidance counselor also referred Anna to Abigail Harding, the CommQuest Services counselor assigned to Jackson Middle School.

Anna and Harding have counseling sessions via video every week, and Anna and her mother say they are coping better with the situation.

Tough times

The Duttons aren't the only family to need help. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a daunting mental-health challenge, and children and teens are especially sensitive to the stress of the pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Social distancing spawned feelings of isolation and loneliness. Furloughs and shutdowns raised questions about paying bills. The disease caused anxiety about personal health, and the health of loved ones. Many people know at least one person who has died.

The American Psychological Association has warned the pandemic's long-term effect on mental health will be "serious and long-lasting."

The association's Stress in America survey, conducted in late April and early May, found Americans were more stressed than they had been the year before, with parents especially feeling the pressure of homeschooling and providing food and housing during the pandemic.

A follow-up survey a month later, found that 71 percent of parents worried about how the pandemic would impact their child's social development, and a little more than half reported their child had been acting out more since the pandemic started.

New normal

Harding has been a school-based mental health counselor for 13 years. She came to Jackson Local a couple of years ago from Canton City Schools.

Before the pandemic, Harding would spend four days at Jackson Middle School and one day at Jackson High School, which has its own CommQuest counselor. Overall, CommQuest has counselors at 44 schools in 10 local districts.

Harding typically helped students with depression, anxiety about getting good grades or

problems with family members and friends.

Then a new coronavirus started infecting and killing people around the world.

“This whole pandemic hit us with two things most people are not prepared for, it doesn’t matter how old you are: It was unexpected and it was out of our control,” Harding said.

As the pandemic crept toward Ohio and Stark County, Harding and her fellow counselors planned for how they would keep in touch with their clients after schools closed.

Jackson Local stopped in-person classes a week before spring break. At first, the students saw it as an early vacation, Harding said. Only later did they realize that stores, theaters, restaurants, salons — nearly everything — were closed for the foreseeable future. There would be no class trips to Washington, D.C., and New York City. No prom. No spring sports.

“Definitely, in the beginning, they just didn’t understand,” Harding said. “There was a lot of anger and sadness and grieving the loss of having those fun events that they do at the end of school.”

Help available

Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery worked with local treatment providers and schools to improve youth mental health after a dozen young people died by suicide from August 2017 through March 2018.

Changes in eating or sleeping habits, irritability, a loss of energy and disengagement from friends or activities can be signs that a young person is in distress, said Jeannie Cool, StarkMHAR’s manager of programs and evaluations.

“During this time, it’s always important to communicate openly and make sure that, as a parent or a caregiver, you’re reassuring them that they’re safe and you’re getting information from reliable sources,” Cool said.

Youth treatment services are available through CommQuest and Child & Adolescent Behavioral Health — both agencies get funding from StarkMHAR — as well as other providers in the area, Cool said.

For immediate help, Coleman Crisis Services runs the Stark County Mobile Response Team with a counselor who can respond in person, around-the-clock, to assist children, young people and adults. The team can be reached at 330-452-6000.

Young people also can use the Crisis Text Line any time of day by texting 4hope to 741741 to contact a trained specialist. StarkMHAR supports both the mobile response team and text line.

No summer break

School is out for the summer, but young people can still get help from CommQuest's school-based counselors. Visits can take place in an office or the client's home, and relaxed state rules have made it easier for counselors to use video conferencing to keep in contact with their clients.

During a video session, Harding said, she and a client talk about the things they can control, letting go of worries and moving forward.

Harding likes to say the pandemic is a storm, but everyone is in his or her own boat. Circumstances differ, and so do clients. Some need to talk once a month, others talk every week.

"Some of them did not adjust well; some of them still struggle," Harding said. "Different families have had different rules when it comes to the pandemic about things they are allowed to do and that they can't do."

As Ohio's lockdown has lifted, "clients have definitely been happier going out," Harding said, but she also talks to them about the steps they want to take to keep themselves safe.

Feeling better

Anna is growing back her hair — she raised \$100 for the St. Baldrick's Foundation to support cancer research — and looking forward to a trip to the Akron Zoo.

She's also been drawing. Accurately rendering eyes is the skill she's trying to perfect at the moment. Art is therapeutic, too, as are her video chats with Harding.

"It's going pretty good," Anna said. "I definitely have improved in many different ways. I feel better from the first time I ever got on the call with her."

Harding said she's proud of Anna's progress during the last couple of months.

"I just think she needed an extra little push," Harding said. "I think it really was adjusting to our new normal and she had a lot of changes happen at the same time."

Tina Dutton said she has dealt with anxiety and depression herself, and said anyone who is having a difficult time with their mental health should seek help.

"Abby has been a complete blessing for our family, not just for Anna, but for myself and my husband as well," Dutton said.

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Abigail Harding is the CommQuest Services counselor assigned to Jackson Middle School. Even though it's summer, Harding stays in contact with her clients, such as Anna Dutton, via video. Harding also is being honored as Stark Mental Health and Addiction Recovery's professional of the year. (Submitted photo)