

> A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Mental Health and Wellness



In the following document we take a focused look at findings from the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project that are specific to the topics of mental health and wellness. We highlight findings from the high school student focus groups. However, many of these same themes are reflective of the findings of the middle school reports and are relevant to middle school students as well. For more information and copies of the project reports, see <http://www.wipps.org/voices>

Friends and Parents: Key Sources of Mental Health Support for Students

The high school students in the focus groups expressed that they commonly turn to friends for support with mental health challenges, followed by their parents. Middle school students noted that their parent (especially “mom”) was their primary source of support. School-based resources were perceived by the students as more limited or not accessible.

Friends and parents, rather than school-based supports, were identified by students as their primary, “frontline” sources of support with challenges such as stress, anxiety, and/or depression. Several noted that their schools were not prepared to help them. Instead, high school students were more commonly turning to non-school-based individuals in their life for help, especially their friends. For middle schoolers, parents were a key source of support. It is not clear whether friends or parents are equipped with the information and resources they need to help. One student said, “I talk to my best friend a lot. She’s been my best friend since I was four. She doesn’t judge me or change who I am or tell me how to think.” Other sources of support were parents and grandparents, older siblings, a boss, coach, mentor, and youth club leader. While students turn to their friends and parents, they also are sensitive about not wanting to burden them.

One student noted, “I feel bad going to my mom. I have four siblings.” Another said, “It’s hard going to your family members.” “A good chunk of our school does reach out to the school counselors, and they do a lot, but the front line really is friends.”

Most of the students in the focus groups had a trusted adult that they could talk to, although this was not always an adult at that their school. Parents were the main adult that students reach out to for help. As one student noted, “My parents...when it’s something serious, I would go to my parents. If it’s about my parents, I would go to a close friend, to vent and stuff.” Several students said there was a specific teacher, resource officer, principal, or school counselor they could talk to if they needed help. One student said, “My school’s counselors have explicitly said over and over that they are available, and people feel they can go to them.”

Some students reported having no one to talk to, causing them to bottle their feelings up and “suffer in silence.” For some students, this is because they do not feel comfortable talking to people they do not know. Some have developed personal rituals to help calm themselves or have started to engage in more self-advocacy. Some students expressed a hope that there would be more individual outreach by their teachers, principal, or school counselors to check on their well-being.

Students Expressed Limited Awareness of or Access to Mental Health and Wellness Resources

The students generally struggled to identify school-based or other resources available to help with mental health concerns; many expressed trying to cope on their own.

Generally, students seemed to have limited awareness of mental health resources available at their school. Many seemed to initially struggle to identify specific sources of support; among those that were able to identify or pinpoint specific resources, their awareness of those resources seemed to be more peripheral rather than as a result of having accessed those resources directly. For some students, the difficulty in answering this question may have been a function of not personally feeling like they needed help or resources, and therefore they were not focused on where to go. When probed a bit further by the facilitators about this topic, some mentioned their school counselors as a potential resource, but also felt that their counselors had limited time, training and/or expertise in dealing with mental health issues. Some perceived that their school counselor was primarily focused on school scheduling issues or college applications. Some speculated that if they did want to access help at their school, they would talk to a favorite teacher; yet others noted that it would be hard to go their teachers. Other resources that students mentioned were things like posters in the hallways with guidance and resource information; virtual speakers on mental health issues; suicide hotline numbers in the hallways, bathrooms, or on the back of student IDs; a therapy dog; and in several instances, student-to-student or peer support programs or suicide prevention. Regarding the latter, one student who had a group at their school noted that the group had not met yet this year; another questioned whether the students leading the group were doing so for their college resume. There were students who expressed that school was devoting time to supporting students and that teachers and counselors were encouraging students to talk, if needed.

Many students recognized and expressed a need for more mental health resources at their school (specifically counselors, therapists, and psychologists), yet at the same time noted the complexities of asking schools to serve in a mental health capacity. In some instances, students noted difficult personal or home-life situations that were impacting their ability to focus on school. In the specific case of one student, it was noted, "We need to talk about home situations. How am I supposed to focus on school? I didn't feel safe [at home]." After staying in a hotel and "crashing on couches," one student mentioned that they are now staying with a friend. One noted, "A school counselor can't help. It's just someone to talk to for one hour."

Students frequently expressed that they try to deal with thoughts or feelings on their own. One student noted, "I probably have the least healthy way of dealing with anxiety or stress. I either read until it goes away, or I write in a book, or I daydream what I'm going to write in the book later about a bunch of fantasy adventures and different things and scenes. I typically don't talk to people to deal with stress or anxiety. I just don't like being vulnerable." Another said, "I just kind of sit with my thoughts. I work them out, with myself. 'How can I make this better?' I ask myself. I know other people will drink or something."

Students' Perceptions of Barriers to Accessing Help

Stigma, skepticism, self-reliance, and breaches of trust were identified as barriers to students accessing mental health and wellness resources or help.

Stigma was identified by students as the primary reason why kids do not seek help when they are struggling or when they need it. The majority of students felt that they or their peers do not ask for help at school or in general because doing so leads to embarrassment, fear, and shame. Student comments reflect that they are afraid of being judged by teachers and peers. Similarly, they are afraid of being perceived as weak or vulnerable because it has been ingrained in them (and those around them) that mental health is a taboo topic, and that seeking and receiving help is something people who are "crazy," weak, or in trouble would do. They noted a fear of being shunned by admitting a need for help, or a fear of being rejected, or "losing popularity." One student noted, "I feel embarrassed when I go to someone. I feel like I should be able to handle it on my own. [I don't] want to give negative energy to others." Some students worried their parents would not be accepting of their need for help. Several students mentioned that it is helpful in reducing stigma when their school administration makes an effort to point out that anxiety and depression care can be common experiences, or if a teacher shares their personal perspectives.

Some students are reluctant or not willing to get help on their own because they do not think it will help them; because they do not want to talk about their personal mental health challenges, preferring to handle on their own; or because they do not think they deserve help. Some kids do not feel like they can talk about what they are experiencing. Some students might lack self-awareness and not recognize that how they are feeling could be something that could be helped. Breaches of trust (or "distrust") were also frequently identified as a reason students are reluctant to ask for help. Several described situations where they had reached out for help within their school and felt that confidentiality was not maintained or their problem or concern was not taken seriously. Several students mentioned difficulties in reaching out to adults and being open or honest about

mental health struggles, particularly with people they do not have a personal connection with. Some expressed concerns about privacy and confidentiality, especially in a small school. "I think there is fear of judgment (being judged for having an issue and not handling it yourself). The staff members are super-cliquey. If one person knows, every staff member will know. Plus, staff members tell students about what's going on with other students. It's hard to find someone that others can actually trust."

While students referenced their school counselors at school as a potential source of help, and several did describe specific instances where their school counselor was an integral source of help for them, many shared a perception that the counselors were too busy and "overloaded," or trying to help students with practical problems like scheduling issues. Fear of being a burden to a counselor that they perceived to be very busy discouraged some students from seeking support. Some students felt counselors were also not adequately prepared to address their mental health concerns, and as a result, did not feel comfortable reaching out to them. One student noted, "They lack time," and, "Everyone has a problem."

In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topic of mental health and wellness. **A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.**

I have struggled with anxiety and depression. Being online increased it to a whole other level.

My friends and I have class-specific group chats; we figure out where we are struggling and work through it together. Technology has been so crucial.

I could trust the counselors, but I would go to friends and family first.

When I really need help with my mental health, I'll talk to my parents. Recently though, I haven't really been, I haven't really been going to anybody. And I know that's not healthy at all. I've kind of been bottling things up recently, which is not good.

A lot of students are asking teachers less questions and asking other students MORE questions...there is a nice community of interconnectedness, and students don't have to worry then about teachers thinking they're stupid.

I feel like everyone had one teacher they went to specifically. So that was always really nice because our teachers were always like, we're here if you need us, not just for school, but if you just want to talk. So that was always really nice. And then I know for me, I would always just go talk to my friends if there was anything like bugging me, or I would, yeah, I would talk to them.

...Sometimes it feels like there aren't any resources. Like it's not always there, but I feel like if you actually look for it yourself, you can. You just have to actually send out that email or ask for the call and then you can be exposed to the resources that you need. But if you aren't really looking, they don't really advertise it for you openly, I feel like.

Our school has done relatively nothing other than send one email out with a link to like the suicide prevention awareness hotline or something like that at the beginning of the school year, and relatively nothing else has come out at all.

I haven't really heard [of] any mental health places or groups in where I live or that are with our school.

I don't really know anybody in my school who tells us about resources.

We have a guidance counselor at our school, and she has a lot of great resources. However, she's very busy, so it's difficult. She's not always available. But we have, almost all of our teachers are always willing to talk about any sort of problems that we have, and a lot of students have a favorite teacher that they would go to. But my friends and I, we all talk to each other. We're each other's therapists, and we all just equally dump our problems on each other. But we're, we all love that we can, we feel comfortable enough to do that.

If I had free access to mental health resources through my school, I would take advantage of it

[We need to be] talking about what depression and anxiety look like. I have straight As, am organized, but I still struggle with mental illness.

Stigma is a pretty big part of it, because I, like [student], I myself have struggled with depression and anxiety, and there have been times where I have had an anxiety attack during class. And all my classmates know I have anxiety and I struggle with all these issues. And yet there's still this huge stigma around depression and anxiety.

I think there is shyness and embarrassment. And it can take just one time to talk with someone and realize that it is helpful.

Students and staff are judgy. Our guidance counselor and principal say no one will know, but it ends up that they tell your parents or another teacher. I can only think of a couple of teachers who would actually help and keep it confidential.

People think that whoever they go to will think they need to be "fixed" and that you will be sent off to a therapist.

I don't want to be a burden and put my problems on them.

If people are relying on you to be the positive energy, because they are really negative, you try to be the piece of positivity that they need.

I think some people don't go because they think that they don't need it. And they, like you're not going to get help unless you don't know that you need help. Like you need to accept that you need help to like accept the help that someone is giving you. So they think that they're big and strong, and they don't need it, and it's like sometimes you just need that help. You don't need to like put on a face and be like, I don't need it.

I think with how our society is today, it makes students or people in general really scared to seek for help because they don't want to be judged or embarrassed.

Most people charge for therapy or meeting with a therapist or whatever. I mean, some people's insurance covers it, but most of the time, there's going to be some sort of out-of-pocket cost. And so I think people are like, this isn't a necessity, so they don't really feel the need to pay for something that they think they can figure out on their own.

There is nothing different this year. Nothing to encourage us. It's harder this year for everyone, but there should be something to help students.

Project Background

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project sought to better understand how Wisconsin students are coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support they need. Equally important was to identify, strengthen, and reinforce examples of students' success and resiliency. To gather this feedback, the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted a total of 23 virtual Zoom focus groups in January and February 2021 with a total of 160 Wisconsin students (64 middle school students and 96 high school students). The students were from 38 different counties and 68 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 96 different public, private, and parochial schools. Separate reports were prepared for middle and high school students. Copies of the reports can be found at <http://www.wipps.org/voices> or directly at:

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School-supplemental>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School-supplemental>

WIPPS Research Partners responds to community needs by providing research and information that can help citizens and communities make more-informed decisions about issues that matter to them. In the case of this particular project, our goal was to provide information to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) from the perspective of students on the important topic of learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy agenda in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues. This project was supported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was developed with input from many partners including representatives of the DHS, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin - Extension. We partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) to provide valuable oversight of the research project through the Institutional Review Board; MCW faculty also served as members of the research team.

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