

Youth workers and mental health Challenges specific to the Presbyterians who minister to youth during the pandemic

by Mike Ferguson Presbyterian News Service



Brian Kuhn, director of the Presbyterian Youth Workers' Association and a licensed professional counselor, offered a webinar Wednesday that outlined **the top 10 mental health issues** all youth workers should be aware of. Kuhn, who's also director of youth and family ministries at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church in St. Louis.

Brian Kuhn, a licensed professional counselor and youth worker, is director of the Presbyterian Youth Workers' Association. The four-page, **10-item list of issues** includes the following, which Kuhn highlighted during the hour-long webinar. Kuhn also wrote the resource.

Your own mental health — “What often happens is we get so consumed with taking care of others that we forget to take care of ourselves,” Kuhn said. “It’s at the top of the sheet for a reason.” As youth workers “model self-care, the limits and boundaries and support systems we put in place, our young people see it and pick up on it.”



The isolation connection — Even before the pandemic, about 2 in 5 Americans said they felt isolated from others or had less than meaningful relationships, Kuhn said. “We have a generation of young people who will say this isolation is par for the course,” he said. “What do we need to be doing to look out for the side effects of this?”

Communicating feelings — “I try to speak but nobody can hear so I wait around for an answer to appear” is more than a line from the musical “Dear Evan Hansen.” “Young people can believe they are asking for help or trying to express the trouble they are in, but we don’t hear it that way,” the resource states. “As adults in the lives of young people, we have to teach them how to express themselves in relationships and how to move past the screen to get help.” Or, as Kuhn put it, “They trust us and know we love them, so they will allow us to teach them.”

The joy and sorrow of adolescence — “Adolescence could be seen as a mental health issue all by itself,” Kuhn said. “The response to their natural teenage ups and downs and a lens with which to understand them,” the resource states, “is essential to the long-term resiliency and desire to seek help in the future.”

Self-harm/self-injury/eating disorders — A challenge for youth workers during the pandemic is that they don’t get to observe changes in the youth regularly. “How do we check in?” Kuhn asked. “Can we ask, ‘Are you taking care of yourself? Are you eating the way you’re supposed to be eating? Are you cutting yourself? Are you thinking about suicide?’ I think our main role is to name it for them, to say, ‘I know this is happening and that some of you are thinking about it. Let’s talk about it.’ Be as explicit as you can. It’s when we go silent that shame and stigma kick in.”

Other topics included in the resource are “an addictive brain,” “bullying,” “suicide,” “desperation” and “anxiety and depression.” As the isolation brought about by the pandemic grinds on, reaching out via telephone, email, text or video chat is now more important than ever, Kuhn said.

“That’s all we can do for right now,” he said near the end of the webinar. “We say we want to hug kids and cry with them, but we can’t right now. All we can do is talk with them. It validates their feelings of anger, confusion and sadness — and it helps them remember the happy things, too.”