

# COUNSELING DEPARTMENT

## Mental Health Awareness Week at Pine Valley Central School

Pine Valley supports the mental health and social-emotional well-being of all of our students. Educating students about their mental health, ways to cope with life challenges, and daily self-care is important to their overall success. We know that when a child is struggling emotionally it can impede their ability to learn and be academically successful. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on many people including children. There has been a drastic increase in rates of childhood depression and anxiety throughout the pandemic caused by fear of the virus, social isolation, loss of normal day-to-day activities, and changes to what they know as “normal” school life.

We will be celebrating Mental Health Awareness Week the week of 3/22-3/26. The theme of this year’s Mental Health Week will be on accepting oneself and how self-esteem can positively impact emotional well-being. The week will include dress-up theme days related to key components of positive mental health, in-class lessons, morning announcements and music, and Facebook reminders. At the elementary school, students will engage in lessons with the school counselor on topics including understanding feelings, expressing feelings, healthy coping, self-care, and knowing who to go to when struggling with strong feelings. Negative views of self and self-defeating thoughts are the number one cause of depression and often trigger anxious and avoidant behaviors in children. Teaching children to have a positive inner dialogue early can help keep them mentally and emotionally healthy in the face of things they can’t control.

**Monday, 3/22:** Wear Green (national color of Mental Health Awareness and support)

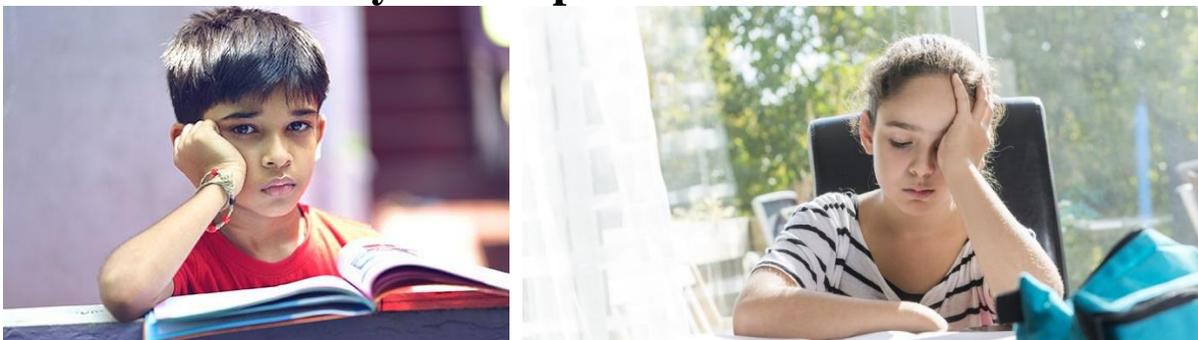
**Tuesday, 3/23:** Supporting Each Other (dress alike with another person or group of people)

**Wednesday, 3/24:** Self-Acceptance (dress in tie dye and celebrate your unique design)

**Thursday, 3/25:** Bring Your Inside Feelings Out (wear you clothing inside out)

**Friday, 3/26:** A Day of Self-Care (do something you enjoy or something that helps you relax)

## Anxiety and Depression in Children



Many children have worries and may feel sad and hopeless from time to time. Strong fears may appear at different times during development. For example, toddlers are often very distressed about being away from their parents, even if they are safe and cared for. Although some fears and worries are typical in children, persistent or extreme forms of fear and sadness could be due to anxiety or depression.

### Anxiety:

When children do not outgrow the fears and worries that are typical in young children, or when there are so many fears and worries that they interfere with school, home, or play activities, the child may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Examples of different types of anxiety disorders include:

- Being very afraid when away from parents (separation anxiety)
- Having extreme fear about a specific thing or situation, such as dogs, insects, or going to the doctor (phobias)
- Being very afraid of school and other places where there are people (social anxiety)
- Being very worried about the future and about bad things happening (general anxiety)
- Having repeated episodes of sudden, unexpected, intense fear that come with symptoms like heart-pounding, having trouble breathing, or feeling dizzy, shaky, or sweaty (panic disorder)

Anxiety may present as fear or worry but can also make children irritable and angry. Anxiety symptoms can also include trouble sleeping, as well as physical symptoms like fatigue, headaches, or stomachaches. Some anxious children keep their worries to themselves and, thus, the symptoms can be missed. Anxiety may present as avoidance or refusal as well.

### Depression:

Occasionally being sad or feeling hopeless is a part of every child's life. This is called situational depression. However, some children feel sad or uninterested in things that they used to enjoy or feel helpless or hopeless in situations they are unable to change. When children feel persistent sadness and hopelessness, they may be diagnosed with depression. This is called chronic depression. Examples of behaviors often seen in children with depression include:

- Feeling sad, hopeless, or irritable a lot of the time
- Not wanting to do, or does not enjoy doing, fun things
- Showing changes in eating patterns – eating a lot more or a lot less than usual
- Showing changes in sleep patterns – sleeping a lot more or a lot less than normal
- Showing changes in energy – being tired and sluggish or tense and restless a lot of the time
- Having a hard time paying attention
- Feeling worthless, useless, or guilty. Saying self-defeating comments
- Episodes of crying
- Showing self-injury and self-destructive behavior

Extreme depression can lead a child to think about suicide or plan for suicide. For youth ages 10-24 years, suicide is among the leading causes of death. Some children may not talk about their helpless and hopeless thoughts and may not appear sad. Depression might also cause a child to make trouble or act unmotivated, causing others not to notice that the child is depressed, or to incorrectly label the child as a trouble-maker or lazy.

## **Treatment for Anxiety and Depression:**

The first step to treatment is to talk with a healthcare provider, such as your child's primary care provider or a mental health specialist, about getting an evaluation. Some of the signs and symptoms of anxiety or depression in children could be caused by other conditions, such as trauma. A mental health professional can develop a therapy plan that works best for the child and family. Behavior therapy includes child therapy, family therapy, or a combination of both. For very young children, involving parents in treatment is key; the school can also be included in the treatment plan. School based counseling can be effective in supporting the child academically and socially, teaching fundamental skills needed to be successful in school. Consultation with a healthcare provider can help determine if medication should be part of the treatment.

## **Managing Symptoms, Staying Healthy:**

Being healthy is important for all children and can be especially important for children with depression or anxiety. In addition to getting the right treatment, leading a healthy lifestyle can play a role in managing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Here are some healthy behaviors that may help:

- Having a healthy diet centered on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes (beans, peas, and lentils), lean protein sources, and nuts
- Participating in physical activity each day based on age
- Getting the recommended amount of sleep each night based on age
- Minimize video games, TV, and screen time (get back to basics)
- Practicing mindfulness or relaxation techniques
- Encouraging open communication about thoughts and feelings within the home
- Modeling healthy reactions to negative life events for your child and discussing it
- Modeling healthy coping skills and self-care and directly teaching these things to your child

## **Isolation and Mental Health, How Are They Connected?**

### What is social isolation?

Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated. (CDC, 2020) It is important for everyone to follow the health and safety guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19 which means social distancing and at times social isolation. That is why it is important to understand the impacts of social isolation and how to remain mentally and physically healthy during these times.

### How can social isolation impact our mental health?

- Social isolation is commonly linked to loneliness which can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression and even anger and resentment.
- With distancing measures, having connections like in-person appointments are limited or placed on hold which can impact the relationships one has with their needed supports.
- Other activities such as sports, social gatherings, and events like concerts, aware ceremonies, and funerals could be limited which can prevent the opportunity to have experiences that are valued.

Although these circumstances can be very challenging, there are still opportunities that can be explored to help us cope and build resilience for the adversities that we face.

## Ways to prevent or decrease the feeling of social isolation:

- ✓ **Find new ways to come together!**  
For example, using zoom, facetime, virtual clubs/groups, video game platforms, and other virtual interfaces.
- ✓ **Take it outdoors!**  
The weather is getting nicer which means there will be more opportunities to get together while still socially distancing. For instance, going to a park, bike trails, walking paths, as well as simply getting some fresh air wherever you enjoy going.
- ✓ **Get creative with special occasions!**  
Whether that means having a virtual party, dropping off gifts at a loved one's door, making a homemade gift, or calling them to say you are thinking of them on the special day, there are many ways to celebrate even if we can't be side by side.
- ✓ **Keep in communication!**  
Call, text, facetime, zoom, social media, email, face-to-face, the list can go on! We have so many ways to connect to others, so it is important to use them to maintain the relationships that mean so much to us.
- ✓ **Be mindful!**  
These are tricky times, so if we are feeling lonely or other strong emotions, being mindful can help! When you are mindful, you are focusing on the present and not on the "what if" or the past. This can help you focus on what you have as resources now and how you can stay grounded with what is in your control like your thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- ✓ **Engage in any hobbies, activities, or skill you have!**  
This could be anything! Such as sports, crafting, being around pets, going outside, riding your bike, coming to school, listening to music, reading a book, playing video games, watching TV/movies/YouTube, talking with friends or loved ones, setting goals, art, or writing/journaling!
- ✓ **Reach out for support when you need it!**  
Sometimes strong emotions can be too challenging to handle on our own. That is why it is important to know who we can go to when we need additional support. For example, family, friends, teachers/aides, school counselor, hotline professionals, mental health counselors (in the community), and other community supports (mentors, case workers, etc.)

## **How We Can Take Control of Our Mental Health!**

### Know the warning signs

When we begin feeling strong emotions, our behaviors, mindset, and mood can change, so it is important to recognize when these changes begin occurring so we can work towards feeling better and/or receiving support!

### **Emotional changes:**

- Feeling sadness, crying spells, tearfulness
- Frustrations or feeling angry over small issues
- Feeling hopeless, numb, empty
- Irritable or annoyed mood
- Loss of interest in activities you enjoy
- Loss of connection with supports or conflict with supports
- Low self-esteem, feeling worthless
- Fixating on past mistakes, self-blame, self-criticism
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure

- Trouble thinking, concentrating or making decisions
- Thoughts of death, dying, or suicide

### **Behavioral changes:**

- Tiredness or loss of energy
- Change in appetite; loss of appetite or increase in cravings
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Restlessness; pacing, excessive fidgeting, inability to sit still
- Slowed thinking, speaking, or reacting
- Frequent complaints of headaches and other body pains (stomach, chest, etc.)
- Isolating from others
- Frequent absences, declining or poor school/work performance
- Less attention to personal hygiene and appearance
- Outbursts or other disruptive/impulsive behaviors
- Self-harm
- Making a suicide plan or engaging in suicide attempt  
(Mayo Clinic, 2018)

### Use your resources, independently and with support

If you begin recognizing warning signs within your yourself, it is crucial that you begin using your resources to work through the adversity that could be causing these strong emotions.

If you begin to recognize warning signs in others, it is important to determine the best way to help them. If you are comfortable with helping them by asking how they are doing and talking with them, that can be the first step! Sometimes people need more support beyond talking to a friend or family member; that is when you can support them in reaching out for more support from a professional, such as a counselor.

### **Self-Care!**

Recognizing what you need to do to feel good can be the first step to feeling better! Getting enough sleep, drinking water, a balanced diet, prioritizing responsibilities, socializing, and creating a routine are all ways you can care for yourself, physically and mentally.

### **Coping Skills**

Using skills to cope with emotions is key! Doing something you enjoy that can be a distraction can help you begin to feel better, such as listening to music, reading or playing a sport. Skills can also include talking with someone about how you're feeling, challenging negative thoughts through positive self-talk, and using calming techniques like paced breathing or meditation.

### **Setting Goals**

Sometimes it takes many small steps, rather than a few large steps, to feeling better. Setting short-term, achievable goals can begin to help us feel successful and build more confidence. Each short-term goal is one step closer to a long-term goal we are striving toward. Goals can allow us to feel motivated, have a purpose, and improve our self-esteem even on the most challenging days!