

# CREATING CONNECTION TO COMBAT THE BLUES



By Lauren Verbilla, LPC

In 2016, studies showed that approximately 12% to 13% of youth ages 12 to 17 had experienced at least one major depressive episode in the last year. Currently, statistics provided by the National Institute of Mental Health indicate that as many as 20% of youth ages 13 to 18 are currently living with a mental health condition. Regardless of diagnosis, this reflects as much as a 7% increase in approximately two years. Locally, in 2017, over 250,000 middle and high school children in Bucks County were surveyed, and 33.5% reported feeling depressed at some point during that year. That is approximately 84,000 sad kids.

While it is known that children in this age bracket are undergoing many brain changes (one example being puberty) and face a number of school and social stressors, what is affecting these young people? Unfortunately, there is no single, concrete answer. A trinity or phrase that I like to keep in mind when considering the needs of children and adolescents is that everyone has the need to be seen, safe, and secure. A combination of these three things can help a person develop connections to others and build personal resilience that will be relied upon heavily throughout his/her

life. What exactly do these three words involve?

## Feeling Seen, Safe, and Secure

By allowing an individual *enough attention to feel recognized or understood*, a sense of connection or attachment can grow. The most common example of this is the connection between primary caregivers and infants as they develop through the first stages of life. Google “attachment” or look through any parenting book, and this process will be outlined in detail. Knowing that there is one person who can recognize a need and respond to fulfill it also instills a *sense of security*. Caregivers who can respond to signs of distress and soothe the person suffering send the message that that individual is worthy of such care. The final “S” in this triad, *safety*, evolves in a similar fashion as being seen and secure. To feel safe is to know that there is a connection, needs will be met, and that no physical or emotional harm is going to result from reaching out for support.

When an environment is created where kids can mature, try new things, make mistakes, etc. while also knowing that they are standing on a foundation of safety, understanding, and connection, a personal sense of value and worth can thrive. This mindset and patterns of brain development also act as a prime combatant of the intense sadness that was referenced earlier.

## What to Look For

Even with the best intentions and skills to create resiliency in a person, someone may still struggle with their mood. It is important for parents to understand when traits of general childhood or teenage cross into dangerous territory. Lists of warning signs to

declining mental health can be found in many places. Signs can include increasing sadness or worry, withdrawing from activities that were once enjoyable, decreased or increased appetite, a change in sleep pattern, difficulty concentrating, or increased risk-taking behaviors. If you notice this in a loved one, please do not be afraid to talk to him/her about this or to support him/her in seeking help. Nothing here is outside the realm of human experience, and discussing this should not be shied away from. What does need

acknowledgement is when these normal experiences cross the line into creating a barrier to daily life or begin to threaten someone’s well-being.

## What to Do

If you are noticing a combination of these in your loved one’s behavior, a number of resources exist to seek help. Parents, talk to your children about their experience. Show them that you understand and that they can bring this stuff to you (safe, seen, secure – remember!). Talk to your family doctor or make an appointment with

a counselor or therapist. Talk to school staff to find out if they have noticed anything off with your child and work with them to identify supports. Talk to other families or individuals who have experienced this and worked through it.

The point is to connect and talk about what your child is experiencing and reassure him/her that you will support and help him/her feel better. We are all on this journey together, and sometimes a simple reminder that we are not alone can make a world of difference.

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