**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

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**The Mental Health Impact of Remote Learning on our Children**

**A Q&A with Christopher Marino, Clinical Director at Community Mental Health Affiliates, Inc. (CMHA)**



With Gov. Lamont announcing last month that remote learning will no longer be an option this fall, many are wondering what parents and educators can do over the summer months to bring ourselves and our children back to some sense of normalcy…

**Q: As a mental health professional, what do you feel that the overarching impact of remote learning has been on students and educators?**

**A:** I think when we step back and consider the individual experience of each student and educator; we’ll realize that the impact remote learning has had is going to be unique to each person. It is easy for us to quickly make the assumption that remote learning has been nothing but a challenging adjustment for *everyone*. But for some students, remote learning has actually helped them feel more accomplished academically. Even for some educators, they have embraced the process and have gotten so creative that they have found ways to enjoy remote instruction. There is no disputing the fact that remote learning has led to social, emotional and behavioral health challenges for many students and educators, but I think we need to look at the impact of remote learning from a strengths based perspective and instead ask the question, *“how well did students and educators adjust to remote learning?”* I think you’ll find that many students and educators learned a lot about themselves and their abilities over the course of the year as a result of remote learning.

**Q: Given the fact that many students during COVID-19 have had to deal with mask and safety protocols for the first time, what are the best ways to re-introduce them to in-person socialization?**

**A:** As opportunities for in-person socialization continue to increase, many youth will be eager to take advantage of these opportunities to reconnect with their friends away from their screens. Overall, we have seen tremendous resiliency and adaptability with our kids between wearing masks and socially distancing. So for many of these kids, I expect we will continue to see them adapt to the expectations and limits of mask and safety protocols. The goal for adults is to avoid the assumption that *all* youth are excited for in-person socialization. Many students will be returning next year with real and understandable fears of risk to their physical health as well as challenges adapting to socializing in-person again – not to mention the academic pressures of being in-person again as well. It is recommended that educators and parents work together to develop clear and consistent language and responses to their children’s eagerness or hesitations. Validate those feelings for our youth and listen with the intent to understand.

 **Q:** **What can parents and caregivers do over the summer months to prepare their children for returning to in-person learning and activities?**

**A:** We know that this summer is going to be different, but it doesn’t have to be like last year. I think families are already feeling that eagerness to travel again and visit places like parks and the beach. So, we’ll definitely see a lot of families take advantage of those outdoor opportunities. And as long as it can be done safely, I encourage families to do so. I think the main point here that I want to send to parents is that we don’t need to re-invent summer for our kids. We might have to get a little more creative with how we do things, but we don’t need to overcompensate. Kids need to feel like they can predict what is happening in their lives. Try to remember what your family enjoyed in summer 2019 – I think it’s hard for us to even remember what life was like before 2020 but it did exist! Try to bring back as much as you can that you family already knows. Traditions, routines, anything that is familiar will be helpful to increase predictability and decrease anxiety children may be experiencing. Try to encourage playfulness with your kids, model it for them, and show them that it is okay to enjoy themselves and be happy and try new things. For our adolescents, especially those with driver licenses, there is going to be a lot of eagerness to get connected with their friends again. Parents may be holding a lot of anxiety and concerns rather than sharing in their teen’s excitement. In these situations, I encourage parents to have an open and honest conversation with their teens while remembering to validate their experience also. We have shown our kids that it is okay for them to begin to gain healthy control over things in their life again.

**Q: Students aren't the only ones who have felt the impact of COVID-19, how stressful has this pandemic been on teachers and educators, and why?**

**A:** I think one thing that has happened during the pandemic is that educators were asked to be extraordinarily resilient during extraordinarily stressful times. When most people were being locked down and working less, teachers were being asked to work harder. Parents and students continued to hold high expectations for educators, and educators were putting just as high – if not higher – expectations on themselves. Under normal circumstances, educators are often able to experience *compassion satisfaction*, which is the feeling we get when we are able to care for others successfully. When the pandemic suddenly locked down schools and forced everyone to remote learning, educators found themselves working harder but feeling like they were accomplishing less as attendance rates decreased and youth mental health concerns skyrocketed. Our educators didn’t give up though, and for most of the pandemic many of our educators experienced what something called *compassion fatigue*. This occurs when we care for others for a prolonged period and are exposed to the adverse experiences in their lives without experiencing enough compassion satisfaction. Many educators were left feeling helpless with educating and caring for their students remotely. But – throughout all of this adversity we have witnessed a beautiful rose grow through the cracks in the pavement. We have such resilient teachers. Our teachers continued to show up, get creative, and strengthen their own abilities as educators that they will carry with them into the future. After a year of so many personal and professional hardships, our educators are prepared now more than ever to re-connect with their students. Most importantly, district leadership must be aware of their responsibility in promoting wellness and self-care, and to remind their educators of the amazing accomplishments over the past year, and their courage and commitment that they continue to show to their students.

**Q:** **What advice/tools do you have for teachers and educators to practice self-care over the summer months?**

**A:** As a mental health professional, when I speak to clients about self-care I often ask the following question: *what meaning and purpose does this self-activity hold for you?* The concept of self-care for many people involves some sort of activity to feel better quickly when we are feeling high levels of distress, and we hold the idea that we can continue to use this self-care activity for any future incidences of distress also. Unfortunately, when we understand self-care through this problem-solving lens we tend to try to use self-care activities only in moments of crisis. I often will work with clients on challenging them to change their understanding of self-care by incorporating wellness activities into their daily routines. When we do this, we begin to value our mental health and overall wellness differently, and see self-care as something with much more meaning in our lives. The other piece of advice I make sure to give to clients is to make sure they do not quantify their self-care. Devices that measure heart rates or track steps are wonderful for individuals trying to live healthier lives; but we need to be careful in assigning a number to our self-care practices to avoid putting any unnecessary pressure or burdens on ourselves. Instead, I encourage client to qualify their self-care. Describe how their self-care activities make them feel. Lastly, I would recommend that our educators engage in self-care activities this summer that they can continue to use throughout the school year *as long as it does not cause any additional stress or burdens*. We are all trying to regain control in our lives – self-care practices are an excellent place to start!

**Q: What resources do you suggest your school community should access should anyone need additional support?**

**A:** I suggest that district leaders begin building meaningful connections and partnerships with the experts in their communities over the summer months. As the Clinical Director of Outpatient Behavioral Health Services for Community Mental Health Affiliates, I have been fortunate enough to have established wonderful partnerships with local school districts that will have an immediate impact on their school communities over the summer and into the following school year. These kind of partnerships are critical to strengthening community resiliency and giving both students, their families, and educators a sense of predictability and re-assurance that they know where to get support and resources.