

So what has it been like for a teenager during the pandemic?

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast, albeit remotely, from the beautiful studios at St. Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

The pandemic changed all our lives, but as tough as it's been for adults to change their behaviors in terms of our day-to-day practices, I'm sure it's been every bit as difficult if not more so for adolescents. The fog from the pandemic has cleared here in the Bronx, but what have we learned and what if it returns? With us today to take a look back and ahead is Kevin Green, a clinician with Child Adolescent and Family services at SBH Behavioral Health Services. Welcome,

So what were some of the issues you saw in terms of mental health of your young clients during this period?

Well during the onset when we had a transition to you know for a lot of people going from their routines completely upended. So one day they're in school, hanging out with their friends, playing sports, involved in all those community activities and then the next moment they're staying at home and transitioning to this new normal of remote learning on the computer, having to be with all of their siblings in a crowded apartment. What we were noticing is anxiety and nervousness and scared and hopeless and anger and fear and a lot of the grief and loss that we were seeing was coming up a lot and just feeling powerless and overwhelmed by the situation.

Has that improved at all now that things have tapered off?

I would say so you know if there's some people who are still worried of going outside and getting sick or even getting them, parents sick or their grandparents, sick or other family members or neighbors sick. So it's still an issue that is still ongoing and again on the onset. It was really about educating the parents and then in turn helping to educate their children to making sure they understand how serious the pandemic is you know.

It's funny. You see a lot of these videos on TV. You see a lot of young people congregating outside restaurants bars, what have you, not wearing masks? You see the political rallies and see marches every young generation feel they're immortal. Are you seeing that among your teenaged clients?

Normally they're going to be somewhat defiant it because if you wanna look at it in a medical term their brains haven't completely developed and they won't until around the age of 25. It's the you know the frontal lobe is not being completely developed in charge of what we call the executive functioning so impulse control, judgment and reasoning, you know it's not happening. With an adults so again, it's helping the parents talk with their teen and being open and straight forward of what is at stake and that safety first cause there is a lot at stake in that people could get sick from this.

Do you think in our community – I mean the Bronx was impacted dramatically obviously by the pandemic – do you think here maybe people are a little bit more in touch with reality than young people realize what can happen?

Absolutely, because and having a lot of the sessions with kids and teens early on, you would hear ambulances go by. It was very serious in March and April. Certainly so I think in seeing a lot of that at the time really help open their eyes and at the same time it allowed for important conversations to have during our sessions to educate them and help them understand how important it was to maintain, you know, safety precautions with the pandemic.

When you have teenagers, you know stuck with their parents for they weren't going to school parents weren't going to work for you know, basically, you know, 16 hours a day whenever they weren't sleeping did that present problems?

Well, I guess you know the whole thing was again with the routines being completely suspended. We're finding early on of teens staying up into the middle of the night and just being completely exhausted to even get on the computer and don't forget the parents were under a lot of pressure, you know when having to navigate multiple siblings on different laptops or different curriculums at the same time, some parents, you know, were continuing to work on the front lines and a lot of teenagers were concerned about you know the health and safety of their parents going to work at the hospital let's say, and some parents have lost their jobs and it's just really difficult and it was really stressful, you know, for the teen seeing their parents go through that too. So yeah. that's what we're seeing in early on.

Schools pretty much closed their doors in March, if you find that was problematic as far as virtual learning, I mean it's difficult for a lot of kids anywhere, but especially in this community to adapt to something like a virtual learning curriculum?

Yeah. So again, you know kids normally enjoy the social aspect of school and being with friends is an important part of their life. They miss their friends in their teens. They need to move so you know again having to be kind of quote stuck in the house or apartment, and feeling like they have a lack of control over the situation. so but again getting back to the transition of school, some of it had to deal with the fact that they were up and into the middle of the night let's say playing video games or texting friends and then not getting on the curriculum per se, but again through the sessions and just working through those moments, you know just to help the teens get on that consistent routine as if they were going to school help as we move along into the springtime until now.

I assume during this period, you saw your patients virtually, Right?

Correct, by phone sessions. Yes, which I thought was crucial to all of this because you know you have that connectedness. It's so important, especially in the crisis like the pandemic and so. Having that's already established therapeutic relationship with them definitely helped throughout the process because again, you know teens, it's important that we respond to their cues and emotions and being honest and straight forward, not just with the parents, but you know for us clinicians to just take the time to listen and take notice of how they're responding is so important and eventually we'll also have video.

It really wasn't that different, right?

Not at all. In fact, they were so excited to hear from me and from all of us on the unit and for everyone in the clinic, you know to just maintain that consistency and connectedness is so crucial in this situation, and I noticed that a lot of people were able to work through their coping skills in this new normal because of that.

Right, you know you mentioned earlier about computers. Did social media play a different or more important role during this period than say it normally would simply because people were not socializing?

Without a doubt because again, you have to be a little bit more strategic. When you're not, you're not able to meet with people in person and again when you talk about with everything that's at stake and teens, you know they normally wanna hang out and be close with their friends. Social media definitely plays a crucial role in all of this as long as it's within the limits where they're able to with people through social media, with Zoom or any other social media app talking with people on a video game. So yes, the social media played a very important role to keep people safe.

Did you encourage your teens to use social media, to use Zoom to connect with their friends and family members outside?

Yes, you know again within the limitations. So you know when you're talking about being able to stay connected and how to connect with other safely whether it's group chats and social media. They don't feel isolated to the Facetime again for the parents to explain to the team that hanging out with their friends, literally put lives at risk. So that's something that you know we're looking at, especially for people that were isolated. You know to encourage them to just stay connected with even the grandparents, you know, taking the time to do a video chat and just helping you know, teens learn empathy and compassion you know and then the parents you know can model them, which is so crucial to all of this.

Kevin, when you look back at this time, will this be memorable to you?

Oh without a doubt. I've been doing therapy work for quite some time and this is my new normal. So it's a journey that everyone is taking, you know, to be able to help people and help the community throughout this pandemic is something that's so important to me and helping you know, kids and teens and families work through the process is why I do this work for so long.

Did you learn anything different or anything surprise you even in terms of yourself, you know as a provider during this three month period?

So again, you have to practice what you preach. If you're telling people to get outside and get some fresh air and my lunch break, I you know with my new normal, I would you know go to the park and get some sunshine and vitamin D and come back in and start my afternoon so again because everyone has to take care of themselves and it's so important to you know. That you can't control and practice what you preach because you know we have to be there for them right now again.

Taking a look at the future, which is very unpredictable and we see what's going on in different parts of the country. Now, what can you do you know whether it's two weeks from now two months from now to deal with your Clients.

Well, just take it as it comes. You know, you have to be honest and straightforward with them. Understand that it won't feel like this forever and these are life lessons that people can look back on. We don't we don't know and the main thing is just keeping positive and staying optimistic and just taking the time to appreciate the things around you, acknowledging you know again for parents to acknowledge that they may not be spending time with friends. The graduations perhaps got cancelled, but the time that you know they were able to spend with family playing a board game or a video, having a family meal together, you know just carry on with you. whether this comes back or not, I think it's a good learning experience for everyone.

Do you think you're young clients you're in a different place today than they were three months ago. Have they grown?

People are resilient and they carry a lot of strength and it was so rewarding to see that to the last three months because it's just thinking about all the challenges of having to face just the uncertainties of all of this. But on top of that having to deal with just teenage life, life that's challenging in of itself and then you're adding on all of the other situations people with preexisting anxieties you're dealing with you know again the increases for. With you know again the being overwhelmed with schoolwork, let's say your parents have to be on the frontlines every day. so yeah, it's been a learning process, but what I noticed is kids are very resilient and they carry a lot of strength and the parents learn a lot from this too. As far as being strong, you know for themselves and for their kids and teens.

Kevin are there any signs you are talking about parents now are there signs that parents should look out for or make sure that their kids perhaps aren't fairing so well during this period?

For sure. So it's really responding to the kid's queues and emotions so a kid that usually is happy, let's say and doing well in school and all of a sudden they're closing the door and they're not interacting and not participating in. Let's say in school, they're shutting down. They're struggling. Those are the signs that you should look for. I'll give an examples. I have a 14-year-old that I work with. He didn't even want to engage in the beginning in phone sessions with me, let's say, March and April, and during our sessions in person he would come in and who would show some of the music he wrote and played on the guitar he would write songs and he would show me that on the phone. But again we have been strategically when you're having these sessions, I was speaking to him and saying, hey, you know what you know you're at home and can't bring the whole amp and electric guitar and so I wanna play a song so that was his end to just kind of starting to play and then we tapped into some of the other coping skills he could use and he wound up, you know engaging, a lot more as them in the last couple of months, so you know again it's parent, you know, even though they were frustrated, but he wasn't going on the computer and participating again when he was able to respond to Oh, you know what I can learn a new song on the guitar and you know I can start connecting with people try you know just do

what you can for the school and work so it definitely put them in a better place with a little bit of encouragement. So again if the parents notice that and they have to definitely respond to the other, kids, cues and emotions and helping them out.

I guess saying kids are resilient and during times of crisis they can rise to the occasion.

I think being able to see that you know in our phone sessions really helpful and also rewarding to see them go through the life challenges and being able to tap into those coping skills to get them through this, the and beyond you know, because it's ongoing. We don't know what the future holds, right. That makes it tough.

Kevin, thank you for a few minutes today. Is there a phone number our listeners could call for more information or to make an appointment?

Absolutely our intake is open. We're always accepting new cases so the telephone number for the intake at our office at 718 960-3071.

Okay great. Thank you very much for joining us today, Kevin. For more information on services available at SBH Health System, Visit www.sbhny.org. and thank you for listening. Until next time.