Mental Health, Stress Play Significant Roles in Health of Denver Youth

Mental and physical health challenges in the critical life phases of adolescence and emerging adulthood (ages 17-21) impact emotional and cognitive development. They also have the potential to affect an individual’s health and ability to thrive as an adult.

Emerging adults with psychiatric disorders, including depression and anxiety, have increased risk of unemployment, homelessness, early pregnancy, arrest/incarceration, and school dropout.

Recognizing the complexity of these health challenges, youth leaders, who led the YHA effort, identified factors at the individual, interpersonal and community level which contribute to the experience of stress.

Young people reported feeling an intense amount of stress in their lives. More than 10 percent of the 447 assessment survey responses identified stress as a key issue affecting youth health. Denver youth said they experience stress from:

- External pressure and expectations.
- Anxiety and uncertainty related to changes in their communities.
- Experiences of depression.

Young people said stress constrains their ability to eat healthy food and get adequate sleep. They also described the use of substances such as alcohol and marijuana as a key coping mechanism for addressing stress and other mental health challenges.

Source: Summarized from the 2017 Denver Youth Health Assessment

Through the YHA, young people also identified PYD approaches focus not on risk factors and...
how adults can support their resiliency when facing stress. In particular, they expressed the need for adults to:

- Validate the complex demands on young people’s time and be aware of the combined pressures that they face.
- Recognize that when it comes to accessing mental health services, young people have unique needs (including confidentiality) and barriers (including financial).
- Advocate for comprehensive, youth-friendly behavioral health services that meet those needs and address barriers.
- Listen to their needs and consider how you or your organization can provide support.
- Learn about, and use, the principles of Positive Youth Development (PYD) to initiate meaningful conversations with young people directly.

PYD efforts are:

- Strengths-based.
- Inclusive.
- Engaging youth as partners and equals.
- Collaborative, and sustainable rather than temporary.

Programs based on PYD, value and prioritize the meaningful engagement of youth in programs—not just as participants but as leaders of the activities and interventions that impact them—and ensure that the young people participating experience benefits from their involvement.

One way to assess the extent which an organization or program is engaging youth in a meaningful way is to review the Ladder of Youth Participation and determine how aspects of the higher rungs could be incorporated.

ROGER HART’S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

RUNG 8 - Youth initiated shared decisions with adults: Youn-led activities, in which decision making is shared between youth and adults working as equal partners.

RUNG 7 - Youth initiated and directed: Youth-led activities with little input from adults.

RUNG 6 - Adult initiated shared decisions with youth: Adult-led activities, in which decision making is shared with youth.

RUNG 5 - Consulted and informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth are consulted and informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of adult decisions.

RUNG 4 - Assigned, but informed: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, decision-making process, and have a role.

RUNG 3 - Tokenism: Adult-led activities, in which youth may be consulted with minimal opportunities for feedback.

RUNG 2 - Decoration: Adult-led activities, in which youth understand purpose, but have no input in how they are planned.

RUNG 1 - Manipulation: Adult-led activities, in which youth do as directed without understanding the purpose of the activities.


What Are We Doing?

- **Denver Public Health**: is implementing and evaluating new models of youth engagement in public health programs:
  - Nine youth ages 15-18 were hired to work 4-8 hours per month on the YHA.
  - Since 2015, Denver Public Health has employed three Peer Youth Advisors who work 20 hours per week on grant-funded youth engagement projects.
  - New substance abuse prevention coalitions employ 10 youth to work as coalition members and youth outreach leaders.
  - Denver Public Health, in partnership with the City of Denver, is facilitating coordination among youth-serving and youth advocacy organizations in Denver.

What Can You Do?

- Review additional opportunities for action in each section of the 2017 Denver YHA.
- Consider where your current youth engagement is on the Ladder of Youth Participation. Examine what you can do to move it to a higher rung.
- Request a Positive Youth Development training by emailing lorin.scott-okerblom@state.co.us.
- Connect with existing groups of young people to get input on youth-related efforts. Consider:
  - Mayor Hancock’s Youth Commission.
  - The statewide Youth Partnership for Health.
  - Youth Advisory Boards of Metro Youth Alliance, Mirror Image Arts, or Children’s Hospital Colorado.
- Meet youth where they are and when possible, when they are already meeting, rather than asking them to come to your organization or meeting.
- Engage young people in processes, policies and decision making.
- Compensate youth fairly for their time and expertise. Look for creative ways to provide compensation beyond gift cards and transit vouchers.