Research Says Schools Need Mental Health Programs

With more than 40 percent of adolescents struggling with mental health problems in the U.S., it is said that less than 25 percent seek help. As they face difficulties ranging from anxiety problems, depression, bipolar and eating disorders, many struggle to navigate their way through school and in turn self medicate through the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Nearly 11 percent of teenagers consume alcohol while 10.1 percent use drugs to cope. But new research has found that by adding a mental health program through the educational school systems can help to alleviate a range of teenage woes, while improving high school student’s grades, rates of substance use and even obesity.

The study, lead by Ohio State University College of Nursing, looked to a group of high school students by providing them with a program called COPE (Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment.) The program, created by Bernadette Melnyk, teaches cognitive behavioral skills with added nutrition and physical activity practices that improved students’ social behavior, depression, drug and alcohol use and their academic success compared to teenagers in standard health classes.

“This is what has been missing from prior healthy lifestyle programs for teens,” said Melnyk, a dean at the University of College of Nursing. “[We need to get] to the thinking piece.” With the new research supporting the need for more schools using mental health programs, 779 high school students ranging in ages from 14 to 16 were the first to participate in the study to test the
effectiveness of the program. With the study having been recently published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, the research found that the program was able to reduce scores of depression in almost half of the teenagers.

Melnyk, who discovered COPE more than 20 years ago while working for a psychiatric unit for children and adolescents, bases the program off of concepts taken from cognitive behavioral therapy and skill building practices. Though straying from therapy sessions in the classroom, the COPE program instead implements 50 minute sessions providing behavioral skills, physical activity, and nutritional information given through instructional manuals.

“These are skills that I can teach a variety of professionals how to deliver,” said Melnyk, who led pilot studies alongside her team with COPE. “They don’t have to be certified therapists.”

The COPE program exercises the linkage between overall thinking patterns that can affect the emotional and behavioral outcomes many teenagers express, such as negative thoughts and beliefs students may have about themselves. “[We show kids] that instead of embracing a negative belief, they can turn that around to a positive belief about themselves,” says Melnyk who notes that while schools are great at teaching lessons in math and social studies, many teens are missing out on crucial life skill and problem solving solutions they need to deal with stress.

While 10 percent of the participants reported having anxiety and depression symptoms before the study, more than 23.4 percent were considered obese for their age range. But as COPE came to a close, the student’s numbers in mental health, overall weight, and academic success improved greatly compared to a controlled class who received basic educational health lectures. While Melnyk and her team could not point out the exact component of COPE’s success, she believes the entirety of the programs served as the basis of its overall effectiveness.

While Melnyk and her research suggest the need for more schools to use mental health programs for their students, she also plans to continue implementing the COPE program across the country.

Written by Annie Elizabeth Martin

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