Youth in Crisis...

When I first came to Mental Health America of Central Carolinas in October 2017, I must admit that I came to the position with a bit of naiveté, but every day I realize that we are faced with the realities of a mental health crisis in our community, our state, our country. In November, our national affiliate, Mental Health America, released its State of Mental Health in America report, which showed alarming numbers and trends relating to our youth.

According to the report, in a five-year period, rates of severe youth depression have increased; 50% of those youth screened age 11-17 often think about suicide or self-harm throughout the week; more than 78% of youth with severe depression—1.7 million kids—did not get the treatment they need.

“I wish I could say the mental health of our children is improving. Our report shows the opposite,” said Paul Gionfriddo, president and CEO of Mental Health America. “Far too many youth people are suffering—often in silence.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 5 American children ages 3 through 17—about 15 million—have a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder in a given year. Recent research also indicates that serious depression is worsening in teens, especially girls, and the suicide rate among girls reached a 40-year high in 2015.

“Child and adolescent mental health disorders are the most common illnesses that children will experience under the age of 18. It’s pretty amazing, because the number’s so large that I think it’s hard to wrap our heads around it,” said Dr. Harold Koplewiz, founding president of The Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit children’s mental health advocacy group.

There are some who attribute this increase in teens experiencing mental health issues to social media and too much screen time. There is some truth in the fact that today’s young people are “missing out on critical social skills development when they spend the majority of their free time connected to and interacting through a screen” (Is Social Media Messing With Your Teen’s Mental Health? by Katie Hurley, LCSW). Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., writes in her article entitled Why So Many of Today’s Teens are Depressed, that increases in depressive symptoms in youth began around the time that social media became almost a necessity for teens. “I’d found that teens were spending less time with their friends in person and more time communicating electronically.” Twenge called for more research to be done in this area, but states, “Right now, smartphone use is the most likely change agent, so it’s the one I’m addressing with my own children, and the one I think other parents should consider.”

Regardless of the reasons behind more young people experiencing depression and having thoughts of suicide and self-harm, there are things we can do to address the problem before a crisis: (Source: America’s Youth is in Crisis—Here’s How You Can Help, Theresa Nguyen, MHA Vice President of Policy and Programs):

Have a conversation. It seems today that young people are less afraid to talk about their mental health problems. We should take advantage of their willingness to have a conversation by making sure we can respond adequately to their request for help. For families who have a history of mental illness, it is important to create a culture of openness and awareness.

Get screened. If you think something might be going on, the internet provides free and anonymous opportunities to explore mental health problems. Screenings are just a first step, just like for cancer or diabetes. You can take more than one screen or take the same screen over a period of time.
Learn more. Once you know what might be going on, the most powerful and important thing you can do for yourself or a loved one is to be informed. Start with looking up basic information about mental health problems. This could help with what next steps to take.

Get help. It is understandable that it might take time to work through whether you reach out or how you want to get help. If things get worse, you might reach a point where dealing with problems alone is hard.

I would encourage those looking for answers to visit our website, www.mhacentralcarolinas.org, for online screening tools, community providers, classes, support groups and other valuable information.

Giles Andreae, a British author, said, “Here is the tragedy: when you are the victim of depression, not only do you feel utterly helpless and abandoned by the world, you also know that very few people can understand, or even begin to believe that life can be this painful. There is nothing I can think of that is quite as isolating as this.”

I hope collectively, as a community and as a country, we can work to educate ourselves and others about mental health, have a dialogue, and change the trajectory of our youth and others suffering in silence.