

>> Thank you for tuning in to the healthy minds podcast where we host conversations with people who are really good listeners and we asked them to share with us and Lucy Caldwell and I work for the Fairfax County public schools. Today's topic is a difficult one and I want to say that up front but there's in my view no more important one for educators parents and the community to address youth suicide.

We're talking today with Whitney McDonough he's a social worker at West Potomac high school he's been a social worker with that CPS for 25 years and she has a wealth of knowledge and experience working with adolescents and families during her time here she's worked with all levels of education elementary middle and high school.

And she's been in specialized programs such as public day schools school based special education programs working with emotionally disabled students. Her most recent assignment is West Potomac high school where she's been for 12 years at West Potomac Whitney provides individual and group interventions consults with teachers and parents regarding emotional behavioral and learning challenges.

And some of the areas of her expertise include suicide prevention. Threat assessment training crisis team leadership and teaching educators how to create trauma informed classrooms.

Her passion, however, is working with teens and helping them cope with relationship and social issues, anxiety and depression.

When she's not working, she loves to be outside with your husband in 2 dogs walking hiking biking or sitting on the front porch in reading a good book she's mom to 3 adult children twin boys who recently graduated from college. And a daughter.

Visitors 3rd year of college when you received her master's in social work. It Smith College School for social work and has been trained in psycho dynamic interpersonal in family systems techniques.

Thank you for being here Whitney thank you for having me what a resume gosh, we're so lucky to have you we really are and and I know it's a tough subject in so I want to warn anybody listening that the conversation we just try to be real we try to talk on the healthy minds podcast about issues and topics that if you haven't been impacted someday you may so it's good to have these conversations.

I want to say that most recent data by the CDC that's the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that the rate of suicide among people aged 10 to 24, increased by nearly 60% between 2007 2018 this is a serious public health tragedy. And we have to look at why this is happening.

Just read yesterday when I was getting ready to have this conversation with you that 7 in 10 teens is struggling with their mental health right now. Probably pandemic-related I'd say in all the isolation.

In June.

The CDC surveyed Americans on their mental health and they found the symptoms of anxiety depression were up sharply across the board and young people were the hardest hit of any group.

Almost 11%

of the respondents to the CDC survey said that they had seriously considered suicide in the past 30 days.

For those ages, 18 to 24 the number was one in 4, almost twice as high and it's good to have you here now even though it's October because September was suicide prevention month and I want to discuss the program. It's part of nearly all its EPS middle and high schools called signs of suicide or S o S

in students aren't in school right now so how are we doing this S o S program first of all in the virtual world.

>> Well, we that's where we really turned to parents because we really need parents help

we're trying to figure out how to do that in the virtual world and and the regular world when we're in brick and mortar buildings we have a program called S o S signs of suicide.

And this is an educational curriculum.

It's a nationally recognized suicide prevention curriculum.

And what it does is it raises awareness about behavioral health.

It encourages students to act so when I say to

act that is a verb but also act as an acronym that stands for awareness care and tell.

And it's so important to know the signs of suicide because like you said this is a serious health issue that's affecting a huge.

You know a huge segment of our population.

I mean your statistics are absolutely right suicide has increased in does it is the second leading cause of death for kids age 10 to 20.

So we really need to bring awareness to it and we need to talk about how we can prevent it because it is a very preventable situation.

So this program as you said earlier has been implemented and our middle and high schools for the past several years by social workers psychologists and counselors and the goal of it is to reduce suicide attempts

and to increase student knowledge and attitudes about depression.

So it does help reduce the stigma.

Hopefully of mental illness.

And it really encourages personal help seeking or help seeking for friends or on behalf of a friend.

So so that's the gist of the program and the kids watch a video and following the video.

They fill out a questionnaire

they're 7 question survey, assessing their risk for depression and or suicidal risk and and then we see those kids immediately so it's a pretty comprehensive program.

>> What types of class or course are the exposed to this program in.

Well at the high school level it's their advisory class it's a period that they have every other day for 90 minutes.

And we try to do a lot of social emotional learning lessons and that class and so it's usually presented in that class

this is something that sort of new with that CPS or has it been ongoing we've been doing this for several years now at the middle and high school level.

What are some of the reactions you get when you talk about this program and kids comfortable with this or he was especially when you.

He begin when you first started what's the reaction of kids when you walk in how do you open the program right well we open by saying exactly how you opened this podcast saying we're going to talk about a subject that's really hard to talk about, but we need to talk about it because it's important and we want you to pay close attention to this video because you're going to learn and a lot of things are going to learn what to look for.

While there is no one cause of suicide.

The common you know the common condition associate with suicide as depression and either undiagnosed depression or untreated depression.

So we we want to educate the kids as to what to look for so that they will know if they have a friend who is really struggling.

They will know what to do so they'll know they recognize the signs and then they'll know what to do and also if they're having trouble so this is you know, it's

you asked what their reaction is yeah reactions across the board some kids are happy to be there because they're getting out of class.

Yeah, kids would love to do their homework.

We've had to take homework away we some kids would like to be on their phone.

We have them and their phones in a paper bag so they can see I mean we tried to do everything to the number of distractions but I think I think for the most part people appreciate it.

Do they rate it after the class and series or any kind of feedback are valuation.

Not really I mean that the evaluation is their survey that they complete at the end which really assess their risk for suicide.

But other than that we don't get feedback like you know this was greater, I wish I didn't have to do this you have kids they're students come up to you afterwards and want to talk absolutely

good and depending on how these kids answer the survey, we meet with some time 20 to 30 kids in that one day after the video.

If these if they've answered questions in a certain way we pulled them to make sure that they're OK and we do send several every time we do the screening recent several to marry field for an emergency evaluation remind everybody what Mary field is Mary field is the emergency.

It's an emergency psychiatric hospital and it's open 24 7 and if you have any concerns about your child or about somebody else's child that's where you need to be is that Mary field.

It's such a serious topic it's probably so hard for parents to to hear that that's that the numbers you're talking about just in your school in your program that are sent to talk about these issues with an external professional and while there's certainly nothing to be afraid of this is the first step and the brave a step that anybody can take with you say at 100%.

Yes.

What are some of the things that the kids say to you.

The pressures that they're seen I mean what could be so you know it's hard for parents like myself to understand

what could be so hard that these kids are facing so share with us some of the things you feel in your colleagues feel that are so hard that might surprise parents.

Well, I think social media is very a very difficult thing for these kids that's where they are all the time we have so many different platforms their snapchat and instagram and I even know most of them.

But

people are posting pictures of them having a great time and we can you know they always look fabulous the only post the pictures where you know they're having fun and that's hard that's hard to see because then you think everybody's having fun except for me so I think the social media aspect is very challenging for kids.

What do you say to them when they

when they talk to you about that I remind them like look at what you post you post things on it when you're looking good only when you're having a great time you're not posting pictures of yourself crying in her bedroom.

So you have to realize that other people are doing the same thing it's not always rainbows and unicorns and other people's lives, people have struggles and issues just like you do and

and we just have to remember that it's not.

>> It's not always as it seems cool would have people in your line of work say about oversharing or sharing so much.

But does that mean and what does that look like and how kids feel about it.

You mean oversharing on social media.

Yes.

>> Yeah, well you're talking majors who think they know everything so I try to tell them

often times they think you don't really know what you're talking about that we just keep telling them

be careful what you share just be careful.

What you share their boundaries please maintain those boundaries and a lot of kids do listen to that and some don't.

>> And so I guess that's one of the main things that you're hearing from the students is are the problems and when things don't go well when they're sharing things right.

>> Right and we'd we just we want to encourage them to keep sharing and that's that's part of this program is that usually kids who make suicidal gestures.

They do talk about it they talk about it sometimes on social media, they talk about it in a journal for in this class they talk about it with your friends.

So they are

they are telling people that they're not doing well.

And so the purpose of these suicide prevention programs is to help kids learn to act to acknowledge to care and to tell someone

because that can save lives and so we depend on these students to come to us when they see things on social media

and that's how we get a lot that's how we identify a lot of our students who are having trouble is through social media because kids have come to us to say MS.

Mcdonagh so and so just posted this what do you think what should we do. And that's perfect that's exactly what they want them to do what we want them to do is come to a trusted adult because they don't they don't know how to handle this. We the adults to all the adults in our building have been trained with how to deal with a student who might be at risk. And there are lots of resources at the school another the counselors, the social workers, a psychologist, there's one social worker and psychologist in every school. So for them just to come to any trusted adult in the school that's great we'll take it from there you just need to let us know when did the parents get involved. So the parents get involved as soon as we meet with the student and realize that they're at risk we call them immediately and ask them to come up so we can meet with them or ask them to come up to take their child for an evaluation. Because we'll do a screener and if they if they score a certain number on the screen are then obviously we get alarms and want to make sure that the student is safe and is going to get some treatment that can be tough news for a parent to hear very hard news very hard news. But I'll tell you the parents I've dealt with have been amazing they drop what they're doing they come right up and there, you know it's scary, it's very it is absolutely a and so, but there are resources and we we can prevent suicide, we really can by by following these guidelines that that signs of suicide has taught us we can help prevent this.

>> What about shows that depict suicide. You know I think about 13 reasons I don't know if anybody else remembers that it was that was going to come in maybe 3 or 4 years ago that came out and and actually I watched it and I thought it was pretty accurate of how people can be in a high school. Although there was a lot of drinking is cut the thing I was surprised about yeah, so I don't know how accurate all that was but I mean I don't have kids at home anymore so I don't know exactly light are grown and gone. I guess when I when I looked at that show and I thought about that show in the popularity that show and young kids we're watching that show our shows like that that depict suicide pretty accurately are pretty harshly and that the painful reality is that something that people with your background would recommend or does it open a conversation what put the people say about that.

>> It can open the conversation it's hard it's hard to say that your kids can't watch this because everybody has access to netflix it's on people's phones. That my recommendation would be as a parent to say hey I heard that there's this show 13 reasons on netflix what we watch that together I would definitely recommend that parents

watch that with their kids so that way they can answer any questions that come up are they can process I there.

I think there's 10 or some well, I guess there are 13 lessons are 13 episodes. But there's a lot to process after every episode it could be a great great discussion.

>> And they have different seasons to I think there were 3 different seasons of the show, but the first one was the one that really had people talking right. But the others.

How early do you think parents should have these discussions about self-harm and their feelings and one of those early discussions, look like for parents of younger kids who might be listening.

>> Right.

Well, I think the parents of younger kids, you know you have to tailor it to their developmental level.

And I I think

I think so many parents are worried that if they say the word suicide if they bring the word up that they're putting that and their kids minds that's not true.

Our kids are they're very bright and suicide is everywhere.

It's all over the news.

They're movie stars who have died by suicide, they're rock stars who died of suicide.

And then there are movies like the one we were just talking about it everywhere.

And it's all over social media and so

by bringing it up you're not introducing that topic to them they know about it.

But what you are doing is you're offering them the opportunity to have a discussion with you and so for the younger kids if they you know if they are self-harming or if they are showing some sort of signs

you need to have that conversation with them and come right out and ask have you had thoughts of hurting yourself have you thought about taking your life

and it's really hard it's a really hard conversation for parents to have but it needs to happen and

not only does it need to happen to give you further information but it also gives the message to your child that we can talk about this, even though it's hard we can talk about it and we're going to get through it, I'm going to support you no matter what

but it's important when you're asking questions to kind of ask open ended questions not a question that can be answered with a yes or no because that kind of brings the conversation to a halt doesn't really give you any word ago so to have some open ended questions to really just listen and try not to say too much to really resist the urge to jump in and fix it.

Well, why don't you try this.

Oh well I've had that what you try this

don't get as much as you want to do that and I'm urging you not to just to let your child do the talking.

But anyway I I think it's important if you're if you're concerned at any age to have the conversation dependent on the developmental stage and if you're not sure how to have that conversation call somebody and have them help you have that conversation with your child,

a mental health professional or consult with the social worker psychologist at your

child's school that absolutely.

>> And there are a lot of different programs mental health first aid, the cod need training programs.

Do you know about those and how people can access those yes, well, I know.

>> Some of those are at the elementary level, I know the mental health first aid is up high school level and those classes, those trainings are always very heavily attended and populated the kids love that.

And you can find out about that I think through leadership classes are just kids can ask their counselor.

>> And first talk need disco on to the CPS website and do a search you can find out how to do those simulations stir quite interesting I think and hopefully people if they have any concerns or they're just curious.

We want people to check that out

our our website has a lot of material on it we get it we hear that all the time people can't find things but just use that little question mark that little search bar

and put called need in there and hopefully that will help you.

One of the things about suicide is family history does that play a role.

You have an uncle or grandfather,

or somebody in your family or even your sister who's in college.

Her best friend, how does it play a role.

>> Yes family history of suicide, definitely increases one's risk of suicide the things that increase your risk for substance abuse.

Already diagnosed depression,

or undiagnosed depression and family history.

The are the big precursors.

>> And really the family history is sort of that exposure to trauma, how does a new U or trauma informed and that's when your specialties talk a little bit about that because

I think the word trauma might fall on deaf ears to some folks and it's important a piece into people's life and we don't say why are they doing this they say what happened.

>> To this person picks talk about that a little bit sadly so trauma can be just one single incident,

or you can have complex trauma where there's something like child abuse that happens over years or witnessing domestic violence over years.

And when you when you experienced trauma whether it's an isolated incident or whether it's complex.

It it has it takes an emotional toll and

particularly anxiety and depression, those are the some of the major mental health disorders that we see with some of our kids who've suffered trauma.

And if that's not treated

then that could lead to suicide because you think about

whatever has happened in your past and if you're not able to talk about if you're not able to work through it if you're not able to get yourself in a different spot. That's where we start to worry.

>> Definitely think that having a

conversation maybe for a future podcast about trauma informed care and how

everybody needs to sort of recognize, and know what trauma is not only in their children's lives for people they care about that in themselves that to give themselves that break you've been exposed to trauma.

This explains a lot right right.

>> And you why you can't undo the trauma right you can provide safe places for these kids you can provide connection, it's really connection connection connection. That's what it's all about.

And if you provide that connection and you provide the safe place.

Oftentimes that helps kids kind of hurry center and they're able to function better in the classroom,

just with those just with those things just with

the safety the consistency, I know that this is a safe place and that my teacher cares about me.

So again it's not going to undo the trauma, but it's going to create a space that hopefully they'll be able to not focus so much on that and be able to move forward.

>> Yeah that's that's what we all need we need those connections and for people to to realize they're not alone and there are people who care about them and sometimes I think

people just especially now with the covid

people are feeling isolated isolated.

Yes is very very low.

Yes,

where can people learn more about some of these issues that we're talking about.

>> Well like I said before you can always reach out to the social workers psychologists at your school or a counselor we're we're all trained in this and we all know what to do if we

have students that were worried about but they're also great resources and the county.

There's the crisis link and hot line.

And there's also that CPS tip line which is the anonymous tip line Rican of anybody can call it

and about concerns for mental health or not just mental health really anything.

>> I think we should be promoting that online, especially right now I did too so stand by I'm going to have a nother podcast

with somebody who works on that line

and talk about it because I think

as I always say I've only been with Fairfax County public schools for a year, but I learn something every day and when I learned I want to just tell everybody in our community because I do know

as a parent that it's hard and you have a lot of information that's being thrown at you and it

takes time to process and none of us are able to capture everything that we need to know

how to help her children through these these times and

we don't know the uncertainty of not knowing.

What's ahead

is is really hard for a parent,

not only for the child, but for the parents

and that your child is looking to you and how you respond to this uncertainty so so

it's a very unusual tough time.

I'd say for everybody

but I like what you said about just staying connected being connected.

And thinking about in your own life, maybe how you can get more connected to people that you care about that you know,

and maybe go to that next level with them of indifference see as far as having is real conversations, real authentic human conversations right.

And the kids will appreciate that they appreciate

they know when we're being authentic or not I agree.

Lately and in a pre she ate when we are being authentic

absolutely I completely agree as hard as it is that's really that's all you have is that truth

between you and your your child if you're not going to do it who is right right right.

>> And especially now that we're not in school we really do look to parents to provide this education for their kids since we're not able to do it right now.

So parents can talk to their kids let them know what to look for let them know what depression looks like you know these are the signs, you know lack of sleep or too much sleep.

Losing interest in and preferred activities isolating yourself from other people.

Just all the signs and symptoms parents can teach their kids that and they can teach their kids

to listen to their friends and they can teach their kids

packed to go tell an adult if they're worried about a friend or if they think a friend is in crisis and need some help

to be that gate keeper yeah as someone else we need parents now more than ever since we're not in the schools say parents are very crucial.

>> Piece of this they are thank you parents for listening and thank you for helping not only your child that your child's friend

ins and other children in our community

is it really does it takes everybody to have that caring in

to go that extra mile sometimes, but before I let you go I want to ask you 3 quick questions, okay.

When was the last time you learn something new today,

well, I'm going to learn something I'm going to find out who answers that

and I'm gonna find out the origins of this program, okay, good

when was the last time you did something fun.

2 days ago, I took a nice long bike ride with my husband, nice which again just have to Mount Vernon and I know that so that every 15 miles round trip.

When was the last time you meet a new friend.

The last time made a new friend.

I would say probably several weeks ago.

I got together with some work colleagues and that somebody that had met before.

So I yes, so that was meeting a new person.

Yeah, it's been too strange, she knew to be disconnected physically from people and I really miss that

and I miss making new friends so or so I'd like to ask that

to in part to shoo listeners that you can even during the pandemic

find ways to meet people yes and connect with people and make a new friend it absolutely so.

>> Thank you Whitney for being here today and if you my listeners have a topic you'd like the healthy minds podcast to explore.

>> Please let us know send us your suggestions to him.