

## **'It's difficult for us to strike a balance': Students, professionals talk about suicide prevention and mental health**



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At a recent meeting, panel members, including local students, discussed suicide prevention and mental health issues in the community.

On Thursday, Sept. 9, members of the Forsyth County Drug Awareness Council hosted “Connect to Protect: A Focus on Youth Mental Health” at Local Church Forsyth, where community leaders, school officials, students and more discussed mental health challenges facing Forsyth County students and ways to deal with those issues.

“We are here to help inform. We are here to listen to our youth. We’re here because mental health is a big problem,” said Forsyth County Commission Chairwoman Cindy Jones Mills, who led the meeting. “It is a pandemic within a pandemic that we are seeing the numbers just skyrocket.”

Here’s a look at what the panel discussed during the meeting.

## **Looking at the numbers**

Throughout the meeting, speakers touched on data for mental health issues in the school system and community.

Mills said she had spoken with the Forsyth County Coroner's Office and found that in 2020, eight-county residents died of suicide, compared with 13 already in 2021, an increase of 62.5%.

"The ages in that 13... they go anywhere from 14 years old to 90," she said.

Similarly, she said she heard from officials with the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office that deputies had responded to three suicide calls the day of the meeting.

Karin White, Forsyth County School's lead school social worker, spoke about a survey a statewide survey on mental health for students

"Last school year, we had approximately 3.1 middle school students that expressed that they have attempted suicide on at least one occasion, and in our high schools, we had 2.1% of high school students reported that on any number of occasions they wanted to die by suicide," she said.

White said that more than 40% of middle and high school students reported facing symptoms of depression, such as not eating and feeling withdrawn.

She said that rate had dipped in the last year, but likely not for positive reasons.

"During the pandemic, we did see a slight decrease in the number of students who had suicidal ideations, attempts and self-injuring behaviors," White said, "and I feel the reason for that is many of our students were virtual, so it was kind of hard to report some of the students and capture some of the students who weren't in our building and attended school virtually."

Lisa Schneider, Children Healthcare of Atlanta's nursing director of behavioral and mental health, said one in five children have a diagnosable behavioral or mental health disorder and for adolescents, the number is one out of two.

"So, 50%, half, of all adolescents have had a diagnosable behavioral or mental health disorder at some point in their lives," Schneider said. "Currently, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for ages 10-24. That's more deaths for that age group than cancer, heart disease and congenital abnormalities combined."

Cindy Levi, CEO of Avita Community Partners, a resource for individuals and families in northeast Georgia facing issues with mental health, addiction and intellectual and developmental disabilities, said more than nine out of 10 students feel that suicide is a major issue among their peers.

"Do teens really think about suicide? Yes, they do, unfortunately," she said. "In fact, 92% of teens surveyed indicate that suicide is a big issue in their community, and one in five teens reports seriously considering suicide."

While many students consider suicide, Levi said few actually want to end their lives.

"As a matter of fact, most teens call for help after a suicide attempt," Levi said. "Suicide really isn't about death or dying. It's about ending the pain. Sometimes it's a physical pain, but most often it is emotional pain, an individual feels trapped in a situation that they don't know how to resolve."

## **What issues students are facing**

To help students tackle mental health issues, the panel also discussed what changes students today face.

Referencing the student survey, White said "the number one reasons that students gave for wanting to die by suicide were due to family issues and academic concerns."

Along with local leaders and professionals, students from FullCircle, a support group for teens facing mental health or substance abuse issues, and from the Forsyth County Youth Council, a group of high school juniors and seniors representing each county commission district to get involved with local government, also shared their experiences.

For many, factors like the competitive nature of local schools, stress to succeed in that environment, the stigma of talking about mental health and a lack of support systems around them are common causes of mental health issues.

"I know even if people have these support groups that we're talking about, a lot of times it's challenging to openly talk to their friends, their family about their issues," one student said. "So, I think just the stigma of mental health, in general, is a really big issue and hard to overcome."

"I think academics play a really big role in declining mental health," another student added. "When there becomes a discrepancy between personal life and with academics, I think it's difficult for us to strike a balance, especially these days -- naturally, we feel frustrated. Oftentimes, this can lead to excessive amounts of worry and fear, which can ... develop into more severe issues."

Another student said she grew up with the pressure to succeed in school, which used to cause her to "completely break down" when she got a B or C on a test before she realized that it was alright not to be perfect.

"Recently, I've been trying to find a balance between school, friends, relationships and FullCircle," she said. "But the biggest thing for me was to accept that I'm not perfect,

and if I try to do everything perfect, I'm just going to stress myself out way too much and cause myself all these problems that I can avoid by just doing the best I can, and If I can't do it, I can't do it."

## Resources and tips

Though much of the meeting focused on what students are going through, the panel also touched on several ways to help them through their issues.

Schneider said suicide is "100% preventable" but those efforts need to happen at every level: individual, in relationships and in the community.

"One of the most important pieces is intervening at a very young, early age, teaching kids resiliency and coping skills to better deal with life's challenges," she said. "Another is to... talk about mental health, ask those questions. It's OK. Maybe you have a child who is isolating or doesn't feel confident or too scared to talk to you, and asking those questions can draw a lot of information, and when you do actually talk to them, actively listen."

Levi said along with school stressors, students may also face issues with unexpected pregnancies, breakups, drug use at home, family divorce, death of a loved one and sexual orientation are among issues that local youth can face that can compound mental health issues.

"Just because a youth faces one of those experiences, it doesn't mean that they will ever, ever consider suicide, but what it does mean is if they do experience those [feelings], they need guidance, support and an opportunity to develop the coping skills that are necessary," she said. "Because without that guidance, support and love and without the coping skills, you may start observing some warning signs."

She said those dealing with mental health issues, particularly students, can give signs like talking about dying, researching suicide methods, abrupt changes in habits and giving away possessions.

Mills said students often face pressure from their families to be high-achievers while also being taught to be tough and "not letting people walk all over you," but also felt parents should focus on compassion.

"I feel like as parents and grandparents, we should be saying more often, 'If I see someone that is retreating, go over and extend a hand, ask them how their day is, give them a smile,'" Mills said. "Those are things that don't cost anything, just to show you care."

When asked what advice she would give her past self or other students who were struggling, a student who is part of the FullCircle program said she would tell both that they can make it through what they are facing.

"When you're going through it, you feel like you're completely alone, that you want to end your life," she said. "Being on the other side of it is this newfound hope I have, and I know no matter what hits me in life, I'm going to be OK and I'm going to get through it. That's what I would want to tell other people, and that's what I would tell myself as well, 'You're going to be OK and you're going to get through it."

Members of the panel also gave a variety of online and in-person resources available to those dealing with mental health issues, including the Georgia Crisis and Access Line, or GCAL, mobile app, which connects users to an anonymous trained professional to discuss their issues.

Forsyth County Schools also offers a [variety of student support programming](#), including health services, a mindfulness pilot program, psychological services and more. More information can be found at <https://www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/page/676>.