

Mental Health Monday: HAPPIER U

Bill Pollock

We're back on. Show Me Today, The Voice of Missouri. And on this segment of Mental Health Monday, we're joined by Rachel Jones, a licensed professional counselor and the manager of trauma informed treatment at the Department of Mental Health. Rachel, thank you for joining me.

Rachel Jones

Thank you for having me.

Bill Pollock

All right. So we're going to talk about HAPPIER U. And the "U" is the letter you kind of a play off of college HAPPIER U we'll talk about that. We're going to focus on college students. And what are some of the top stressors for college students these days?

Rachel Jones

What a great question. Obviously, the pandemic is one huge stressor. If you think about college students who just moved out from their family home, went on to a campus, maybe away from everyone they know, and then a pandemic hits and they have to pivot. They have to be flexible. They're trying to learn. Everything changes. The fear of the unknown. So that's a main one. But traditionally, some of the stressors that happen with college students are just confidence issues. Having to figure out a bunch of new independent living skills that they never really had to flex before. It's like working out new muscles. Managing their time.

A lot of college students today have a pretty significant amount of financial distress with being able to afford college, what the stress and burden is doing to their family, whether they can work and study and do all the things that are expected at the same time to support themselves. And then, of course, some of them are also learning how to pay their own bills, sign lease agreements, get along with roommates, buy groceries. You know, all those things that adults have to do every day. So those are some of the pretty standard ones, along with just academic stress and having to learn new things, being in new environments. Having to manage the time to study on your own and balance that with some social activities so you're not isolated and just learning ways to manage your stress.

Bill Pollock

Rachel, you talked about confidence. And, a friend of mine had a son that when he first went off to college, was a very good musician and ended up going off to a big college to study music and then got there and found out that, you know, he wasn't the big fish in the small pond anymore. And not only were there really good musicians, but some that were better than him. And so his confidence was struck by that and ended up doing a different major. So people learned to adjust. I mean, I guess the, the story behind that and maybe the message to college students is, you know, maybe not pigeonhole yourself or don't worry if one path isn't what you

expected. Can you talk a little bit about that and those type of stresses?

Rachel Jones

And I'm glad that you gave that example, because I'm sure there's a lot of listeners who were nodding their head because they know at least one young person in their life where that was a similar experience. You know, college is this time of social comparison and all of a sudden you have all these other options. You're meeting people from all over the place who have different experiences, different skills. And you do compare yourself to them, and it can shake you to your core a bit, but it's also just a part of learning who you are, that self-identity that happens. And I always like to remind people the brain isn't fully developed until someone's in their mid 20s.

So some of the skills that young adults need, those, you know, skills to think abstractly, plan long term, think about who they're going to be in the future. Those are the last skills that your brain actually develops. And so, you know, they need those. But those are also the last ones to mature. And that's a part of the equation when you're in college.

But growth mindset is a really wonderful thing for young people to grasp because that is a mindset where you are open to flexibility, to the possibilities. You see a challenge as an opportunity, not as a total setback that you'll never be able to come back from. And I think that shift of looking at challenges, looking at, okay, the plan didn't go the way I saw it.

I always expected myself to do this. Now I'm wondering, should I be doing something totally different. That's taking a growth mindset instead of being so rigid and so inflexible that when life happens and things don't go as planned, you completely fall apart and you can't recover from it. So adopting that growth mindset is a really important thing for young people and for their families, so that they can encourage them throughout the process.

Bill Pollock

Rachel Jones, a licensed professional counselor and the manager of Trauma informed Treatment at the Department of Mental Health, joining us here on our Mental Health Monday segment on Show Me Today. I find it interesting that you brought up that our brains and our mental health is still developing in our teens and early 20s. You know, we have a lot of listeners on Show Me today that are older.

And by that I mean past college, whatever age that might be. And, you know, we have a tendency to be cynical when we look at college kids who are stressed, you know, all of a sudden it's like, well, you listen. We look back at our college days and you think about the fun stuff. Because now you're raising kids, you're worried about grandkids, you're worried about your job. And so sometimes you become cynical and say, oh, come on, what stresses do you have? But so for those people that have college kids in their lives, what are some things they can do to help and what we're going to talk about HAPPIER U. But I wanted to bring this up for our listeners, though. What are some things they can do to help college kids?

Rachel Jones

Yeah, I'm glad you asked. Thank you for kind of talking about that part of it, because the people who raise these young adults are such an important role in their life at that stage in their life when things are kind of up in the air. So the things that you can do to support a college kid in your life is check in with them and try not to use judgmental language. Just let them tell you what's going on without you feeling like you need to respond. When you can create the safety that they can trust, that they can say something and they're not going to get the lecture. They're not going to get the cynicism. The dismissive thing. It's a safer way for them to just give you bits and pieces.

And as you create that relationship with them and you allow them the time and space to say what they need to say without judgment, what can happen is they start to reveal some of the major stressors that are happening to them. Some of the deeper issues that are at their core, some of the life decisions they're trying to grapple with.

And that opens up opportunities to have really productive, helpful conversations. But the problem comes whenever the adults in their lives just mimic them or use sarcasm or blow them off. Then it shuts them down. And then what happens is they're typically turning to same age peers while their same age peers are going through the same things. Right? So there is definitely support there with other kids their age that know what's going on. But what they really need is the wisdom and the guidance of adults in their life to help them learn those adult skills and make those major decisions. So I'd say the best thing that you can do is frequently checking in with them.

You may have to start doing that through text or Snapchat or video calls and go a little bit outside of your comfort zone, because that's how they communicate. That is the youth culture right now. So you kind of need to match where they're at and meet them where they're at, and then try to create the safest environment for them and try to withhold judgment and just listen to what they're going through.

They could probably teach you some things. And what youth are going through today on college campuses is a little different than what other people went through generations ago. So I think that could be a helpful way for adults to connect to the young people in their lives.

Bill Pollock

Yeah. That's great. Rachel, we need to have another segment where we just talk about that, where we talked to the old folks about nothing.

Rachel Jones

Now, don't call them old folks!

Bill Pollock

I'm in that category, though, Rachel. I'm telling you I got to listen to what we listen to our daughter when she calls and goes through her stresses. And there is there's that part of you that, you know, I coached my kids through their, you know, grade school and all that. And, you know, you kick them in the pants to kind of get them going to hustle.

And you kind of want to do that in life, but you can't. You got to sit and listen to them. And and it does. It takes a lot of practice. And you know, you have to bite your tongue.

Rachel Jones

Yeah. That's right. And you can kind of adopt this all teach all learn model, which basically means I'm not the expert who's going to teach my college kid everything.

They could also teach me some things. So if we both go into it open minded, I could learn from you and you can learn from me. That changes the conversation a bit because it's not the parent expert or the grandparent expert on the phone trying to lecture a kid. It's, an adult on the phone trying to figure out what's going on and what can you teach me? And then maybe I can share some wisdom with you and that type of exchange is a lot healthier for both parties involved.

Bill Pollock

Yeah. That's good. Hey, let's take a break and come back and then we will talk about HAPPIER U. That's why I brought you on. And it's our Mental Health Monday segment. Rachel Jones, a licensed professional counselor and the manager of trauma informed treatment at the Department of Mental Health, is with me. And, we got to talk about this HAPPIER U. And it's the letter "U". So it plays on the college kids. What is HAPPIER U?

Rachel Jones

HAPPIER U is a campaign. It's a wellness campaign that we have created. So the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development in Missouri, we came together because we had a shared interest.

We knew that college kids and the people who are working on college campuses have a tremendous amount of stress right now. But we also knew that in order to manage stress, you can focus on wellness. So a lot of times people think about mental health. They're actually thinking about illness and conditions and problems. But there is this whole other side of that continuum which is about wellness and wellness practices.

So when we came together to kind of think about what is a creative way that we can reach college age students and really promote health and wellness, we decided on HAPPIER U because we're trying to promote a healthier you and a happier you and positivity. So we have created this campaign where people can go to the journey to College website with the Missouri Department of Higher Education, and they can find HAPPIER U. And it's really social media campaigning. We've got college age actors who have been talking about different ways that you can practice wellness. So there may be 3 to 5 minute long video clips so that college students are seeing someone that looks and sounds like them and gets them, but that person is also talking to them about easy ways that you can just start practicing wellness and focusing on positivity and happiness.

And so essentially that's what the campaign is about. It's just a way for us to try to reach college age kids, to promote wellness and give them some easy, quick tools that they can do right away in the moment with the

person that they're watching on the video and practicing it throughout their day. That's low cost or free. It's just a matter of them changing their daily habits. And we're also, of course, linking them to resources that are available either on their own campuses or available through our Missouri Show-Me Hope crisis counseling program. And so we have a website, Mo Show Me hope.org where people can go get a lot of resources about how to manage the pandemic and some of the stressors that go along with that and HAPPIER U as a part of that, too.

Bill Pollock

Well, tell me about this happiness science.

Rachel Jones

Yeah, it's pretty fascinating stuff. But there's been research that shows that there are different parts of your brain that start to make connections when you're focusing on positivity and happiness, and what that does is you've got all these cells making connections and these pathways happening in your brain. And the more often you do things, it's like a muscle that you work out.

It gets real strong and real quick, and it kind of becomes your default response. So if your default response is negative, cynical, sarcastic, hopeless, that part of your brain actually gets wired real quick and it's going to be the first thing that overrides everything. But if you learn how to practice happiness, and that becomes the new neural pathway that your brain makes, then you start to override that other default system and you're focusing more on positivity.

And so it's some really fascinating science that's happening in the brain. But also then of course, it changes your outlook. So then you begin to make different decisions. And you have a lot of physical health benefits from that too. And so I encourage people to check out this really great website. It's called Action for Happiness. And when you find this website you'll see some of the science.

They've got a lot of tools. They have an app you can download. It's really focusing on that positivity and all the health benefits for our brain and our body when we focus on happiness.

Bill Pollock

So Action for Happiness is the website. All right. Want to check that out. So you have to train yourself though I mean this isn't just something you do a couple times and okay hey now I'm a happy person.
Rachel Jones

You got to work at it, right? You know, some people do have a temperament where they're happy. You might know some of them. I know some people that I often think, are you really this happy? How could you be this happy every day?

Bill Pollock

Yeah, they aggravate me. Those people aggravate me, Rachel.

Rachel Jones

I get it. You know, it's almost unbelievable when you can find someone who has that much joy and positivity.

And it seems to come so natural to them. But there are people in the world that that is their natural setting, right? That's their default system. But for the majority and anyone who's involved with any of the things that are happening in life, you really do have to practice it just like you would any other skill that you're trying to learn.

So small, repetitive ways of practicing it so that it becomes normal for you and more comfortable for you is a really good way to try to basically override the negative with the positive and be a more happier person and spread happiness. It's very contagious, just like negative is contagious. So you know you can be a upbeat, positive, bubbly person and your energy can change the room.

And you probably know people like that where they just are the life of the party, so to speak, and they just have this thing about them that's energizing. And people want to get connected and that's their happiness factor, you know, that's starting to spread and being contagious. And so it doesn't come naturally to everyone. It's very contagious when you get Ahold of it, but it's something you can learn and you can become a happier person. It's going to take practice.

Bill Pollock

Rachel Jones with us here on our Mental Health Monday segment. So where can people go again to learn more about HAPPIER U?

Rachel Jones

HAPPIER U. You can find it on the Journey to College website at the Missouri Department of Higher Education. You can also find it at our Mo Show-Me Hope.org website and you can Google search. "HAPPIER U Missouri Department of Higher Ed" and you'll find it that way as well.

Bill Pollock

All right. And then, for people who need more help, they can text or call crisis hotlines. What are those numbers?

Rachel Jones

We have the disaster distress helpline, which is 1-800-985-5990. You can call or text that. And we also have a crisis text line. So you text M O save. So Mo SAVE to 741741.

Bill Pollock

Great stuff. Rachel Jones, a licensed professional counselor and manager of trauma informed treatment at the Department of Mental Health. Thank you for joining us on this segment of Mental Health Monday. And I guess, somewhere down the road, either next week or the week after, you're going to walk me through. I don't know why I agreed to this, but, you're going to walk me through some, exercises.

Rachel Jones

Yes, we're going to do some breathing exercises, some positive affirmations. It's going to be great. Great fun.

Bill Pollock

Well, listen, I'm going to keep a positive attitude. I'm not going to get negative about it. I'm going to stay positive. And that'll work.
All right. Well Rachel, thank you so much.

Rachel Jones

Thank you.

Bill Pollock

This is Show Me Today, the voice of Missouri.