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The Importance of Social Connection for Idaho's Wellbeing

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Presenter Background

15 years in K-12 Education (2007)

- Classroom teacher; Health, Science, Math & Drama
- Developed a model of effective middle school program

Public health–Public education researcher (2012)

- Intersection between public education and public health
- Community-school partnerships
- Adolescent Health & Development

Joined Icelandic Prevention Model Research team (2013)

- Survey Design, Development, Analysis
- Translation to U.S. context/Opioid Epidemic

Founding Director; Communities for Youth (2020)

- Translation to Idaho Youth Mental Health Crisis
- Community Engagement & Advocacy



Pause and Connect



What is your “happy place” or thing?

You can also think of a place or thing that provides you calm.



The Challenges for Today's Parents are Great...

Youth are facing a lot in today's context...

- Substance Use
- Mental Health Crisis
- Unstable economy
- Loneliness epidemic
- Chronic Absenteeism
- Academic Underachievement
- Social Media & Info Overload
- High rates of violence
- Undersupported families
- Unmatched competition and pressure



Today's Parents: 'Exhausted, Burned Out and Perpetually Behind'

Surgeon general's warning: Parenting may be hazardous to your health

PARENTING

Is Parenting the New Smoking?

The surgeon general issued an advisory on parental stress.
Now what?

Being an adult who cares about kids...



**... can often feel like
playing
Whack-A-Mole.**



Youth Mental Health in Idaho

#50

National Ranking

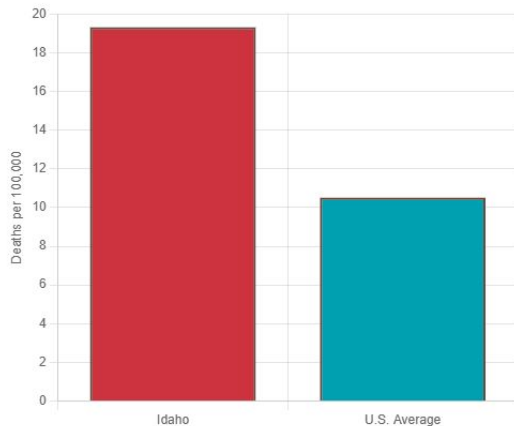
Idaho ranked 50th in the nation for youth mental health in 2022, indicating a severe crisis with high prevalence of mental illness and low rates of access to care.

1.8x

Higher Suicide Rate

Teen Suicide Rates (per 100,000)

Idaho's rate of death by suicide among teens aged 15-19 is alarmingly high compared to the national average. This disparity underscores a critical public health issue within the state that demands immediate and focused attention.



**52.5% of youth
in need of mental
health services
go untreated
each year.**



Youth Mental Health in Idaho

According to the Idaho Youth Well-being Survey (2025) teen depression rates range from 24%–67% across the state .

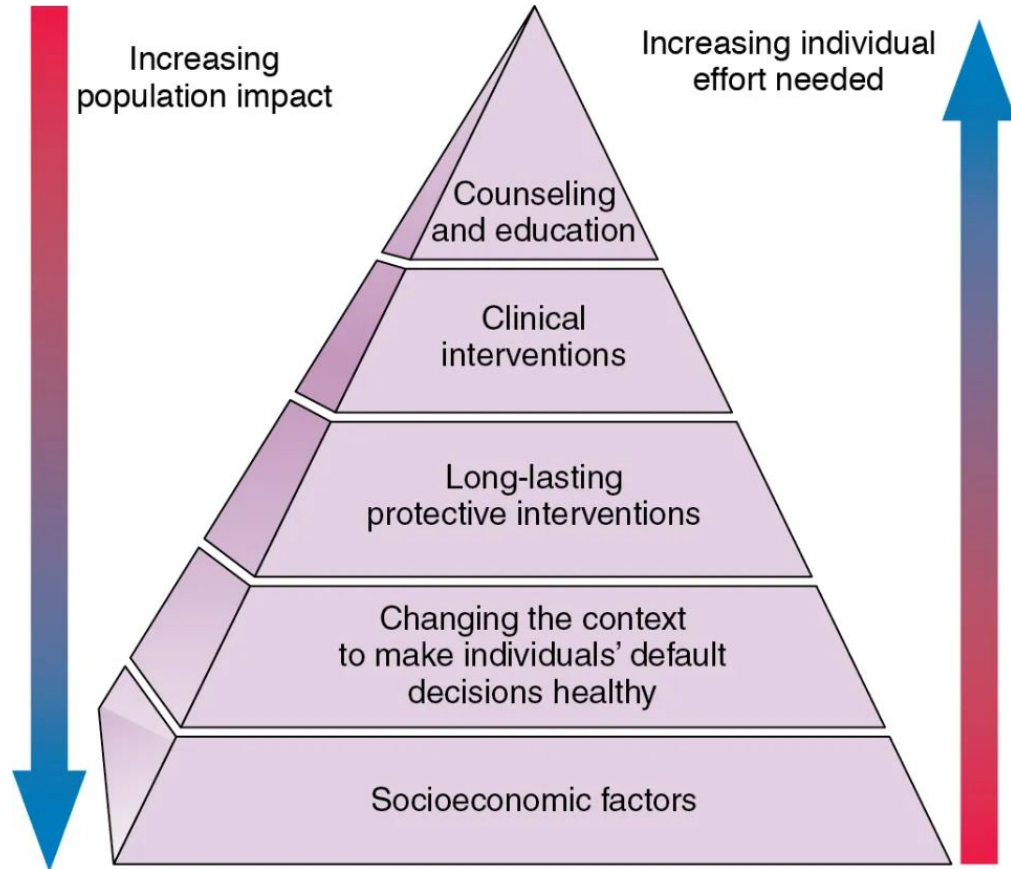


The Scope of the Solution...



Has to match the scope of the problem.

Health Impact Pyramid



**Our goal is to
promote the most
well-being for the
most people.**

How to Transform Mental Health for All (WHO)

Three major pathways:

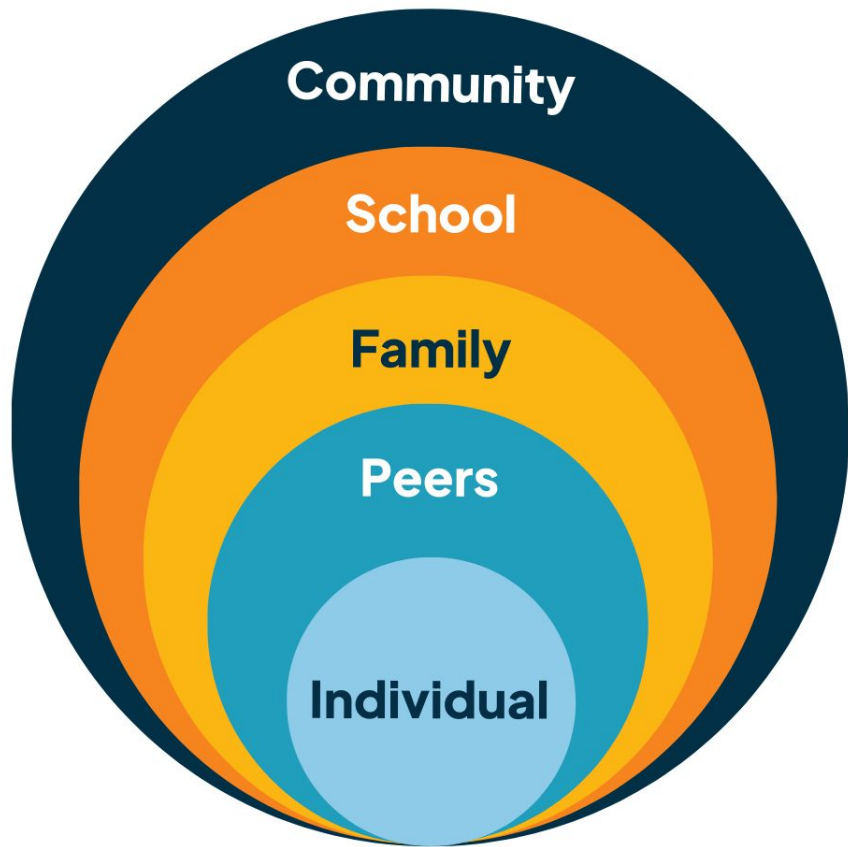
- deepen the value given to mental health by individuals, communities and governments, ***backed by meaningful engagement and investment across sectors***;
- **reshape environments** – in homes, schools, workplaces and communities – ***to better protect mental health and prevent mental health conditions***; and
- strengthen mental health care by building community-based networks of accessible, affordable and quality services.

UPSTREAM PREVENTION



- Work on root causes instead of waiting for crisis to occur.
- Focus on the whole context/environment not just individual behavior.
- Focus on increasing *protective factors* and reducing *risk factors* at the community level.

Improving the Root Causes



An Upstream Prevention approach aims to collectively build strategies that focus on changing the conditions for youth across multiple domains.

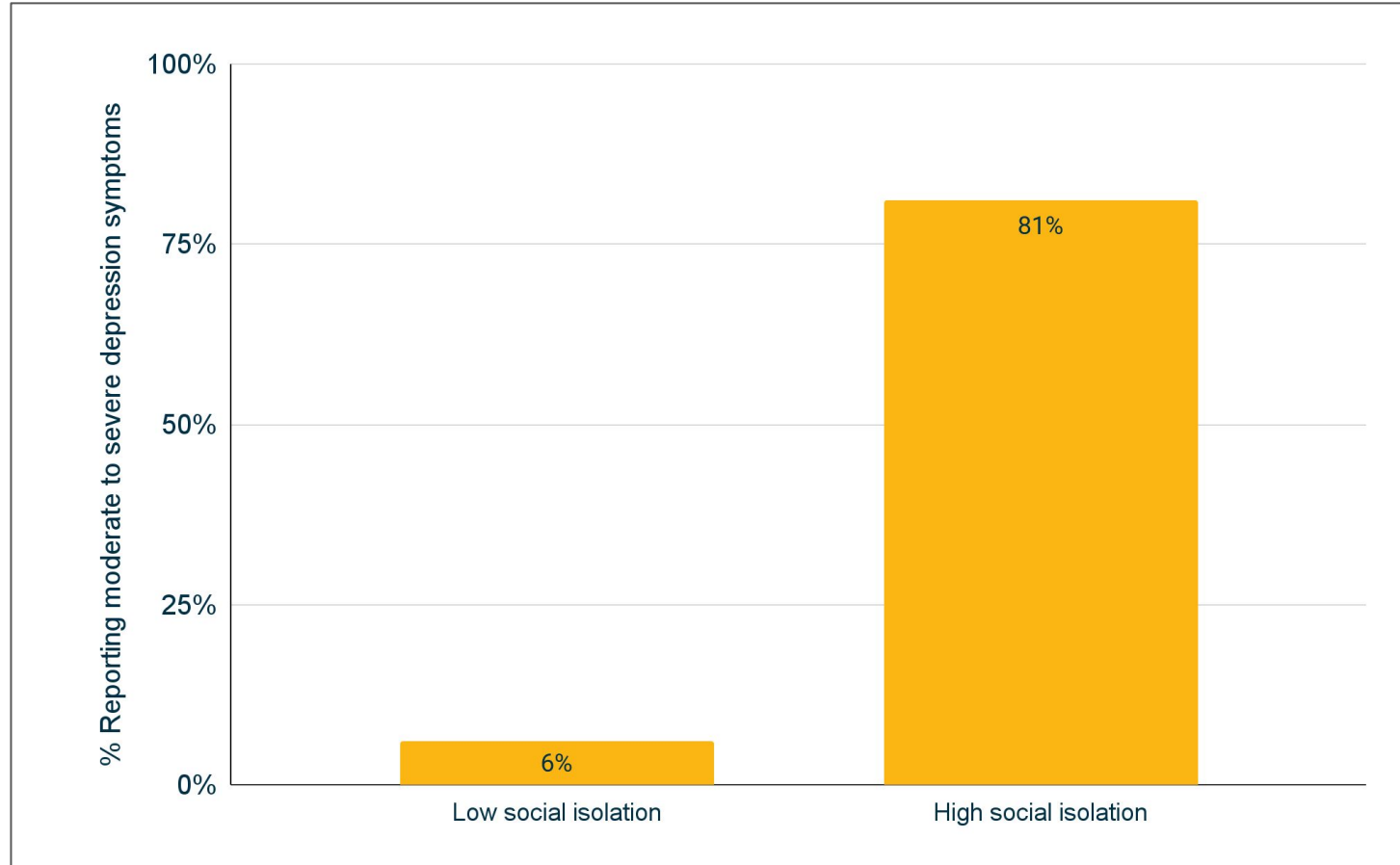
KEY Risk and Protective Factors for Idaho Youth in 2025

1. Social Connection
2. Stress
3. Sleep
4. Family Support
5. Discrimination/Violence



Depression and Social Isolation in Idaho Students

Teens with
low social
isolation
report
lower rates of
depression.



How Can We
Support
Young People
in Idaho?



**Focus on
Youth Social
Connection!**

What is Social Connection?



High quality relationships in which we can be our authentic selves.



What we know about Social Connection



- Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter. Human beings are biologically wired for social connection.
- Poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke. It has a similar risk to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.
- It is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia.
- Connection to others is one of the best protective factors for mental health *and* other concerns such as substance misuse.
- Social isolation is arguably the strongest and most reliable predictor of suicidal ideation, attempts, and lethal suicidal behavior among samples varying in age, nationality, and clinical severity

What are the experiences that help you to feel the most connected to others?



Pillars of Social Connection for

Connection to Self

- Exploration
- Purpose
- Autonomy & Competence
- Self Awareness

Connection to Peers

- Scaffold connection
- Intentionally build and support real connection skills.

Connection to Safe Trusted Adults

- Lead with listening
- Notice kids
- Role model positive coping

Creating Connections



Connection happens when you get/give:

- **concrete help**, such as having a friend pick your kids up from school
- **emotional support**, like hearing someone say, “I’m really sorry you’re having such a tough time”
- **perspective**, like being reminded that even the moodiest teenagers grow up
- **validation**, like learning that other folks love reading train schedules too



Strengthening Connections



- **MAKE IT YOUR TOP PRIORITY....**
- Make a list of the people you want to contact regularly. If necessary, add a reminder to your calendar.
- Listen really well. Repeat what you heard to make sure you understood.
- Ask for specific kinds of help. Even the best of friends can't read your mind.
- Show how much you respect, support and appreciate your friends and family. You may think positive thoughts, but sharing them works wonders.



What we all need for health... PDF!

- **Playtime** means unstructured time for social interactions and playing informal sports, games, and other activities for fun.
- **Downtime** is time set aside beyond structured activities or academics to relax, reflect, or just be. Research suggests that kids need downtime throughout the day — in addition to enough sleep at night.
- **Family time** When kids are part of a family unit that spends time together, they are more likely to feel supported, safe, and loved unconditionally. Try to incorporate 20–25 minutes a day, 5 days per week.



Now let's think through it together...



Connection to Self	Connection to Prosocial Peers	Connection to Safe Adults

Explore Activities to Support Connection



- ★ **Inclusion.** Building youth's sense of value and mattering in their community.
- ★ **Support.** Create opportunities for youth to interact with others, such as icebreakers, recreation and dialogue or reflection points.
- ★ **Welcome.** Ensure that adults welcome youth as they arrive and call them by name.
- ★ **Interest.** Taking genuine interest in teens' interests/activities.
- ★ **Tradition.** Create fun engaging activities that youth count on and look forward to.
- ★ **Navigate.** Helping youth navigate conflict without solving for them.
- ★ **Joy.** Helping youth connect to joy and purpose, trying new things.
- ★ **Plan.** Host a monthly gathering with you and a few other families.

What is one thing you can incorporate into your day-to-day life to increase connection for young people in your neighborhood?

Three things that can promote mental health for youth in Idaho...

Increasing social connection for young people; to self, peers, and safe adults.

Taking responsibility for the environment and coming together as adults around

Collecting community-specific data to navigate and check our work.

Thank you!



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Well-being. Together.