



## The WCPA News

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### **The Back-To-School “Mental Health Check-up”**

By Ann Sullivan, M.Ed., LPC, NBCC and  
Regina Hermann, MS, LPC, Psych. Examiner

If you're still reeling from the realization that summer is gone and you are wondering how you are going to add one more thing to do to “get back to school,” you are not alone. We would all like to believe that we can relax, for a bit, after making our children's doctor's appointments, shopping for school clothes, creating carpool arrangements, and coordinating sports or other extracurricular schedules. Kids of all ages often welcome a fresh start when school begins: the opportunity to renew acquaintances, improve their grades, and participate in new activities. But there is one more task all parents should be sure to make part of their routine: a mental health check-up for their children. This is usually not a formal, professional assessment, but an informal check-up we can perform ourselves, by asking the right questions and noticing changes in our children's behavior.

What is a mental health check-up? It's something like a physical, but it has important differences. A child's physical check-up is a scheduled event, usually on an annual basis. It provides precise numbers about a child's height, weight, vision, and hearing. If your child hasn't been experiencing any physical ailments, you don't expect to learn anything new. The doctor often confirms what you know: your child is growing! Once the visit to the doctor is complete, you can check it off the list and move on with healthy eating and exercise.

An informal mental health check-up is different. Chances are, it won't take place in someone's office, and it won't have a *precise* measure of change, growth, or diagnosis. It will occur with greater frequency than the physical exam, and it will happen in your home, your child's school, and in extracurricular activities. A number of people may have input, and sharing observations can make the difference in addressing potential concerns. The three key elements in a mental health check up are: noticing change, observing the environment, and communicating with other adults in your child's care or your teen's life.

Throughout the school year, asking your child or teen, “How was your day?” often results in that monosyllabic response that tells you nothing: “Fine.” So here are some things to keep in mind. They may help get you the information you need, and, if your child or teen needs help, pave the way to their trust in your ability to help and support them.

1. Insert the question, “How did you sleep last night?” in the daily conversations you have. Observe how your child behaves at the dinner table. Does she push her food around on the plate and leave before finishing a portion? Look for changes your child initiates in physical appearance: clothing, hair style, or posture. Changes in sleeping, eating, and physical appearance can both reflect changes in how a child is feeling and create changes in how a child feels, especially if your child or teen doesn't adapt to the demands of the new school year. Children and teens who have difficulty falling asleep are often thinking through the day and recalling a hurtful conversation, a disappointment, or a worry.

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## **Mental Health Check-up**

Continued from front page

2. As middle schoolers and teens enter the upper grades, their social circles expand and influences beyond your reach affect much of what they think and feel. Continue (or begin) your conversations with, “What/how do you think/feel about that?” and be prepared to listen with both ears open – delay expressing your opinions and feelings until your child has had a chance to voice theirs and elaborate on them.
3. How is the content of your child’s comments about school, friends, or adults changing? Is there a subtle, but increasing frequency of cynicism, irritability, or discouragement in your child’s tone of voice or the actual words he uses?
4. When you talk to other adults about your son or daughter, what specific reports do they have about your child’s social interactions, ability to take constructive criticism, or level of energy? What can they tell you about changes in the environment they see your child in? Take seriously any concerns that your children’s teachers, coaches, youth group leaders or scout leaders share with you about your child. Sometimes, other adults notice changes in our children before parents do.
5. How has the composition of your child/teen’s social circle changed? If they have left sports or other extracurricular activity, have they been willing to explore other interests? You might expect a child in sports who gets cut from a team to be disappointed. But a child who makes the team or other extracurricular activity, and then withdraws effort may be sending a message.
6. School is not merely an academic enterprise, but classroom behavior and achievement do provide concrete measures of effort and motivation. A child’s shift in these areas can indicate that there is a growing concern. A drop in grades, for example, doesn’t always indicate “laziness” or a need to “buckle down.” It is possible that such a decline could be a red flag for an emotional or mental health challenge. Anytime your child’s academic grades or school behavior changes significantly, this is important information for your mental health check-up.

These and other observations and conversations occur over the course of the school year. Change isn’t bad; it’s what your child or teen makes of it. Sometimes a child or teen just needs a little skills training to improve their achievement in school or extracurricular activities, or a chance to be heard by a loving adult so they can do the “brave thing” that is hard for them to do. Some children may continue to have difficulties adjusting to school. Signs to watch for include: not wanting to go to school, having physical symptoms before, during or after school such as headaches, nausea or stomachaches, frequent visits to the nurse or bathroom, or requests to stay home from school or be picked up early from school.

Unless you know that your child is bringing into the school year a significant loss, past experiences of bullying, a new health or educational diagnosis that they are adjusting to, or some other significant experience, you will be focusing on the routines you have practiced in helping your child transition to the next grade. Children and teens need to know that it’s normal and reasonable to be nervous in the midst of big change. Adults in their lives also need to know when to intervene. And if your child or teen is entering the school year with an extra weight on their shoulders, you may have already enlisted the help of professionals in easing the transition over the course of the school year.

WCPA offers many resources to help ease the stress and make the transition smooth for families and everyone involved in the process, including students, parents, teachers and peers. If your informal mental health check-up leads you to believe that your child could benefit from professional services, you may call our office at (314) 275-8599.

***Regina Hermann, M.S., LPC, School Psychological Examiner** is a licensed professional counselor with over twenty years experience. In addition to working with adolescents and families on issues related to personal and academic concerns, college planning, and critical incidents as they impact the school setting, she has extensive experience in helping children and families deal with depression, anxiety, and motivational concerns.*

***Ann Sullivan, M.Ed., LPC, NBCC** has worked extensively for over fifteen years with adults and adolescents, couples and families who have come to therapy seeking help for a variety of issues and presenting problems. In addition to private practice therapy services, Ms. Sullivan provides schools and the community with substance abuse assessments & counseling. She also offers a variety of other presentations for faculty, parents & students.*



## **Opportunities for Professional Development**

Call the office to register: (314) 275-8599

### **PROCESS ADDICTIONS: IT ISN'T JUST ABOUT DRUGS AND ALCOHOL**

Friday, October 25<sup>th</sup> 9:00 a.m. – Noon \$50 Presented by Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW

Education professionals know that we live in a highly addictive society. However, when we talk about addiction, we generally think about drugs and alcohol. Addiction to the internet, video gaming, pornography, sex, shopping, overeating/undereating, cutting, relationships and work involve the same physical, emotional and spiritual mechanics. This seminar will talk about the addiction process in general, factors that influence addictions and those that increase the likelihood of addictive behavior. In addition, there will be time to discuss many of the above-mentioned process addictions. Come prepared to discuss examples that you see among the students that you serve.

### **OCD IN THE CLASSROOM**

Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. \$40 Presented by Diane Prost, M.Ed., NCC, PLPC

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a fascinating subject - until it enters your classroom. Knowing the facts about OCD builds empathy, explains unusual behaviors in class, and helps school educators identify symptoms. This workshop is geared towards teachers, school counselors, and school administrators who wish to gain more information about OCD. The workshop goals are: to familiarize school personnel with the causes, signs, and symptoms of OCD; to give teachers techniques to handle children with obsessions and compulsions in the classroom; and to explain treatment techniques that therapists use and how teachers can support these at school.

### **DEPRESSION IN STUDENTS: CRITICAL INFORMATION FOR SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS**

Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup> 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. \$85 Presented by Amy V. Maus, MSW, LCSW

Education professionals are on the front lines, noticing students' depression and needing to respond effectively, to prevent academic decline, social withdrawal, and suicide risk in depressed students. This workshop shares significant and in-depth clinical information relevant to the school professional. Topics covered include: depression symptoms in children and adolescents, red flags in the school setting, the biological relationship between stress and depression, treatments for depression – what schools need to know, suicide prevention tips for educators, suicide risk as it relates to anti-depressant medications, appropriate school responses to depressed students, and working with families to support appropriate action.

### **COMPASSION FATIGUE: HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF IN A GIVING PROFESSION**

Friday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 9:00 a.m. – Noon \$50 Presented by Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW

In a profession as "other directed" as education, it is challenging to maintain a healthy balance between nurturing one's students and appropriate self-care. The result is often *Compassion Fatigue*. Learn about this newly identified phenomenon and what you can do to increase your emotional health and satisfaction in the work place. Participants are asked to bring examples of challenges and successful strategies, as they will be invited to share these with one another in addition to learning the presenter's suggestions.

## **Families in Transition**

It is hard on every member of the family, when divorce and separation occurs. West County Psychological Associates is now offering a program called Families in Transition. This program offers counseling services for parents and children who are experiencing some type of transition within their family. Services include, but are not limited to:

- Counseling for the adults and children who are thinking of, in the midst of, or who have made a transition
- Co-parenting counseling for couples who have difficulty making joint decisions for their now separated family
- Custody studies
- Step-parent support
- Communication with attorneys, the court system, and schools (with parental permission)

For more information, please call Jennifer Webbe, MSW, LCSW, DM at the WCPA office, 314-275-8599 ext.90

## **Private Psychoeducational Testing Available Year-Round**

When students require purely educational testing for an academic concern, many families understandably choose to utilize the free services available through their local public school districts. However, there are many circumstances under which it is appropriate or even necessary to obtain private psychological or psychoeducational testing. These circumstances can include:

- Preferring a private office setting with confidential results
- Desiring testing for possible Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Wanting testing for emotional functioning, including depression and/or anxiety
- Electing to get a second opinion
- Having been declined for testing services through the public district
- Choosing to obtain psychological or psychoeducational testing for an adult
- Wishing to acquire psychological testing as an aid for progress in counseling/therapy
- Wanting to account for continuing difficulties, when previous testing did not determine the cause of the problems

West County Psychological Associates offers high-quality, private psychological and psychoeducational testing at our therapy offices. Wait times are usually brief and reports are available soon following the test date(s). When a minor is tested, parents can choose whether or not to give permission for our evaluator to send a copy of the report to the school or the child's doctor or counselor.

Many families in our community choose to utilize high-quality, private testing services. If you would like to learn more about this option, please feel free to contact our office at (314) 275-8599.

## WCPA's Professional Staff



**Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D., Director** is a licensed psychologist and has been the Director of West County Psychological Associates since 1986. She has worked extensively with many public and private school systems in regard to dysfunctional families and at-risk children. Before beginning her career as a psychologist, Dr. Fitzgibbons was in education for 20 years, in both elementary and secondary levels. She was formerly a counselor and guidance director and is adjunct professor at Webster University, St. Louis University, Fontbonne University, the University of Colorado and the University of San Francisco. She provides numerous presentations to professional groups on issues of children and families.



**Kathleen Dooling, MA, LPC** received her Masters in Counseling from the University of Missouri - St. Louis. Her interests include working with individual adults and adolescents, military personnel and veterans, crisis intervention, depression, anxiety disorders, grief counseling, and group therapy. Kathleen has significant experience working with trauma victims and additional training in Crisis Intervention and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Prior to becoming a counselor, Kathleen worked for 20 years in private corporations as a real estate manager, paralegal and mortgage processor/closer. She also has her BA in Finance and her MA in Legal Studies. Kathleen is a life long resident of St. Louis.



**Bryan Duckham, Ph.D., MSW, LCSW** has over 23 years experience in the treatment of depression, anxiety and addictions. In addition to private practice, Dr. Duckham has worked in a variety of outpatient mental health and addiction treatment programs. He believes that often, people's religion and spirituality are essential parts of their recovery and sensitively integrates his clients' beliefs into treatment. In addition to maintaining his practice at West County Psychological Associates, he is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville and teaches theory and practice courses in the undergraduate and graduate social work program.



**Donna Garcia, MA, MS** has a background in psychology, educational administration, and computer science. She has thirty years of educational experience and has worked extensively with children of all ages, parents, and school faculty and staff as teacher, principal, and university faculty. She has a particular interest in working with parents who are striving to become better parents and teachers and principals who want to provide healthy learning environments and school cultures for their school families. In addition to consulting through WCPA, Mrs. Garcia is currently the principal of a St. Louis area private elementary school.



**Regina Hermann, MS, LPC, School Psychological Examiner** is a licensed professional counselor with over twenty years of experience working with adolescents and families on issues related to mental health, motivation, college planning and the school setting. Ms. Hermann has served as an adjunct instructor at Fontbonne University and has also evaluated children and adolescents with suspected learning disabilities and emotional issues. Other areas of interest include transition counseling for individuals exploring new paths as a result of changing schools, careers, or relationships.



**Amy Maus, MSW, LCSW, Assistant Director** specializes in services to schools, including work within public and private schools in urban, suburban and rural settings. Ms. Maus provides training to administrators, teachers and parents, consultation within Care Teams and on individual cases, and/or direct intervention with at-risk students. She also leads monthly consultation groups for area school principals. In addition, Ms. Maus enjoys providing presentations to school-related groups of all sizes and she provides psychoeducational testing for mental health and learning challenges. Along with two colleagues, Ms. Maus wrote and published *The Care Team Approach*, a book for school professionals.



**Tina Murphy, MA, LPC** has over 10 years of experience in helping children and families deal with social skill issues and difficult behaviors such as ADHD, anxiety, motivational concerns, and depression. Ms. Murphy has an extensive background in the public and private school system. She served as a guidance counselor for over 5 years working with elementary students, teachers and families with a wide range of concerns. Through WCPA, Ms. Murphy provides therapy for children, adolescents, adults and families as well as school consultation, on-site clinical services, and training on a variety of topics.



**Sandra Price, MSW, LCSW** has worked with children, adolescents, and teens to address behavioral disorders, depression, anxiety, grief, and many other issues that surface as children grow and develop. Sandra draws upon art and play therapy techniques. She has worked with parents to provide therapeutic support during crisis and transition. Sandra most recently worked with children admitted to the Saint Louis Crisis Nursery who were at risk of abuse and neglect. Sandra is a mother of three and enjoys working with children and their families to create an environment of success at home and at school.



**Diane Prost, M.Ed, NCC, PLPC** received her Masters in Counseling from the University of Missouri - St. Louis, with a concentration in family systems and couples therapy. In addition, she has specialized training in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and leads a monthly OCD support group. Her interests include working with children, adolescents, couples and family therapy, OCD and anxiety disorders, grief counseling, and group therapy. Diane has over eight years of experience as an educator in the St. Louis parochial school system and has worked with children from kindergarten age through high school. She is fluent in Spanish, and has a strong background working with Latino clients.



**Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW** provides consultation, on-site clinical work and training within schools and business organizations. In addition, she provides individual, couples and family therapy, particularly specializing in working with middle school through college-age clients and adults on issues surrounding family dysfunction and codependency, depression, anxiety, parenting skills training, social skills, crisis management and abuse. Ms. Saggau's work experience also includes over twenty years in accounting and management positions within private industry and the university environment. Her broad background makes her skilled in working with business professionals.



**Ann Sullivan, M.Ed., LPC, NCC** has worked extensively for over 15 years with adults and adolescents, couples and families who have come to therapy seeking help for a variety of issues and presenting problems. Ms. Sullivan has worked effectively in a variety of treatment settings including: substance abuse, addictions, anxiety & depression, group counseling, sexual orientation & intimacy trouble, womens & fertility issues, individual, couples & family therapy. In addition to private practice therapy services, Ms. Sullivan provides schools and the community with substance abuse assessments & counseling. She also offers a variety of other presentations for faculty, parents & students.



**Carol Hall-Whittier, Ed.D.** is an experienced educator who has worked in an urban school district as a principal, instructional leader and teacher for over 34 years. Dr. Whittier received her training as an urban leader from St. Louis University where she earned a doctorate in education. She is adept in providing leadership training for principals, staff, and parents. She is especially interested in providing professional development for school personnel in the areas of transformational leadership; collaborative cultures; literacy learning; and effective use of assessments and evaluations to perfect the practice of professionals who are preparing students to live in a democratic society.



**Jennifer Webbe Van Luven, MSW, LCSW, DM** received her Master of Social Work from Saint Louis University with a concentration in family systems and law. Jennifer provides private therapy dealing with adult issues, depression, anxiety, marital and relationship issues, as well as adolescent development/behavioral issues. She has extensive experience in family law and courtroom testifying. Jennifer is also a certified Divorce Mediator. She assists couples in a peaceful resolution, where continued communication is imperative for raising healthy children. Along with private therapy services Jennifer provides school consultation and a variety of presentations for parents and educators.

## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

There are various counseling modalities, with some being touted as more effective than others. However, I strongly believe that the type of therapy one uses isn't as critical as the relationship between the therapist and the client. I came to understand this, not from graduate studies and reading, but through experiencing the change in clients who seemed to grow emotionally primarily because of the ongoing relationship. I didn't understand how this came to be until I began to learn more about Attachment Theory.

Attachment Theory is based on the joint work of J. Bowlby and M.S. Ainsworth, beginning in the 1930's. It says that positive parental responses in early development create a sense of secure attachment, leading to the well-being of the child. The sense of well-being that emerges from predictable and repeated experiences of care creates a secure base for a child. Secure attachment is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children in many areas, including social, emotional and cognitive domains. In fact, our brains are structured to be in relationships with others. That is why attachment experiences are a central actor in shaping our development.

There are two behaviors that are critical for the nurturing/attachment process. The first is attunement. When we become empathic, open and receptive to the child's emotions, we become attuned to them. An example of the attunement process is expressing enthusiasm or curiosity when they tell or show us something that is important to them. This develops the connection between the adult and the child, which gives the child a sense of meaning and importance to his or her life and, most importantly, helps the child achieve meaningful relationships.

The second behavior is mirroring. In infancy, when a baby smiles and makes soft wordless sounds, a nurturing parent responds in like manner by smiling back at the baby and imitating some of the sounds. A dialogue has begun that says that the parent is giving the child a reflection of himself that says that the infant is valued. He sees in the mother's face and voice the reflection of his own value. This lends itself to the growth of a strong healthy ego or sense of self.

What are the implications for schools when we look at this theory? I believe they are critical. Many, if not most, children coming into our schools have not experienced secure attachments. There are various reasons but few would be intentional on anyone's part. Studies have shown that a nurturing relationship with someone other than a parent, in which the child feels understood and safe, provides an important source of resiliency within the child. These relationships don't replace a secure attachment with a primary caregiver, like a parent, but they are a tremendous source of strength for the child's developing mind. For many of our students, this may be the only source of strength that they have.

There are various studies that denote that a child's cognitive functioning is directly related to "good enough" attachment. While no one is suggesting that the educator assume a parent's role in a child's development, there is much to be said in thinking about the mirroring and attuning processes in the classroom. What I am suggesting is that each teacher make a mindful effort to have each student see her goodness and value reflected in the teacher's behavior towards the student. The teacher reflects back to the child the goodness seen within her. I am also suggesting that we attempt to attune ourselves to each of our students by attempting to understand and reflect a caring attitude about the child's thoughts and feelings. While the exchange of ideas and thoughts is important in this process, it is really through the sharing of emotions (what the child is feeling) that allows us to feel joined or connected to them. When others understand our feelings, we feel attuned to.

I know that the immediate reaction to these suggestions is to question the availability of time - "Where would I ever find the time to do this?" But I think that if we have an awareness of these processes we can become more mindful when we are interacting with each student. I have always believed that learning is best achieved when there is a relationship between the student and teacher. This is a process that tells us how this can be accomplished.

*-Mary*