Transitioning from High School to College

Spring is finally here and graduation is right around the corner. This is a very exciting time for youth as they achieve this major milestone. Many are looking forward to going on to college and starting a new chapter of their lives. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015, 69.2% of high school graduates enrolled in college immediately following high school. Though this is an exciting time, transitioning to college can be challenging and overwhelming. From 2009-2015, only 59% of students completed a bachelor's degree at the same college where they started in a 6-year period. Parents are more important than ever to prepare youth for college and provide support throughout the transition.

College often marks the beginning of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Going to college may mean moving away from home for the first time. Whether students choose to live on campus or off campus, students are faced with new responsibilities and opportunities. It is now up to the student to make sure their basic needs are met. They will also have opportunities to meet new people, join new clubs or participate in new activities. The opportunities can be exhilarating and also daunting for some. There are also significant pressures related to social situations and academics. As their new social life grows so does the likelihood they will be exposed to alcohol, drugs and sex. Students will likely be faced with many choices that will challenge their values and beliefs throughout their college experience that can shape who they become in adulthood. Furthermore, there is pressure to succeed academically and choose a career path. The increase in responsibilities and abundant pressures can cause significant stress and increase risk of mental health disorders.

A survey by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors found that 70% of directors reported an increase in psychological problems on campus over the past year (2012). Their top concerns are anxiety (41.6%), depression (36.4%) and relationships (35.8%). This makes sense considering 75% of individuals with an anxiety disorders experience symptoms before 22 years of age (National Institute of Mental Health). Additionally, suicide is still the 2nd leading cause of death for ages 15-34 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention).

There are numerous resources available for students on and off campus to help students manage stress and develop strategies to cope with a mental health disorder. There are preventative strategies that can be used as well. The first step is helping youth identify when they are struggling and encourage them to seek help. Second, youth need to be educated on what resources are available. Parents also need to be aware of the warning signs and resources available.

Know the warning signs:

https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/how-we-can-all-prevent-suicide/

https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm

https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml

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Tips for parents to help prepare youth for college:

- Help youth develop life skills, like how to eat well, set a sleep schedule or use a laundry machine
- Provide strategies on how to cope with stress
- Educate yourself and your child on the resources available on campus (i.e., health clinic, student services)
- If your child already has a mental health diagnosis or health condition, help make arrangements for the services they need
- Discuss values and beliefs to help them prepare for social pressures they may face
- Encourage youth to join a club or organization on campus
- Provide listening ear to discuss any fears or concerns they may have
- Determine times to talk on the phone or visit in person throughout first semester
- Be understanding of mistakes and give them space to find solutions to problems

References:

http://www.apa.org/advocacy/higher-education/mental-health/index.aspx

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-transition-college/201708/essential-parenting-tasks-healthy-college-transition

https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40

Looking Towards the Positive: The Role of Protective Factors in Youth Prevention

At the forefront of SCIP are efforts to engage in prevention initiatives that promote positive youth development. Research tells us that the healthy development of youth does not occur in isolation. Specifically, when we consider a student's emotional and behavioral health, we must explore individual traits, the role of family and the influence of school, peers and the community. It is easy to get hung up on risk factors that may adversely affect youth development and wellbeing. While we can't ignore the role of risk factors, a growing number of studies suggest that greater health impact might be achieved by enhancing protective factors that help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse outcomes (CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). An important goal of prevention is to change the balance between risk and protective factors so that protective factors outweigh risk factors.

Protective factors are seen as characteristics or conditions that buffer or reduce the negative effect of adversity on child outcomes. Research supports the idea that the more protective factors a youth has, the greater likelihood they will avoid at risk behaviors such as substance use, delinquency and violence. Thus, research-based prevention programs focus on intervening early in a child's development to strengthen protective factors before problem behaviors develop).

Protective factors are typically organized into 5 categories:

- *Individual* (biological and psychological dispositions, attitudes, values, knowledge, skills)
- *Family* (family function, management, parenting practices, parental engagement, bonding, etc.)
- *Peer* (norms, activities, ability to make friends, healthy relationships, etc.)
- *School* (school climate and culture, policy, school connections, partnering between school/family, academic performance, etc.)
- *Community* (resources, awareness, connections, community mentoring programs, positive social norms, etc.)

Protective factors not only exist in multiple domains, but they have the potential to produce positive effects in multiple areas. For example, positive parenting practices has been found to mediate the effects of poverty, divorce, parental bereavement and parental mental illness. Likewise, young people who feel connected to their school (school connectedness) are less likely to have emotional distress, consider suicide, engage in substance use, violence and gang involvement and are more likely to have higher grades and better school attendance (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: SAMHSA).

Promoting protective factors not only serve in the prevention of adverse behaviors and outcomes, but examining protective factors that reduce risk factors can also be useful in identifying interventions that are more likely to work when problem behaviors are seen. Both prevention and early intervention are powerful tools in enhancing the overall health and wellbeing of our youth.

Below are some tips from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) on how to incorporate the use of protective factors specifically into drug and alcohol prevention initiatives:

- *Parents:* use protective factor information to help develop positive preventative actions before problems occur. Parental involvement and parental monitoring are two important protective factors. Talking about family rules, setting family policies and having clear expectations for behavior and values can help guide parents.
- *Schools/Educators:* strengthen relationships with both parents and students to increase school connectedness and parental engagement in school. Schools can also be an important connecting point for mentoring programs and the involvement in positive extracurricular activities (two important youth protective factors).
- *Community Level:* provide opportunities for youth prosocial involvement in the community (giving back to the community, volunteering, etc.), recognizing and rewarding youth for prosocial community involvement, enhancing neighborhood safety and investing in building strong, socially cohesive neighborhoods. Communities that show youth they are invested in their wellbeing can help contribute to protective factors.

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.