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Low-Barrier Mental Health Resources for Rural New York

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Low-Barrier Mental Health Resources for Rural NY

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University of Vermont | Larner College of Medicine

Shortage of Mental Health Professionals in Essex County

- Essex county is considered a mental health professional shortage area in the "highest need" category
- 23 mental health clinicians accepting new patients, 20 with in-person availability in the county
- Many patients with barriers to in-person mental health care such as unmet transportation needs
- Finding a therapist who is a good fit can take weeks or months
- Capacity for addressing mental health needs in the primary care clinic setting is limited by appointment duration, mental health counselor availability, and patient engagement

AHEC Focus Areas:

- Behavioral health integration - services that better address the needs of individuals with mental health and substance use conditions, including training for health professionals to address burnout and resiliency
- Social determinants of health - economic stability, education, social and community context, health and health care, neighborhood and built environment
- Medical practice transformation - quality improvement, care coordination, cost containment, rural healthcare, primary care, patient-centered care, team-based care

Public Health Costs and Considerations

- NY Office of Mental Health Needs Assessment Map:
  - Higher rate of readmissions for mental health concerns <30 days from discharge (12% for Essex County vs 10% statewide)
  - No residential crisis stabilization programs in Essex county
  - No inpatient psychiatric beds available within the county
  - 1 mobile crisis intervention program for the entire county
    - Most patients experiencing a mental health crisis will utilize the emergency department
- 2023 Essex County Community Needs Assessment for Older Adults:
  - Only 15% of participants reported *good* or *excellent* availability of affordable quality mental health resources
  - 47% of respondents identified feeling depressed as problematic for them
- CDC:
  - Estimated total economic cost of suicide in New York State in 2023 was roughly $17.8 billion

Community Perspectives

"Transportation is difficult for some and can limit their access to mental health services in Essex County, especially for those who prefer an in-person visit. Telehealth visits have helped make care more accessible and more comfortable for people with transportation or scheduling barriers."

- Kami Phinney, LPN at Willsboro Health Center

"In addition to the lack of clinicians, especially for children, there was the family cycle of not seeking help as a point of pride… especially in a small town where everyone knows [each other]."

"Getting buy-in from some families required outreach and individualization by therapists."

"With so few mental health clinicians, a lot of the community needs are addressed in the PCP's office."

- Sheila Bridge, retired Child and Family Coordinator for Essex County Head Start program

Intervention and Methodology

The following brochure was designed using content from a prior student project and adapted through literature review with evidence-based interventions and updated resources to promote mental health. 20 brochures were provided to the Elizabethtown and Smith House Health Centers along with the printable PDF.

NAMING OUR EMOTIONS

One of the best ways we can improve our mental well-being is by learning how to recognize and **put a name to the things we feel**.

Naming emotions helps us build **emotional intelligence**, which not only helps us better understand our own feelings, but those of other people. This can improve our relationships with others and help us to regulate our emotions during tough times.

Recognizing how we feel can be challenging and takes practice.

While we often think of broad emotions like feeling sad or angry, **exploring what is happening in our minds and bodies can reveal more specific feelings** like frustration, disappointment, or loneliness. When we learn to pinpoint what we feel, we have more power to change it.

Helpful App: How We Feel

SAFETY PLANNING

Having a plan for who to talk to and how to find help can keep you safe when you are struggling.

What are my WARNING SIGNS?
Write down 3 things you notice in your mind or body when you start to feel bad:

_____
_____
_____

What are my COPING STRATEGIES?
Write down 3 things you can do to distract yourself or relax:

_____
_____
_____

Who can I call for SUPPORT?
Write down 3 trusted people you can ask for support:

_____
_____
_____

Who to contact if I am in CRISIS:
24/7 Suicide Helpline: 988 (call or text)

24/7 Essex County Mental Health Crisis Line: 1-888-854-3773

24/7 Mental Health Association in Essex County HopeLine: (800) 440-8074

YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

ELIZABETHTOWN COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

A COLLECTION OF RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH

DEVELOPED BY STUDENTS AT THE UVM LARNER COLLEGE OF MEDICINE

MOVEMENT

Movement and exercise are essential pieces of maintaining mental well-being. Activities that use both the mind and body, like yoga, are especially effective at improving symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression. Other types of exercise like weight lifting and aerobics are also effective. The most important thing is to do a little bit every day and stop if a movement is painful. Below is an example of the "7-minute workout".

MEDITATION

Meditation is a practice that has been around for centuries. At its core, meditation involves being still, acknowledging your thoughts and feelings as they come, and then letting them go. Engaging in 5-10 minutes of meditation on a regular basis can help improve mental well-being.

Helpful App: Plum Village

COPING SKILLS FOR STRESS

Stress is part of everyday life. Taking a few moments to engage in mindfulness when we start to feel overwhelmed or tense can provide a sense of grounding and help us to feel more in control. Here are some examples of popular techniques that may help:

Square Breathing - Breathe in for 4 seconds, hold it for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds, and hold it for 4 seconds. Repeat. Try adjusting the timing to find what works for you!

Sensory Mapping - Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

Body Scan - Take a few minutes to close your eyes and slowly bring awareness to each part of your body, from the top of your head to your toes. Take note of how each part of you is feeling and focus on relaxing anything that feels tense.

AFFIRMATIONS

Negative self-talk is often part of mental health conditions. By intentionally taking time to be gentle and kind to ourselves, we can begin to form a more positive self-image. Affirmations are most helpful if you do them regularly!

Let's give it a try.
"One of my best qualities is _____
_____

Helpful Apps: UCLA Mindful, I Am - Daily Affirmations

COGNITIVE REFRAMING

When we experience stressful situations, we may have negative thoughts that feel "automatic". These thoughts impact the way we feel about ourselves, which in turn affects our behaviors, making it difficult to achieve our potential, which then reinforces the negative thoughts.

Reframing is a tool used in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that helps to address these "automatic" thoughts. Remember, be gentle with yourself, this is a skill that takes lots of practice!

Try following these steps:

1 - Notice the negative thought:
pause and say the thought to yourself or write it down.

2 - Check the facts:
ask yourself if the thought is 100% true, what evidence do you have for and against it, are you ignoring any positives?

3 - Challenge the thought:
try to look at things from a different angle. What would you say to a friend who had this thought? Is there a more balanced way to see this?

4 - Replace with a helpful thought:
instead of "I always mess things up," try "sometimes things don't go as planned, but I learn and improve each time."

5 - Notice how you feel:
take a moment to notice if your feelings have changed, even a little.

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Results and Reflection

The intended impact of this intervention is to provide a low-barrier way for individuals to access mental health resources, especially in a small community where people may not feel comfortable talking about mental health struggles with their PCP or a therapist yet.

It also provides evidence-based strategies that patients can use to improve mental health while in the process of finding a therapist or initiating medical therapy.

With more time to measure implementation and uptake of the brochure, one way to assess impact on a small scale is distribution among clinic staff followed by a survey of how often staff utilized strategies from the brochure, whether it helped them identify any new mental health resources or strategies, and whether they felt it had an impact on their own mental health. A similar approach could also be to do this on a larger scale with patients, by documenting which patients received the brochure and sending out a follow-up survey through MyChart or including a QR code to the survey in the pamphlet.

Key challenges in the implementation of this intervention include the cost of printing brochures in color, which can increase engagement compared to black-and-white print, and the ability to distribute the brochure to areas outside the clinics such as local schools, town offices, pharmacies, and businesses.

Future Directions

Future students rotating through Elizabethtown could continue these efforts by interfacing with the County Department of Health and Essex County Mental Health, both of which are in Elizabethtown, to gain further perspectives on how to increase mental health provider recruitment and retention in the area.

Engagement with school-based counselors could also be an important aspect of future projects as children and adolescents, especially in rural areas, face considerable mental health challenges.

Other potential future projects could include printing more brochures for staff and providers to hand out to patients and keeping track of uptake based on how many are distributed.

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