

PREVENTION FORUM

Panel discusses youth suicide, student health in the Valley



Justin Strawser/The Daily Item

WVIA Senior Vice President Chris Norton speaks before a panel discussion during A Community Youth Suicide Prevention Forum on Tuesday at the Campus Theatre in Lewisburg.

Experts: Difficult talk with youth is necessary

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LEWISBURG — Talking about youth suicide is difficult but necessary, according to a panel of experts on Tuesday.

A Community Youth Suicide Prevention Forum was held on Tuesday at the Campus Theatre in Lewisburg. The event, which was open to school district teams and community organizations

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or groups that engage with youth, was hosted by the Mental Health and Resiliency Community of Practice of the CSIU Region in partnership with WVIA, Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania and the Central Susquehanna

Intermediate Unit.

“We have to acknowledge that it’s hard as hell,” said Dr. Sam Faulkner, director of the Pediatric Bridge Clinic at Geisinger’s Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health. “I ask kids every

day: ‘if you walk out of the emergency department, are you going to die?’ I’ve asked it thousands of times. I have conversations with nurses and teachers all the time where the idea of asking that out loud is absolutely terrifying. Of course, it is. It requires you as a grown-up to confront the fact that there’s a possibility of death with a child. We have to acknowledge that it’s going

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A panel of experts were part of A Community Youth Suicide Prevention Forum on Tuesday at the Campus Theatre in Lewisburg. Pictured are Dr. Thor Edmiston, superintendent at Warrior Run School District; Jennifer Jones, Children's Case Management supervisor and Child and Adolescent Social Service Program coordinator at CMSU; Dr. Sam Faulkner, director of the Pediatric Bridge Clinic at Geisinger's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health; and Tia Dreckman, a counselor at Milton School District.

Panel discusses youth suicide

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to hurt, it's going to be difficult, and it's necessary."

An average of 17.43 percent of students in Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties reported having seriously considered suicide in the last year, according to the latest data from Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS).

If adults don't acknowledge it as painful and difficult, "Then we just keep running from it," said Faulkner. "It keeps us from asking the question. The question is sometimes the gatekeeper between life and death."

Faulkner was one of four panelists that also included Jennifer Jones, Children's Case Management supervisor and Child and Adolescent Social Service Program coordinator at CMSU;

Tia Dreckman, a counselor at Milton School District; and Dr. Thor Edmiston, superintendent at Warrior Run School District. WVIA Senior Vice President Chris Norton facilitated the panel discussion and CSIU Chief Outreach Officer Dr. Bernadette Boerckel, the facilitator of the Mental Health and Resiliency Community of Practice, introduced the event.

Dreckman said society has created a narrative that middle school students are "extremely difficult and foreign" to adults. Students seem to have accepted that narrative, she said.

"Therefore, they are lacking a sense of love and belonging," said Dreckman. "As adults, we have ostracized ourselves from the pre-teen and teen years. We have disconnected ourselves from this age group that needs us more than ever with a narra-

tive of 'I just don't understand what teens are doing,' or 'I just dread the teen years so much.'"

Instead, adults need to align with young folks in meeting that need for love and belonging. When they don't get it from adults, they turn to their peers who are going through the same changes and brain development, said Dreckman.

That is "spinning our children into chaos," she said. "Mix that in with COVID over the past three or four years, we have a swarm of a hot mess."

Dreckman said not to discount the importance of relating to our students and helping them understand the way they are feeling is OK.

"You are not foreign to us, you are not terrible," she said.

Adults often forget the struggles of being young, and they often internalize their feelings

in front of their children, said Faulkner.

"Being willing to self-disclose in the service of shared experience is something that can be a powerful tool," said Faulkner. "'I have struggled, I have suffered, too.' That's something that kids don't often hear."

The event opened with a screening of a portion of the PBS documentary "Facing Suicide," and a WVIA short film about Abby Shaffer, a Bloomsburg University student whose personal struggles with depression led her to become an advocate for suicide prevention. It was the fifth screening/discussion program WVIA has presented around the region based on the "Facing Suicide" documentary from Twin Cities Public Television.