

# Vermont This Week-State of Youth Mental Health in Vermont

## Vermont's child and youth mental health crisis

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Recently Vermont This Week on Vermont Public hosted a panel discussion on the state of youth mental health in Vermont. The conversation focused on the 2023 Youth Behavior Risk Survey, released in November 2024, and the fact that the results have not improved since the pandemic. Vermont's youth are in crisis. As a mental health professional who works with Vermont's youth, I see evidence of this crisis daily. Youth are reporting a dramatic increase in conflict and divisiveness in our communities, and a constant barrage of media combined with social disconnectedness creates a systemic feeling of hopelessness. This leads to increased isolation, substance use, and self-harm behaviors. One of the questions asked in the *Vermont Public* panel was "What do kids need?" and the response was that kids need to be "believed, listened to, they need to feel like they belong, that they matter." The question we all need to be asking ourselves is: How do we do this?

It's time in Vermont to get creative in how we approach the youth mental health crisis. We need to be proactive and support evidence-based programs, such as mentoring. Mentoring programs play a crucial role in supporting youth mental health by providing individualized, one-on-one attention and fostering meaningful relationships between youth and trusted adults. In Vermont, 96% of mentees in mentoring programs funded by MENTOR Vermont reported that their mentor made them feel like they matter, and 92% said having a mentor made a positive difference in their lives.

Mentors offer emotional support, guidance, and encouragement, which are particularly beneficial for youth struggling with mental health issues. They help mentees engage in their schoolwork, think critically about their future, and navigate personal challenges. This support is essential in preventing risky behaviors among young people. Moreover, mentoring relationships help build resilience by providing a consistent and supportive presence in a young person's life. This connection can significantly improve their self-confidence, self-awareness, leadership skills, and communication abilities. Mentoring relationships are thoughtful, engaged and provide a shared experience. According to the National Mentoring Partnership, youth who have mentors are more likely to improve in areas such as emotional regulation, social skills, and overall life satisfaction. A study by the *Journal of Primary Prevention* found that mentoring can lower the likelihood of depressive symptoms and suicide attempts by providing emotional support, positive role models, and a sense of belonging. Overall, mentoring programs are a proven tool in promoting mental well-being and ensuring that young people have the supportive relationships they need to thrive.

Although the Vermont youth mental health crisis may seem overwhelming, it can be addressed by being proactive and putting in place proven early intervention programs such as mentoring. Thanks to the work of MENTOR Vermont, such programs already exist in many communities throughout the state, but they need more support and resources to broaden their effectiveness. Doing so will ensure that every child who needs a mentor has access to one, and the path towards stabilizing and moving out of this crisis will become clear.