THE THIRD ACE: YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

An iceberg model shows different parts of a system. The highest part is what we can see... but there’s more to it below the surface. As you go deeper, you understand the system better and also have more power or leverage to change it. (Source: https://untools.co/iceberg-model)

**EVENTS** What just happened?

**PATTERNS / TRENDS** What trends have there been over time?

**UNDERLYING STRUCTURES** What has influenced the patterns? What are the relationships between the parts?

**MENTAL MODELS** What assumptions, beliefs and values do people hold about the system? What beliefs keep the systems in place?

**Traumatic, stressful events** just keep coming, and youth are being challenged developmentally as they try to cope. Youth may internalize these events, leading them to experience symptoms of anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. These symptoms may show up through external behaviors including increased school violence and school suspensions, school avoidance, racially motivated violence, gang involvement, gun violence, and/or self-harming behavior.

During the pandemic, there has been a **pattern** of youth having to navigate losing opportunities to develop socialization and communication skills. The **trends** of focusing on physical safety/health and not on emotional safety and needs has resulted in isolation and lost opportunities for youth to develop social and emotional skills. Youth are experiencing bullying, pressure to perform or conform, and fear of violence, leading some to not attend school. Some youth mentioned peers seeking to replace a sense of home or a support system with gangs. Others described fellow students falling into cyber-bullying or violent, discriminatory influences online for similar reasons. Youth are resigned to the state of affairs and have been forced to grow up too soon.

The pandemic has exacerbated the disconnect youth already felt from their cultures and identities. Many youth have had to navigate losing their safety net, routines, and **structures**. Some caregivers, the “village,” and teachers don’t have the capacity to share cultural knowledge, affirm identities or provide support. Adults, both city and suburban, aren’t equipped to deal with resulting negative home and school behaviors. External racism, easy access to guns and drugs) also negatively impact youth mental health.

**The mental model** is one that provides no space for healing or acknowledging the need to recover, for youth or adults. The myth of resiliency supports this view. Youth are being challenged developmentally when trying to cope with violence, but they are exposed to and resort to it. Racism, bias, and prejudice also contribute to poor youth mental health. Adults may be dismissive of youth who express mental health challenges and can sometimes push spiritual beliefs over mental health counseling.

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The Third ACE Project aims to document the scope of the impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health in Rochester and Monroe County. In partnership with youth, caregivers, families, local community-based organizations and community leaders, together we will analyze and collect data while also exploring potential solutions. This project seeks to explore the COVID-19 pandemic as a third “ACE,” in addition to the “pair of ACEs” (Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adverse Community Environments). The initiative is a partnership between Common Ground Health and Coordinated Care Services, Inc.