John T. Broderick: Mental health and the pandemic - opportunity knocks

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THOSE last two months have been unlike any in my lifetime. It’s humbling to be reminded how, in the 21st century, there is still little we control and how we are not as all-knowing as we think. Pandemics, it turns out, are great equalizers. No one is immune from the sadness, pain and loss this pandemic has wrought, although for some it has been overwhelming. There are few silver linings in this tragedy, but over the last several weeks we have all begun to hear and read more about the pandemic’s impact on our general mental health.

Many of us have been rocked by our “new normal” and feelings of being isolated, vulnerable and afraid. Anxiety and depression are understandably rising among many who have never experienced them and are sadly exacerbated in many already suffering them.

We have ignored mental health for too long in America and failed to build and underwrite a mental health system that is equipped to treat the undeserved suffering of so many we know and love. But maybe the widening pain and dislocation this pandemic has caused will open our eyes to emotional suffering in ourselves and others. I hope so.

With the help and support of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health, I have been on a 45-month odyssey speaking to tens of thousands of students in middle school and high school gyms and auditoriums across Northern New England. I have visited more than 230 schools during that time and embraced hundreds of young people.
who have responded to my message of hope and healing. Their conversations with me, their tears, and their struggles have profoundly affected me. I see now what I never saw growing up.

My experience has made me impatient for change. My mission has been to start a conversation around emotional health, so we can finally — after centuries of silence, stigma and shame — liberate those who are suffering and begin to get them the help they need, and to build a mental health system that we can all be proud of.

I’m a baby boomer. My parents’ generation never discussed mental health and my generation bought into the “cone of silence” too. Family secrets remained secrets. The culture of silence and stigma that has been the norm for generations helped no one and consigned many people to suffer in the shadows.

I was so ignorant about mental health that I missed the signs of suffering in one of my own children. I’m not ignorant now.

Today’s young people are exceptional in many ways. As a result of numerous conversations with them these last four years, I have grown to better understand their considerable strengths and emotional challenges. I genuinely admire their savvy, candor, competence, and non-judgmental ways. But I also know that their lives are more stressed, more scheduled, more structured, more digital, more shaped and controlled by the virtual world and more pressured by the expectations of others.

Some of this new world order has propelled young people to achievements and opportunities many of us never experienced at their age. But it has also come with unwanted side effects.

The statistics tell us that half of all mental illness in America begins by age 14 and two-thirds begins by age 23. In any given year one in five adolescents suffers a mental health challenge, but less than
half receive treatment of any kind.

Last year in the U.S. we lost more than 47,000 friends and neighbors to suicide — that’s more than those who died in every traffic accident across our country. According to the Centers for Disease Control, from 2007 to 2017 the rate of suicide for people ages 10 to 24 increased 56 percent. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 24.

The Youth Risk Behavioral Surveys from school districts in my state of New Hampshire and around the country disturbingly reveal that it is not uncommon for 25 percent of high school students to be depressed, 20 percent to be engaging in non-lethal self-harm and almost 15 percent admit to giving serious consideration to suicide.

These pre-pandemic statistics won't improve as a result of the trauma and isolation of the pandemic. But they should concern all of us and compel us to act. A non-judgmental community-wide conversation about mental health that is free of shame, blame and stigma is overdue. Most mental health problems can be successfully treated but not without access, resources and community support.

Statistics have names, smiles and dreams. I know because I met far too many young people in pain these last four years to pretend the status quo is working. Maybe this dreadful pandemic will embolden us. It should. Many lives can be saved and changed if we do. We have run out of excuses.

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