

# MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH

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Tools to navigate today's emerging challenges





The landscape of mental, emotional and social health (MESH) is starkly different than it was during most camp leaders' youth. Historically, youth lived without the pressure of being constantly connected to others. Children and teens, even 10 years ago, participated in more play, which created opportunities for dialogue, in-person interactions and learning within natural settings. The current digital environment has shifted the focus of youth from physically interacting to engaging remotely — and almost continuously. ►



Why is this important? What is the value or detriment to the way youth are learning to navigate their environments? Compounding the digital effect is the requirement to walk through a pandemic for the past two years, which has further limited our capacity to physically engage with one another. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) and Kaiser Family Foundation's research has identified increasing levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness, depression, frustration and emotional regulation issues in our youth and young adults.

Camps are caring for individuals who have lived during these challenging times. The Alliance for Camp Health (ACH), formerly Association of Camp Nursing, conducted COVID-19 research following summer 2021. They identified that the most common challenges at camp were MESH, not only in campers but also in staff. Campers had social delays and emotional regulation challenges, while staff shared more anxiety about becoming ill, frustration due to changing protective measures, and a general desire for their camp experience to be "different." They wanted to "go back to" the way camp was before the pandemic.

In 2021, the Anxiety and Depression Association of America reported approximately 18.1% of the adult population (those 18 years and older) and 25.1% of adolescents (13–18 years) have anxiety challenges regularly. Mental Health of America conducted a large-scale analysis of MESH in the U.S. in 2021 and identified that 46% of Americans will meet the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition and half of the people will have onset of symptoms during childhood or adolescence. With the addition of the COVID-19 pandemic, the MESH challenges continue to escalate.

Campers, staff and leadership have all experienced trauma, stress and concerns about health and well-being since the start of the pandemic. People have been ill, lost family members, lost income, lost jobs and sometimes lost faith in their situations. This is the essence of trauma — when an event happens, and it is out of our control or ability to manage well.

Camps are encouraged to have a trauma-informed approach that acknowledges that we must better understand an individual's life to provide healing-oriented care as instructed by the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center. When we understand the nature of trauma, we are more equipped to effectively nurture and support interactions with those in our circles.

As we gain knowledge about the current state of MESH, Christian camps have a unique opportunity to participate in trauma stewardship. Trauma stewardship is a practice grounded in the idea that both joy and pain are realities of life as Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk write in their book *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*.

Camp is a unique opportunity to support and steward youth and adolescents as they practice navigating a lived experience with others. In this model of care, we understand it is a privilege to support people walking through trauma. We see this idea represented in Galatians 6:2, where Paul says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." We must be fully present to walk with someone through an emotional experience and practice compassion for both the individual and ourselves.

The purpose of this article is to share a few skills to assist individuals in need. Train your camp staff in these skills and promote opportunities to build personal relationships. This work in creating connections is essential to helping youth meet development trajectories for resilient MESH. ►

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Photo courtesy of Cascades Camp and Conference Center [2018]



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon [2019]





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## **Being Present**

Campers arrive in anticipation of a great week (or two) of fun, play and friendships. But this does not always happen naturally, especially as youth may be carrying previous trauma with them. Trauma from loneliness, anxiety, isolation or other adverse events feel like the physical luggage they brought with them. Their MESH may feel heavy, laborious and potentially overwhelming. Staff may also be dealing with similar emotional challenges and need support.

One early intervention is teaching staff to “sit in the uncomfortable.” Encourage staff to be present with others. They do not and should not try to “fix” a problem but rather be a listening ear. As it’s been said, God gave us two ears and one mouth. Hopefully, that reminds us to listen twice as much as we speak. The book of James reminds us to be “quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19), and it is a sacred experience to be offered an opportunity to help another.

By being present at a picnic table or on a bench in the dining hall, we allow others the opportunities to share their joys, griefs and challenges. Sharing happens at the speed of trust. This means that through listening and connections, youth will begin to share more about their MESH. Just listening to others helps them know that they can be loved and taken care of in the midst of suffering or pain as Lipsky and Burk explore in their book.

A second opportunity to promote presence, for others and ourselves, is to practice a mindful approach to living. Being mindful is to be fully present and aware, which helps to minimize being overwhelmed by previous life events, stress, trauma and other emotional strife. We often get so busy with activities that we fail to be “human *beings*.” Filling our time with busyness is most often associated with striving for an outcome, an accumulation or a reward. This creates additional stress as we seek to “stay ahead of the pack.” Human *beings* strive for deep conviction and invest in the journey, not just the result.

How do we become mindful and just enjoy “being” at camp? Throughout each day, encourage campers to use all their senses (sight, smell, touch, hearing) to engage with the environment. Camp environments give us beautiful blue skies, the smell of the campfire, the touch of a horse’s coat, and the sounds of birds at nightfall. If we practice “stopping” to recognize the gifts of creation, our heart rates will slow. Embracing gratitude is not only an antidote to stress, but it’s also commanded all throughout Scripture. Being thankful glorifies God as we see in Psalm 50:23, “Those who sacrifice thank offerings honor me....” When we model being present and being grateful, we’re providing simple opportunities to create profound results in our camp work. ►



## Fostering Connections

We were made to connect. Youth may arrive at camp with delayed skills in connecting with others as some have had periods where they have been out of school and away from peers for months. ACH's COVID-19 research affirmed that youth lacked communication skills and emotional regulation. In essence, youth have missed community and connections that support social growth.

A couple of skills to foster connection are “creating voice” and promoting resilience. “Creating voice” is the act of giving youth a chance to tell their story. To be heard is one of the most profound gifts we can give to another. Youth begin to tell their stories when we ask simple questions, “What are your interests? What is important to you?” and then use repetition to reinforce that they have been heard. Repetition allows us to repeat what we just heard.

*Example: Thanks for sharing your story, Sam. What I hear you saying is that you had a rough year at school, and you are looking forward to joining the track team in the fall.*

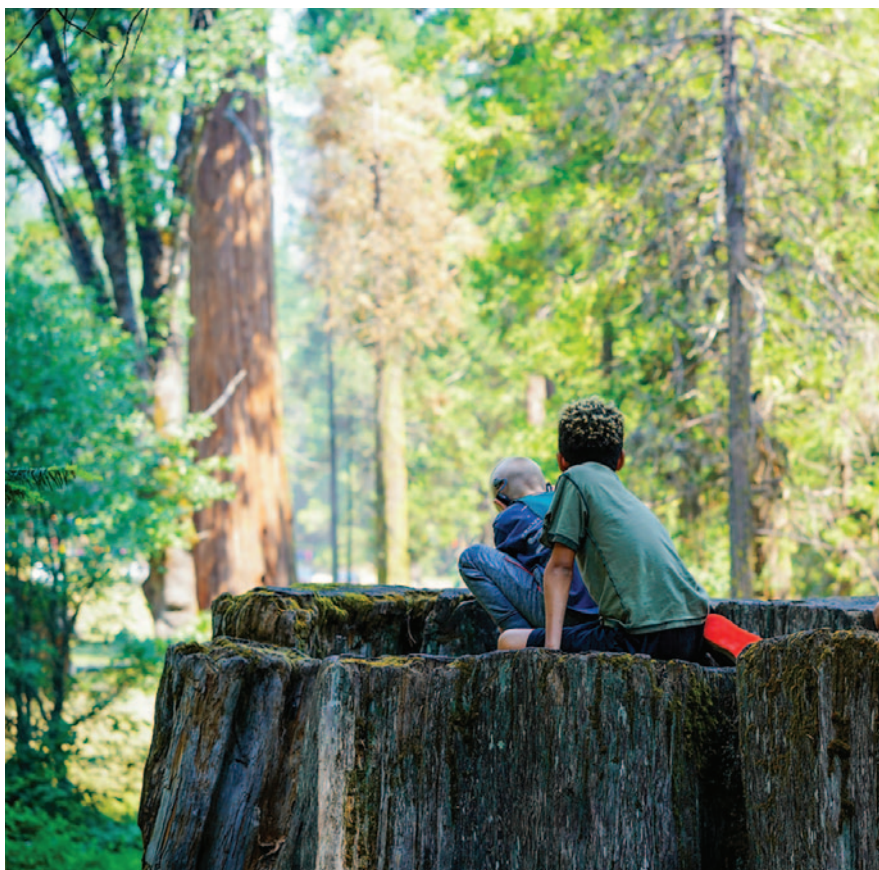
A second skill is the promotion of resilience. Dr. Deborah Gilboa advocates that “resilience is navigating our lives with truth and integrity.” We often talk about resilience as “getting back up again,” but this skill is only helpful if done with integrity and truth — not couched in lies or manipulation. Camp is a great opportunity to encourage youth to be vulnerable, to try activities like climbing walls and riding horses and identify new interests. While attempting new things, youth may not have success, but you can help them build resilience as you frame the experience in a healthy context.

*Counselor to camper (who did not make it up the climbing wall): I see you tried rock climbing today. That's a challenging activity. You made a lot of progress, which is a great start!*

In our communications with campers, we focus on the positive with a goal of providing validation in situations that continues to stimulate connections. Youth need to hear affirmations:

- You can do this.
- I am proud of you.
- You are on track.

Youth need our coaching and support for their MESH, to overcome trauma and help establish a path of wellness. ►



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Photo courtesy of Calvin Crest Conferences (2018)



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon (2021)



# Our desire at camp is to not only recognize hope-filled individuals but also promote the hope given to us within the camp experience itself.

## Healing Through Hope

Hope is forward-thinking. Hope is not a feeling, but rather an action demonstrating motivation about the future. When we say we are “hopeful,” we focus on the hope Jesus offers as we navigate what lies ahead. How does this play out at camp? What is the benefit of being hopeful? Researchers Casey Gwinn, J.D., and Chan Hellman, Ph.D., tell us that individuals who have a hope-filled approach to living have much fewer MESH issues. Hopeful individuals are often thinking about goals for the next day, week and year. Christian camps can have an even greater impact dispersing hope because you have the privilege of sharing the great hope available to us, hope through faith and a relationship with God. Our desire at camp is to not only recognize hope-filled individuals but also promote the hope given to us within the camp experience itself.

There are simple activities that can help to replace revisiting trauma with hope-filled forward-thinking. Within camp activities, consider goal-setting opportunities. Camps may do this by establishing community commitment plans (CCP). A CCP gives voice to the campers and allows them to establish expectations about how their camp group will treat one another while together.

A CCP for young children may include: no hitting and being kind to one another. A CCP for an older camper group may be more robust to include giving each cabin mate one affirmation each day, using words of courtesy with everyone they meet and practicing inclusion. Having CCPs for each group then allows them to own the behaviors, promote accountability and strengthen friendships.

All interactions at camp need to be oriented on safety, love and respect. If your camp has nighttime chats, use this time to encourage discussions that promote the uniqueness of individuals in a safe space. Encourage and recognize loving acts when campers hold the door open or let another be first in the dining hall line. The skill requiring the most attention is respect. As youth learn to navigate emotionally charged interactions, bullying or other verbal altercations, they need guidance about how to love others who may think or act differently.

We will continue to navigate MESH challenges through future camp seasons. We want to prepare ourselves and our staff to learn skills that cultivate healthy and heartfelt people. Focus on three things:

- *Presence:* Do this by sitting in an uncomfortable space with others and striving to live in a mindful way of the beauty and gifts that surround us daily.
- *Connections:* Use the tools of creating voice and building resilience. Help youth by listening, listening, listening to their stories, validating their experiences and affirming positive futures. Failures are inevitable, so help youth learn to become resilient and walk through life situations with integrity and truth.
- *Hope:* Help youth develop goals for the camp experience through tools like a CCP. Encourage campers and staff to think about how they will model safety, love and respect for everyone in your camp community.

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Serving campers, guests and staff with these tools can help you navigate MESH challenges at camp, pointing people to the hope of Jesus and demonstrating intentional care for everyone around you. ■



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