

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) is a nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, in partnership with historically marginalized communities.

This is one of CUP's **Urban Investigations** – project based afterschool programs in which high school students explore fundamental questions about how the city works. Students collaborate with CUP and Teaching Artists to create multimedia teaching tools that reach audiences in the fields of art and social justice. To learn more about CUP, visit welcometoCUP.org.

CUP

Teaching Artist: Stephen Kwok
Project Lead: Fielding Hong

Life Sciences Secondary School

Principal: Kim Swanson
Parent Coordinator: Cecilia Gual
Students: Sabina Aktar, Rosemarie Alubankudi, Gabriella Chavez, Bisma Ejaz, Nishat Fiza, Azia Francis, Nadia Islam, Ada Johnsen-Deweese, X-zavion Rivera, Alaa Mady and Ayah Mady

Thanks to our interviewees: Dr. Dianah Cantres, Nicole Hamilton, Dr. Wenimo Okoya, Linda Tigani, Ashley Zaharakis

Special thanks to: Parker Johnson, June Song, Elijah Thomas

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NYC Cultural Affairs



It's Not Just in Our Heads

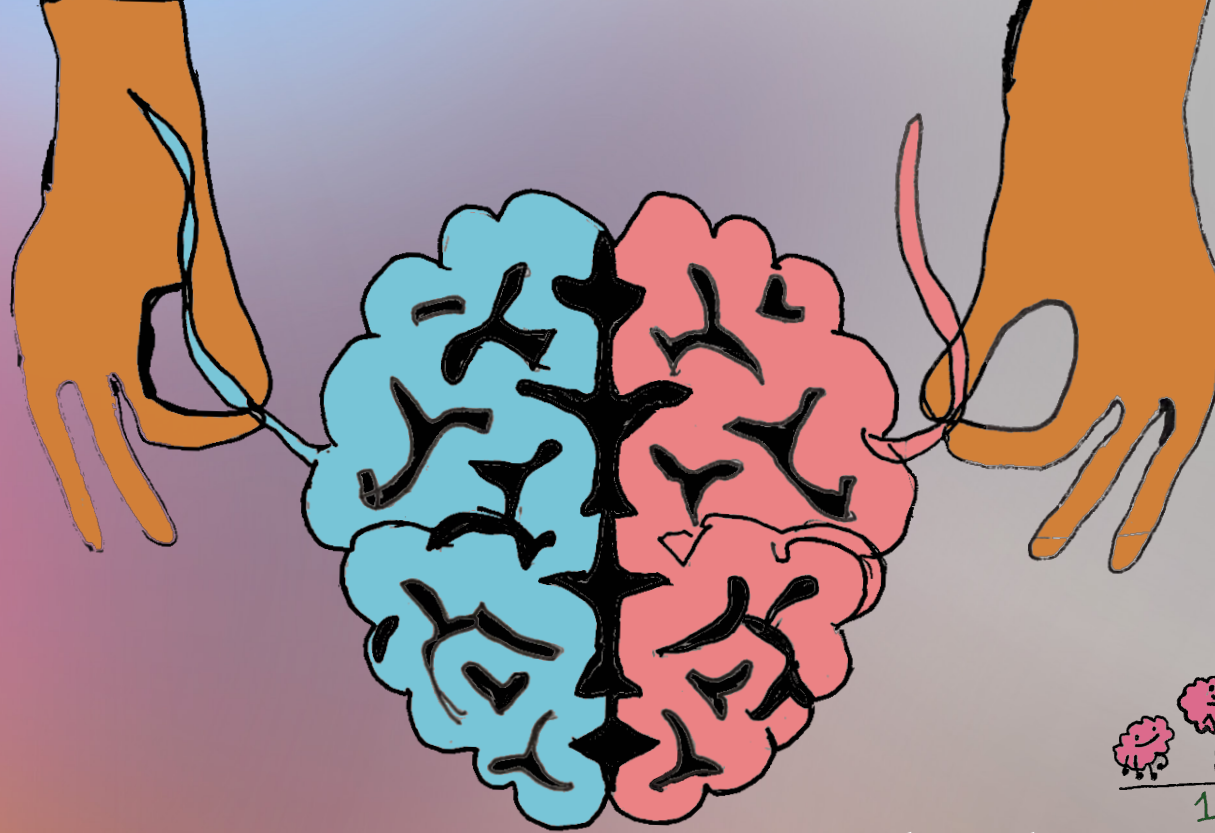
What impacts student
mental health?

From sudden school shutdowns to the pressures of social media, young people are dealing with a lot these days. As conversations about mental health become more common, there's a growing sense that many of our personal struggles might not just be all in our heads.

What's mental health? What impacts our mental health? How can we find support? How can we support others?

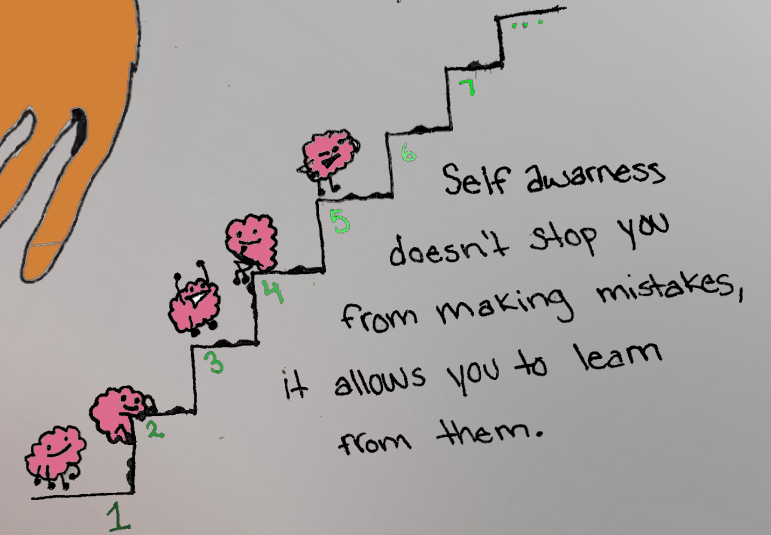
In the winter of 2020-2021, CUP collaborated with Teaching Artist Stephen Kwok and public high school students from Life Sciences Secondary School to investigate this issue. Students created art therapy activities, surveyed community members, and interviewed key stakeholders working on the issue.

This is a guide to what students learned about mental health, how it impacts our daily lives, and how to support others that might be struggling with their mental health.



"I want to over emphasize that having mental health concerns or needing support for your mental health is normal. And all of us across our lifespans might have some need for additional mental health support."

- Dr. Wenimo Okoya



What's mental health?

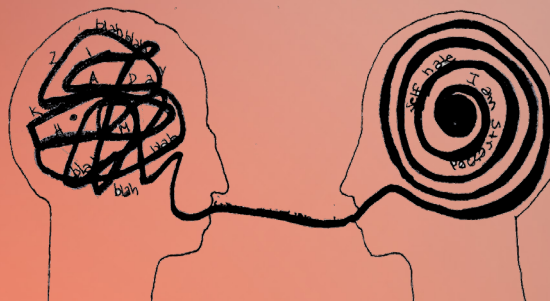
"I like to think of mental health as a spectrum of wellbeing. Mental health is what allows us to manage our day [and] to be productive in our lives with our family, with our friends, with our community. Mental health helps us manage whatever stressors we're dealing with."

- Linda Tigani, Senior Director, Children, Youth and Families, Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC



"Mental health is being able to show up as your best self and being able to realize your potential."

- Dr. Wenimo Okoya, Director, High School Program Implementation, The Jed Foundation



"If you are feeling like you can handle what is being thrown at you on a day to day basis then you're probably in good standing with your mental health."

- Ashley Zaharakis, Guidance Counselor, 12th Grade & College Advising, Life Sciences Secondary School



Ashley Zaharakis

You are
not alone



Socioeconomic Status

"Socioeconomic factors like living in poverty or living paycheck to paycheck, or living in an apartment or house that is in constant need of repair, all of those factors of daily life and daily living can put major stressors on the mental health for the adults and the children in the space."

- Linda Tigani



Dr. Wenimo Okoya

What impacts mental health?

Social Pressures

"School workload sometimes affects my mental health. And when parents pressure kids to be good all the time and to get A's all the time - this affects students' mental health."

- Rosemarie Alubankudi, Student

Racism

"One thing that is constant that does impact all young women of color is white supremacy and racism and racism. Whether you're Asian Pacific Islander, African-American, Caribbean American, Latina Latinex -- white supremacy sets up these systems for us that caused us to have to push a lot harder to break through the barriers to be able to do what we want, when we want, how we want to do it."

- Nicole Hamilton

"Racism causes disparities [in health]. Our country has been designed in a way that disenfranchises communities of color. It makes it difficult for folks to access culturally responsive healthcare and mental healthcare."

- Dr. Wenimo Okoya



It's not just all in our heads. Lots of things beyond our individual control can impact our health and wellbeing.

School Budgets and Resources

"I wish that we could have a built in mental health facility right in our school. We do have one around the corner. [But,] unfortunately, sometimes it's so backed up and so overwhelmed that we can't get a student in there in a timely fashion."

- Ashley Zaharakis

"If the school doesn't have the budget, they may not be able to get the resources in the school that are necessary for a student's mental health."

- Dr. Dianah Cantres, Guidance Counselor, 9th & 10th Grades, Life Sciences Secondary School

School Community

"For example, if I as a black girl walk into a school and I feel seen and I feel heard then my mental health is going to be positively impacted by me feeling as though I belong in school."

- Dr. Wenimo Okoya

Are young people today more likely to struggle with mental health?

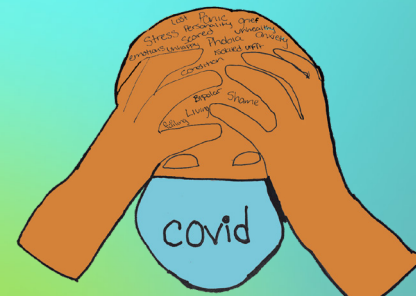


“With the pandemic and COVID specifically, it’s exasperated all of the stressors and daily life that can cause someone to be sad and can cause someone to feel trauma.” – Linda Tigani

Social Isolation & the COVID-19 Pandemic

“One of the main issues that we’re seeing right now in our schools is that because students are isolated because of COVID they’re feeling really disconnected from their peers and their friends. That disconnection and isolation is linked to increased anxiety and depression.”

– Dr. Wenimo Okoya



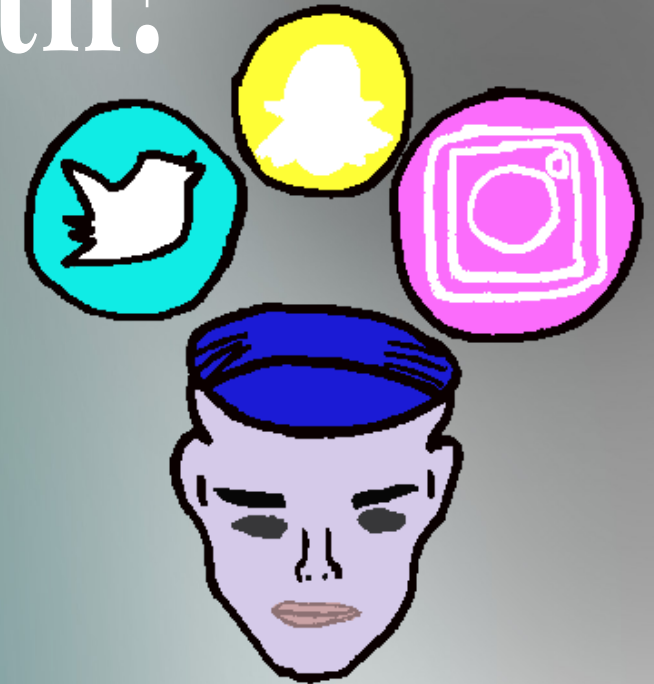
Linda Tigani

“It’s hard to compare this generation to other generations because this generation talks about mental health more. [Past generations] only talked about mental health when it was a serious mental health condition.”

– Dr. Wenimo Okoya

“I think that young people today have a higher level of consciousness about their mental health and their feelings, and they’re feeling freer to share it. Which I think is wonderful.”

– Linda Tigani



How does social media impact mental health?

“Social media [creates] constant exposure to comparison... Having the phone at your fingertips creates over-stimulation and the [need for] instant gratification, making it really difficult to manage emotions and control impulses. There’s this huge pressure for perfectionism, which has always existed, but exists so much more because of exposure to social media.”

– Dr. Wenimo Okoya



What mental health resources are available for teens in NYC?

Youth Programs

“New York city has more youth programs than any other city in the entire country... They may not always be packaged as mental health supports or as intervention programs, although those things exist too.”

– Nicole Hamilton



“Girls for Gender Equality (GGE) has a lot of social justice based afterschool programs. For example, helping young people learn how to organize, but doing it through sports and cooking and food, justice and dance and all kinds of art and photography... [GGE] centers the social and emotional needs of young people and their health and mental health and wellbeing.”

– Nicole Hamilton

NYC Well

“NYC Well is a mental health service for all New Yorkers and it’s free... I had a couple of students that did not want their family members to know that they were going to counseling. They didn’t want to have to pay out of pocket or pay with their insurance. NYC Well, helped to find a location that was free to the student near their home.”

– Ashley Zaharakis



Dianah Cantres

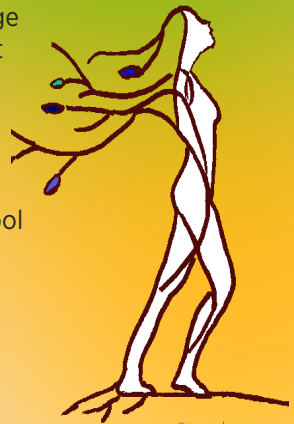
What support can I find in schools?

“A lot of times teachers are a huge part of mental health services at our school. We are the mental health frontline.”

– Ashley Zaharakis

“Every New York city public school has a mental health program. And that program supports all the students with their emotional wellbeing, as well as their academics.”

– Dr. Dianah Cantres



Community Centers

“Community centers have recreation programs, including music and art. Students can get homework help...They also have counseling sessions, small group, big group.”

– Dr. Dianah Cantres



Looking for some help?

If you’re really struggling right now, here are a few organizations that can offer free help, 24/7.

- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800-273-8255
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Trevor Project: 866-488-7386
- Trans lifeline: 877-565-8860

How can we care for our own mental health?

Create a Daily Ritual

"[Before winter] I used to wake up before my classes at 7:30 in the morning and go for a run. And then after when the sun was coming up, I sat in the park in the swing and just swung myself back and forth. It was one of the happiest times of my day, because I feel like if you start off your day positively, the whole day will be better."

- Nadia Islam, Student

Try Journaling

"Journaling really helps me to kind of figure out what it is that I'm feeling. Some times it's hard within your brain when everything's kind of mucked up and whirling around for you to understand. But when you can write it out, it becomes a little bit more clear."

- Dr. Wenimo Okoya



Take Control of Your Social Media

"You can remove apps from your phone to limit your use of social media throughout the day. You could schedule some social media time for a half hour every day. And then that's the only time that you look at it... You could filter in everything that gives you energy and excitement [and] you can filter out what doesn't."

- Linda Tigani

Talk to Someone You Trust

"The most important piece is that when you're feeling emotional distress, that you don't keep it to yourself. Share with one or two people that you feel confident that they're going to keep your privacy and they're going to help you seek help when you're ready."

- Linda Tigani



Lean on Friendship

"When one of my friends are struggling, I listen. When I think that they're done, I will say, 'Do you want to spend some more time sharing, or would you like me to chime in?' And if they say chime in, I just repeat back to them what they said. I make sure that they know that I heard what they said. Then at the end, I'll ask, 'What would you like to do?'"

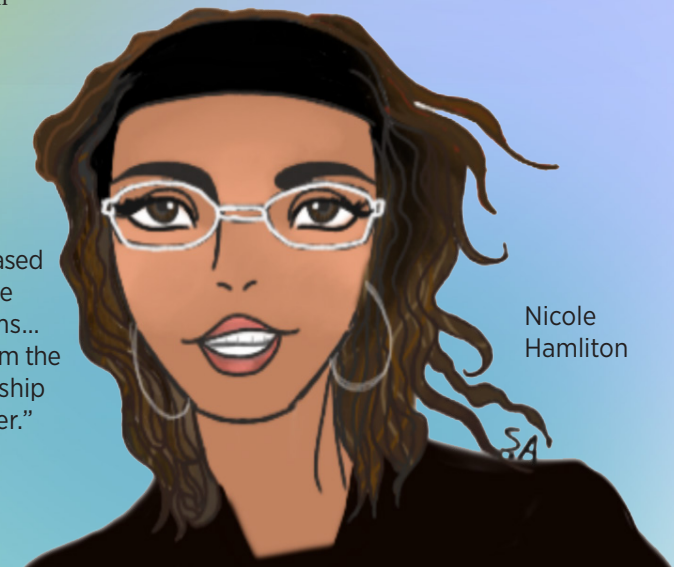
- Linda Tigani



Center Healing

"A healing-centered approach uses a strength-based perspective to accentuate and use the positive things [in people's lives] as coping mechanisms... In a healing-centered relationship, it's not like I am the expert and I'm here to heal you. It's a relationship [in which] we work through your stuff together."

- Nicole Hamilton



Nicole Hamilton

Chill Out, Make Art, Self-Care

Students created art activities to help you chill out and self-care. Take a look and try some out!

Draw It

by Alaa Mady & Sabina Aktar

This drawing game is a way to distract ourselves, get creative and have fun!

Materials: Paper/Index cards, Pencil,Timer

Steps:

- Put 45 seconds on a timer.
- Have one person draw what's on their mind on a piece of paper in 45 seconds.
- After they finish drawing have them describe the drawing with details to the other person without letting them know what they drew. (For example, If you drew a face don't say "draw a face". Guide them through drawing the face without them knowing it's a face.)
- Once they are done drawing compare the drawings and see how similar or different they look.



"I would advise other parents to understand that mental health issues are not something that is shameful."
- Alaa Mady, Student



"I think people need to know that mental health is just as important as physical health and that it is nothing to be ashamed of."
- Ayah Mady, Student

Mandala Feelings

by Gabriella Chavez and Nishat Fiza

This activity is a short mental health exercise done whenever you have free time and want to express how you feel but don't have the words to do it.

Materials: Paper, drawing supplies, music

Instructions:

- Put some music on.
- While you're listening draw or paint what you are feeling.
- When you finish drawing, create mandala over your drawing.
- Use a pencil to make a dot in the middle of your paper.
- Lightly draw three or more concentric circles around the dot.
- Lightly draw four lines that cross the paper at the middle dot. Draw a line from each corner to corner and from each side to side. Each circle should now have eight pieces.
- Use a marker or pen to draw repeating designs within each circle.
- Erase the pencil marks.

"Mental health is a real thing and a lot of people struggle with it. I know a lot of people don't like to talk about mental health issues. You can always talk to loved ones or friends."
- Gabriella Chavez, Student

Release the Stress

by Nadia Islam and Ayah Mady

"Give your stress wings and make it fly away." This activity is a short and artistic way to release all your stress.

Materials: Paper, Pen or Marker, Paint and Paintbrush

Steps:

- Gather your materials
- Either write your message or paint your message on the paper
- After writing or painting your message, fold the paper into an airplane.
- Lastly, FLY IT AWAY!



Four Quarters

by Ada Johnson-DeWeese and Naomi Maldonado

This is a short mental health activity that can be done in one day or multiple days, depending on how you feel.

Materials: Paper, drawing supplies, music

Steps:

- Fold your paper in half hot dog style. Crease well and unfold.
- Fold your paper in half again, this time hamburger style. Crease well and unfold.
- Choose 4 different genres of music. (i.e Country, Indie, Pop, Alternative, Depressing, etc)
- Unfold your paper so that you have 4 different sections.
- Listen to 3 songs from the first genre while drawing however the songs make you feel. (You can doodle, paint, color whatever you want to express how you're feel while listening to those songs.) Try to avoid stopping or pausing. Just go with the flow of it.
- After those 3 songs end stop wherever you are and go to the next genre and repeat step 5.
- Do this until you have filled all 4 quarters of the paper with doodles or something
- Enjoy your masterpiece!

“Don’t ignore your mental health. Talk to someone you trust about how you feel and take some time off for yourself to relax and just reconnect with yourself mentally.”
– Rosemarie Alubankudi, Student

Color Collage

by Bisma Ejaz & Rosemarie Alubankudi

This activity is a quick relaxation mental health exercise for once a week.

Materials: Digital Option—Computer, Collage Website (here), Pinterest, Google; Physical option—Paper, cardboard, magazines and newspapers, scissors, glue

Steps:

- Gather your materials
- Choose a color that expresses your mood for the week
- Choose images that match your mood color
- Create a collage with those images
Repeat whenever you want to relax

“There are ways that you can get mental health support that are affordable. Everyone deserves support and can get help with their mental health whether they realize it or not.”
– Ada Johnson-DeWeese, Student

“It’s okay to take your time to find healthy ways to heal.”
– X-Zavion Rivera, Student

“Never feel like you’re in this alone, there will always be someone out there that you lean on whenever you need a shoulder to cry on.”
– Sabina Aktar, Student

