



## The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

### *Why the Ability to Listen is a Superpower (Part I)*

**Jeanne Blake:** One important way to support children is to be present and listen – rather than give advice. This was underscored by middle school students at the National Cathedral School in Washington, DC after they viewed the teen video of our program *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*. Too often, they said, parents respond to kids' distress or sadness by trying to fix things. Dr. Leslie Klein Garvin is the Director of Counseling and the Middle School Counselor at the school.

**Dr. Leslie Klein Garvin:** They explained that so often their well-intentioned parents try to cheer them up when they're feeling down. If they were struggling, or were withdrawn, many shared their parents would say, "Hey, cheer up, let's do a Zoom movie night or meet up with your friends in the park." That wasn't what they wanted to hear. We know sometimes it's necessary to force yourself to do things you enjoy. We call that behavioral activation. What we know in this moment of grief, and what the students expressed, was their parents' suggestions didn't match what they were experiencing in the moment. And they wish their parents would simply let them be down, join them in it, and not try to pull them out of it.

**Jeanne:** Dr. Kerry Ressler, the Chief of the Division of Depression and Anxiety Disorders at McLean Hospital, explains that when parents respond to children's feeling of distress by going into "fix it" mode, may be responding more to their *own* emotions than those of the child.

**Dr. Kerry Ressler:** What people will tell you is, "I'm not telling you because I want it to be fixed or that I think you can fix it. I'm telling you because I want to have somebody share it with me, know that it's going to be okay, or know that you're going to love me anyway." Often, when someone tries to fix the problem, they don't have enough context of the situation. So, what you come up with as the listener is likely something they thought of themselves. It's unlikely, at least in a rapid fixing way, to be a meaningful attempt to solve the problem. Rather, it's trying to make the problem go away. And how much is that for the person sharing their fear and their stress? And how much of it is for you, as the listener, trying to make this go away and not have to feel bad about it?

**Jeanne:** Dr. Ressler encourages parents to tune in and listen, be empathic, and acknowledge what a child feels. That, in itself, is healing. For longer term solutions, you can explore *with* a child how you can best support them in an ongoing way. That's how Kercine Elie responded after she and her son Christian watched our teen video in which 17-year-old Cedric described feeling isolated and lonely.

**Kercine Elie:** After Christian heard the story he said, "Wow, I'm so glad somebody understands what I've been trying to say all this time. I'm so glad somebody understands me." And I like, OK. I thought I understood. But here it is: These kids were *over* being stuck in the house, missing out on sports, missing their friends. And we thought as parents, if I give you food, shelter, and keep you healthy, that should be enough. But it's not."

**Jeanne:** Kercine supported Christian in finding more ways to spend time friends to lessen his loneliness. Because she listened and helped him problem solve, Christian is thriving. And now, there are many more family conversations between Kercine, Christian and his two siblings.

**Kercine:** I'm being more of a listener than before, and I think they realize it. So, they're sharing way more.

**Jeanne:** These conversations – in which parents listen more than they talk – validate children and help them build resilience. That helps prepare them to navigate future uncertainty, change and challenging times.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.**

**Kerry, J. Ressler, MD, PhD, is chief scientific officer and James and Patricia Poitras Chair in Psychiatry at *McLean Hospital*. He is also Chief of the Division of Depression and Anxiety Disorders.**

**Leslie Klein Garvin, PsyD is the Director of Counseling and the Middle School Counselor at the National Cathedral School in Washington, DC**