



Issue XLIII | February 2018

Mental Health, Stress Play Significant Roles in Health of Denver Youth

Mirroring the high rates of depression and anxiety [recently noted in adolescents nationwide](#), young people in Denver are experiencing high levels of stress and mental health concerns. The recently released [2017 Denver Youth Health Assessment](#) (YHA) revealed mental health as a central threat to youth health; depression and stress were noted specifically.

“I believe that the amount of stress that adolescents face is too high. There is constant pressure on us to do well and it can become overwhelming.”

Young people reported feeling an intense amount of stress in their lives. More than 10 percent of the 447 assessment survey responses identified stress as a key issue affecting youth health.

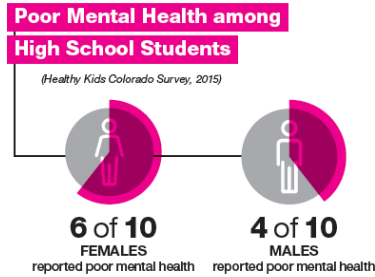
Denver youth said they experience stress from:

- External pressure and expectations.
- Anxiety and uncertainty related to changes in their communities.
- Experiences of depression.

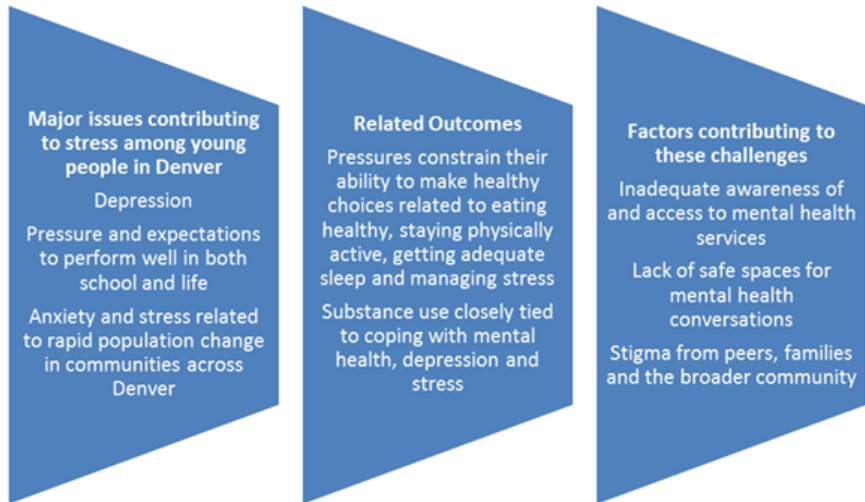
Young people said stress constrains their ability to eat healthy food and get adequate sleep. They also described the use of substances such as alcohol and marijuana as a key coping mechanism for addressing stress and other mental health challenges.

Mental and physical health challenges in the critical life phases of adolescence and emerging adulthood (ages 17-21) impact emotional and cognitive development. They also have the potential to affect an individual’s health and ability to thrive as an adult.

Emerging adults with psychiatric disorders, including depression and anxiety, have increased risk of unemployment, homelessness, early pregnancy, arrest/incarceration, and school dropout.



Recognizing the complexity of these health challenges, youth leaders, who led the YHA effort, identified factors at the individual, interpersonal and community level which contribute to the experience of stress.



Source: Summarized from the [2017 Denver Youth Health Assessment](#)

how adults can support their resiliency when facing stress. In particular, they expressed the need for adults to:

- Validate the complex demands on young people's time and be aware of the combined pressures that they face.
- Recognize that when it comes to accessing mental health services, young people have unique needs (including confidentiality) and barriers (including financial).
- Advocate for comprehensive, youth-friendly behavioral health services that meet those needs and address barriers.
- Listen to their needs and consider how you or your organization can provide support.
- Learn about, and use, the principles of [Positive Youth Development \(PYD\)](#) to initiate meaningful conversations with young people directly.

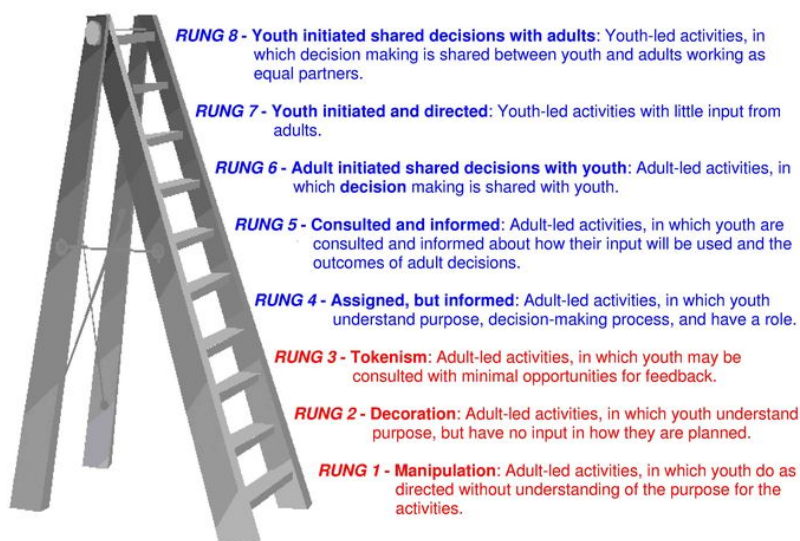
harms, but on assets and protective factors. PYD efforts are:

- Strengths-based.
- Inclusive.
- Engaging youth as partners and equals.
- Collaborative, and sustainable rather than temporary.

Programs based on PYD, value and prioritize the meaningful engagement of youth in programs—not just as participants but as leaders of the activities and interventions that impact them—and ensure that the young people participating experience benefits from their involvement.

One way to assess the extent which an organization or program is engaging youth in a meaningful way is to review the **Ladder of Youth Participation** and determine how aspects of the higher rungs could be incorporated.

ROGER HART'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

What Are We Doing?

- [Denver Public Health](#) is implementing and evaluating new models of youth engagement in public health programs:
 - Nine youth ages 15-18 were hired to work 4-8 hours per month on the YHA.
 - Since 2015, Denver Public Health has employed three Peer Youth Advisors who work 20 hours per week on grant-funded youth engagement projects.
 - New substance abuse prevention coalitions employ 10 youth to work as coalition members and youth outreach leaders.
- [Denver Public Health](#), in partnership with the City of Denver, is [facilitating coordination among youth-serving and youth advocacy organizations in Denver](#).

What Can You Do?

- Review additional **opportunities for action** in each section of the [2017 Denver YHA](#).
- Consider where your current youth engagement is on the **Ladder of Youth Participation**. Examine what you can do to move it to a higher rung.
- [Request a Positive Youth Development training](#) by emailing lorin.scott-okerblom@state.co.us.
- Connect with existing groups of young people to get input on youth-related efforts. Consider:
 - [Mayor Hancock's Youth Commission](#).
 - The statewide [Youth Partnership for Health](#).
 - Youth Advisory Boards of [Metro Youth Alliance](#), [Mirror Image Arts](#), or [Children's Hospital Colorado](#).
- Meet youth where they are and when possible, when they are already meeting, rather than asking them to come to your organization or meeting.
- Engage young people in processes, policies and decision making.
- Compensate youth fairly for their time and expertise. Look for creative ways to provide compensation beyond gift cards and transit vouchers.

About Denver Vital Signs

Published by [Denver Public Health](#) and [Denver's Department of Public Health and Environment](#), *Denver Vital Signs* is a bi-monthly publication on important public health topics for policymakers, public health professionals and interested citizens of Denver County.



Share



Tweet



Forward

Copyright © 2018 Denver Public Health, All rights reserved.

Want to change how you receive these emails?

You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#)