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School Nurses Can Be Mental Health 'Detectives' But They Need Help

By KAVITHA CARDOZA • SEP 3, 2016

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LA JOHNSON / NPR



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Originally published on September 3, 2016 3:37 pm

This story is part of our NPR Ed series on mental health in schools.

Patricia Tolson has some visitors.

Two 5-year-old girls, best-friends, hold hands in her office at Van Ness Elementary School in Washington D.C., one complaining she doesn't feel well. Tolson, the school nurse, asks, "How long has your stomach been hurting?"

It just started, but this little one says her head hurt last night, too. Tolson knows she has a history of fevers, so she checks her temperature and asks her more questions: What did she eat? Has she gone to the bathroom? Does her head still hurt?

Schools function as the mental health system for up to 80 percent of children who need help, according to the American Association of Pediatrics.

And school nurses? They play a critical role in identifying students with mental health disorders.

It could be that these two little girls that went to Patricia Tolson's office are fine. Or maybe there's something else going on. And that's what school nurses have to gauge every day.

"School nurses are the detectives in that school," says Donna Mazyck, the executive director of the National Association of School Nurses. "They're the eyes and ears of public health."

She says nurses look for patterns, "so if a student comes back with the same symptoms every single day that week, that school nurse is going to begin to connect the dots."

All of which is great if there's actually a school nurse. Some schools share nurses. Some districts have just one for all of their schools.

On top of that, school nurses generally get very little training when it comes to mental health. Mazyck says she herself was overwhelmed when she was a school nurse. She saw depression, trauma, anxiety, grief and "students who didn't even know what to do to calm themselves down," she says. "They didn't know how to cope."

So Mazyck went back to school for a graduate degree in counseling and now she focuses on getting nurses more training. Mental health is routinely ranked one of the top issues all school nurses deal with, and many want to be better at it.

Nurses feel like they might open a Pandora's box if they ask students certain questions about their mental health, says Sharon Stephan who co-directs the National Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland. Her team trains school nurses all over the country. She says that nurses can feel overwhelming when they aren't sure if there's anyone in the community to help students outside the school.

Stephan says no one expects nurses, or even teachers for that matter, to be therapists or psychiatrists. But she tells nurses there are two simple questions you can ask yourself to see if a child needs help:

Is the student acting or behaving differently than they were before?

Or

Are they somehow far outside the norm of what you would expect?

What frustrates her is that often, the only time everyone pays attention is when there's a tragedy, like a school shooting.

The idea is "Can we catch the one student who might harm others?" or "How can we identify the one student who might be suicidal?"

But she says there are so many more kids who need help — and the first person who might notice — is the school nurse.

Talking back, getting into fights and being distracted in school: "Is that just kids being kids? Or signs of a child struggling with mental health?" she says she asks herself.

Increasingly it's the school nurse's job to make that call.

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SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

Now we'll hear from StoryCorps' Military Voices Initiative, recording interviews with men and women who've served in the post-9/11 conflicts and their loved ones. We're coming up on 15 years since September 11 and the war in Afghanistan that has claimed the lives of thousands of U.S. military personnel. Today, we'll hear about one of them - Sergeant First Class Chris Henderson. He joined the Army right out of high school in 1991. He served in Bosnia and Kosovo before he deployed to Afghanistan in 2007 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. On that tour of duty, he was killed by an IED. He left behind an 8-year-old daughter and his wife, Jenna.

JENNA HENDERSON: He had eyes the color of a swimming pool. They were the lightest blue. They sparkled. I mean, it wasn't just the color. And he always made sure that I felt loved. I can remember the times that he took me for motorcycle rides. And it would be winter almost in Washington, and we'd be freezing, yet we'd be riding up in the mountains. And I can remember looking through the tall trees out at the sound feeling the cold on my face and having my arms wrapped around him, thinking there's no other place I'd rather be.

When Kayley was probably 18 months old, I remember it was storming, and he put on her bathing suit and his bathing suit, and they're out playing in mud puddles in the pouring rain. He was such a goofball (laughter) and there was a lake right down from the house. And I can remember many times seeing the two of them with feet in the water just fishing and talking.

And there are things that come out in her that I see of him. Like, when she's upset, her little eyebrow twitches, and when she smiles, she's kind of got that little crooked smile he had. And when she laughs, you can see the light in her. And next year, when she starts high school, one of her courses is JROTC. So, I mean, she's trying to follow in his footsteps.

But, I mean, I miss him horribly. It hurts because, I mean, when it comes down to it, somebody took his life, so I'll never be at peace with that fact. But I don't think I could have married a better man.

Matter of fact, one of the last letters I got was an apology for something that had happened a year or two before. In it, he said how much he loved me and how he was glad that he had married me and that he wouldn't have changed that for the world. And that would be the one thing that I would want to tell his grandchildren or his great-grandchildren or his great-great-grandchildren, that he was a man that they could be very proud of.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SIMON: Jenna Henderson remembering her late husband, Army Sergeant First Class Chris Henderson who was killed in Afghanistan in 2007. She recorded that interview for StoryCorps in Arlington, Va. It will be archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.

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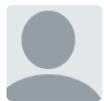
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