

Julie is a licensed Social Worker in the State of Ohio. She is a full-time therapist and part time Director of Youth and Family at St. Paul Lutheran, Defiance, Ohio. Julie will lead the webinar Managing Anxiety in Post Pandemic Times on Tuesday, April 25 at 8 pm Eastern. The interview was conducted by Diane McGeoch, President of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA.

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

***Tell us about your ministry setting and your work with youth and families.***

I have worked at St. Paul Lutheran, Defiance since 2008 and the setting is rural Northwest Ohio. My work with youth has had a heavy emphasis on parish education for all ages. While we still have a traditional Sunday school, we have transitioned to more emphasis on Wednesday night youth groups. We try to plug youth into ministry opportunities that match their interests. Pastor Dave Brobston speaks openly of mental health issues often and this has led to some unique opportunities for us as a faith community. We are a place where mental health is spoken of regularly, and where people can come and be real about their struggles.

***What changes in ministry and in children/youth/families have you experienced during and since the pandemic?***

We all had to invent a new way of ministry during the pandemic. We tried all kinds of things, and I hope the love of Christ shone through all the efforts. We were taping and uploading Sunday school lessons and offering Zoom youth groups that were awkward and hard to sustain. We got tired of screens. We had to find ways to stay connected. I think the pressures of church leadership during that time were enormous. I learned things I never even wanted to know about livestreaming. We could not sit together for such a long time. Our relationships had to be rebuilt. We were creative and there were positives that come out of this time. But let's consider our youth. At a key time in their development, everything was interrupted. They lost access to their education (both school and faith), their relationships to extended family, their teachers and church, and their critically important peers. We thought they depended on phones before, but for two years their phones were their lifelines to connection. Now they have been thrown back into it all and they are struggling to make up for lost time. Social situations are more anxiety provoking because so much time together to learn the skills was lost. Anxiety and depression have spiked. There is an increase in suicide attempts. I certainly see that as a therapist and as a youth director, and have to admit it is overwhelming.

***What are some of the causes of the rise in anxiety and depression in those we minister to?***

The causes are so numerous. I get weary of the discussion of all the contributing factors because many things on that tired list cannot be helped. I would like to see us move beyond condemning the societal ills because it just contributes to a lack of hope. Where anxiety and depression are concerned I have immense hope. I am sure there are many societal woes to blame but sometimes I think it is more simple. There is a lack of love in so many lives. Approaching our work with youth with love, open to what they have to teach us, and dedicated to encouraging them acts as a counter weight the causes of their anxiety.

***How do we comfort and support those we are in ministry with? What are some tools that can help us navigate this time?***

Listen. Accept what you hear. Assume there is a good reason for their anxiety. I was always given the impression that worry was 'wrong' or that I should be able to lean on God and not feel that way. Rid yourself of that. I will be providing a list of resources and hopefully suggesting practical skills and activities that can help both you and your youth to learn to calm.

Creating a culture of Christ's love and acceptance is our best work. Youth love to take care of each other so creating a space where they can build relationships and pray for each other is vital. The world is full of words and we often think it is all on us. Build time for silence and seek out sacred space where they can receive care directly from God.

***Can you share ideas or programs you've used that provide support for these needs?***

I, along with my pastor and the youth director from another church have done evenings of suicide prevention and drug prevention. We also jointly did a school assembly on suicide prevention. I am willing to share some of the materials we developed and used along with some very important suggestions.

***I have a resource list:***

- Rewire Your Anxious Brain by Catherine M. Pittman PhD and Elizabeth M Karle MLIS available on Hoopla (Public Library app) for FREE
- The Anti-Anxiety Toolkit: Rapid Techniques to Rewire the Brain by Melissa Tiers (This book has very practical techniques with no long fluffy description that are ready to use. I think using them creatively to incorporate faith would make them even more powerful)
- Tapping In by Laurel Parnell, PhD (Could be used creatively with youth in a quiet dark sanctuary depending on your comfort level with reading a guided imagery. My suggestion would be to encourage youth to imagine God/a bible character as their protector, supporter, strength, etc) There are so many podcasts out there.
- Tik Tok Believe it or not because kids will try anything they see on Tik Tok -did you know there are Tik Toks that educate on reducing anxiety? Some of these translate so well to youth group. (eat a sour gummy! apply an ice pack to the chest or back of the neck) The body is amazing and it truly is possible to calm ourselves in fun ways!)
- Apps are incredible! Among them the Insight Timer. Abide and Hope are faith based calming apps.

***Faith suggestions:***

- Diagram a Bible Verse
- Meditate on Psalms
- Spend time in the sanctuary- break up in threes and have each youth share a prayer concern then pray for each other
- Go out into nature. Use phones to take pictures of where youth see God. You could send them with Bible verses and ask them to reflect on them. Discuss and pray when they return

Creating decreases anxiety. Do your kids enjoy art? Encourage them at the start of the process to seek God in their process. I have youths who are skeptical of faith. Encourage them to open themselves up to God and how God might be present to them.

End each youth group praying over their worries and stresses and making a statement of love and caring before they leave. Check on them as they face big challenges.