Therapeutic Adventure as a Scalable, Accessible Solution to Maine's Youth Mental Health Crisis

by Shannon M. Parker

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Maine's welcome sign changed to "Maine. Welcome home. The Way Life Should Be." These words serve as an invitation to new Mainers finding home in our state and as a reminder to visitors and residents alike: a slower pace of life and deep connection to nature are essential for a well-lived life. Yet for too many young Maine citizens, life isn't as it should be.

Maine is the second most rural state in our nation behind Vermont, with over 61 percent of residents living outside densely populated areas.[1] More than 27 percent of Maine youth are affected by mental health issues compared to the national average of 16.5 percent (Whitney and Peterson 2019). Across the state, Maine's behavioral health system and private practitioners cannot meet demand for youth needing mental health supports. Children languish on waitlists while turning to self-medicating, isolating, school absenteeism, and suicidal ideation (Schirmer and Johnson 2024). The state's failure to serve Maine youth caught the attention of the US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, which stated that "Maine failed to comply with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): 'Maine is violating the ADA by failing to provide behavioral health services to children in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs. Instead, the State unnecessarily relies on segregated settings such as psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment facilities to provide these services. As a result of these violations, children are separated from their families and communities'" (US DOJ 2022).

According to the John T. Gorman Foundation (JTGF 2024), Maine leads the nation in number of children who experience two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). As such, 20 percent of Maine youth are exposed to the traumatic effects of abuse, neglect, violence, and navigating a home life where mental health issues and substance abuse go unmanaged. The toxicity of these experiences is well-documented, and a large body of research links the stress of ACEs to developmental and processing delays, impaired stress responses, chronic physical health problems, mental illness, and lifelong substance misuse (CDC 2021; SAMHSA 2024). The consequences of unmet mental health needs ripple out to families, communities, schools, and our collective future. As diverse and dispersed Maine organizations look to support our kids with accessible, scalable solutions for our pressing mental health crisis, we might be well served to take cues from Maine's abundant resources: resiliency and nature.

A VISIONARY APPROACH

What if Maine offered a literal out-of-the-box (or out-of-the-office) solution to youth mental wellness? What if conversations around mental health shifted away from the individual and toward community solutions? For nearly 1,000 kids annually in midcoast Maine, this innovative approach to mental wellness is the new normal. Young people find a third space with Hearty Roots, a youth organization that offers an immersive, therapeutic pathway for youth to engage, unplug from devices, and return to simple restorative time in nature. In rural Lincoln County, young people connect with land stewardship, personal wellness, peer connection, and community commitment.

School-based Access

Kids in crisis don't have time for bureaucratic waitlists. Kid in emerging crisis deserve intervention and support immediately. Caregivers in rural areas often cannot reliably transport youth to health appointments, and transportation issues shouldn't be a significant barrier that prevents children from receiving support. Instead of creating transportation infrastructure, Hearty Roots relies on transportation systems already in place. Working closely with school administrators, teachers, and special education staff, the organization provides supports for students with the highest needs without individuals needing to leave school for an office visit. In green spaces behind and around school, youth meet with a trained mentor to process stress, anxiety, peer relationships, and more. Students are supported one-on-one or in groups, during or after school. As a result of these experiences with trained mentors, educational and support staff witness decreased behavioral incidents

by students attending the program and increased attendance when the program offerings occur. Youth report an increase in "mattering" and "belonging," factors in the forefront of recent research illustrating the connection between a child's well-being and how valued they feel by others (Scarpa et al. 2021).

For those of us working in the mental health field, we know the most beneficial labors involve increasing protective factors. As stress levels decrease from being immersed in nature, kids in the program increase their resilience. Supportive responses—taught through breath centering, journaling, stewarding, adventuring—are transparent and transferable. Youth are provided the tools they need to remain calm and centered as they return to home and social situations where stressors can often increase.

For children needing clinical intervention, Hearty Roots offers Adventure Therapy in which youth meet one-on-one with a licensed clinical social worker. This tiered, responsive approach allows a child to reliably access clinical care with a mentor who is trusted and respected due to their presence in the school. In Adventure Therapy, young people learn that conserved land is free for them to access. For children and families from disadvantaged households, land trust signs are often interpreted as "keep out" signs. This therapy teaches children how they are welcome on public land, and it is in fact secured for their use and the use of future generations. Contextualizing their place in the world helps them to see their mental health work—and their adventure—as part of a continuum. Youth restore under the canopy of nature instead of being shuffled to an institutional office visit.

Linguistic Shift

When working with young people who suffer from multiple adverse childhood effects, words, tone, and communication style matter equally. A shift toward language that prioritizes self-empowerment, safety, self-respect, and respect for nature and others is key. In our rural state, there is no shortage of ways to explore nature's resilience and strength. Hearty Roots mentors connect this resiliency, renewal, strength, and beauty to a child's journey. Like seasons, we renew. Like storms, we weather. Promoting safety and trust in an environment that is free for youth to access, trusted adult mentors initiate youth into spaces that are healing and restorative. Language use that invites participation rather than procedural directives also helps create space for youth voices and increase trust of the self and others.

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Community Focus

When shoring up youth in community settings, we know our connection to others increases the connection to self. Equally important in youth mental health work, community support helps shift our language away from the individual and any associated ideas of personal, internalized shame. In community, open and positive conversations about mental health help youth see that they are not alone. Bringing rural kids together in community to experience how they are part of the natural world that supports their growth can have a strengthening effect that persists for a lifetime.

Socioeconomic Anonymity

Operating programming on a pay-what-you can registration process can allow families to retain their dignity as they self-select the level of reduced (or removed) fees they require per session. In this way, socioeconomic anonymity is modeled at the point of registration. This approach to equity and reciprocal trust is beginning to gain traction in Maine, where program funding is curated through donors and philanthropic foundations eager to make quality mental health care equitable for all Mainers.

A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE

As youth-supporting organizations spread out over the expanse of a rural state, we've been historically responsive to attempting to overcome the impact of ACEs because too often we are unable to prevent the negative experience. Traditional therapeutic support aims to help individuals after the ACEs have been experienced and the young body is already a host for trauma. In contrast, proactive therapeutic support can help individuals become resilient in the face of future challenges. So, while we cannot protect or prevent the adverse experience from existing in a child's life, we can lean on prevention from another angle: increasing positive childhood experiences. Through avenues that embrace equity and access and self-empowerment, we gain another pathway for assisting young people. For kids who experience trauma, positive experiences can help move the needle for a lifetime.

Research into positive childhood experiences (PCEs) shows that positive experiences not only offset the

negative effects of adverse experiences, they are "dose responsive." Put simply, the more positive experiences children receive, the better their mental health will be as young people and in adulthood (Bethell et al. 2019). Programs like Hearty Roots work to increase positive experiences in children's lives to buffer them into adulthood.

We understand that mental health cannot be addressed in a vacuum. Young persons dealing with hunger, homelessness, family trauma, school stressors, and unsettled peer or familial relationships need good mental health to navigate life's perils.

Maine's children deserve better than a waitlist, more than a twice-monthly 50-minute visit in an uninspired office building. With nature as our guide, we can immerse youth in regenerative green space to bolster their wellness and resilience. And at a time when national policy will again restrict mental health supports, Maine can look to its own backyard to clinically serve kids outside the box, out in nature.

NOTES

1 "Most Rural States in the U.S. 2025." https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/most-rural-states

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