

I. INTRODUCTION

Looking at the statistics surrounding mental health challenges in youth, it is no wonder that mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health (MESSH) continues to be a top issue for day and overnight camps.

- 1 in 6 youth will experience a mental health challenge by the age of 18.¹
- 50% of all mental health challenges begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24.²
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 10–34.³

These statistics continue to rise as the impacts of the pandemic persist, with 44% of teens reporting they felt hopeless in the previous year⁴, and 40% of high school students reporting that they felt so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year.⁵ Additionally, camps are seeing campers and staff who are not meeting developmental milestones previously seen in their age groups, who are struggling with “controlling behaviors”— coping skills or behaviors whose purpose is to make up for feelings of a lack of control like self-harming, disordered eating, and substance abuse—as well as increases in depression and anxiety.

Over the last decade, MESSH has emerged as an important field in camp programs, and in recent years it has only become more vital to daily camp operations and functionality. This manual provides some guidance on best practices to address MESSH challenges in a camp environment to help better support campers and staff, proactively prepare for challenges and crises, and create a thriving and vibrant community.

This guidebook was created as an accompaniment to the [BBYO Center for Adolescent Wellness’](#) (BBYO-CAW) Camp Wellness Assessment tool, made possible by a partnership between Foundation for Jewish Camp and BBYO-CAW through the [Yedid Nefesh initiative](#) generously supported by The Marcus Foundation. Camps in the Yedid Nefesh initiative are eligible to take the assessment.

All camps can benefit from this guidebook to help enhance their policies, procedures, and training to achieve MESSH best practices. It is recommended that camps using the guide also connect with [BBYO-CAW](#) to complete the assessment process.

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.

² National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>.

³ National Alliance on Mental Illness, “Mental Health By The Numbers,” <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20new%20data,hopeless%20during%20the%20past%20year>, Released 3/30/22. This data was collected during the first six months of 2021.

⁵ Youth Risk Behavior Survey – Data Summary and Trends Report, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011 – 2021, released February 13, 2023.