**COVID and Mental Health; a Balancing Act**

*Alice Bodda*

The sanity of 500 students, all in the hands of a few staff members at BISB.

COVID-19, the virus which has changed the world as we know it, has severely impacted the mental health of young students across the country. The British International School of Boston (BISB) has a substantial responsibility to help students persevere through the mental hardships of the pandemic.

As the guidance counselor of BISB, Ms. Hernandez has seen what COVID-19 has done to the mental health of students. She explained how the impact of COVID on students was “intense”, as more students are reaching out to her and other members of staff; especially younger teens in years 7 through 11, noticing how students with underlying mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, as it has amplified their existing mental conditions; their isolation was infinitely more lonely.

Research has proven that the pandemic has impacted people in the same way as army veterans afflicted with PTSD symptoms. Students of all ages have been forced into a more difficult situation than adults, since adults have coping mechanisms which are much more sophisticated and mature than those of students, whose developing minds are fragile and easily disrupted by events like the pandemic.

The extended social isolation along with remote learning have had the most devastating consequences on students and their mental health;During the remote learning period which BISB adopted at the onset of the pandemic, Ms. Hernandez described the difficulty students had adjusting to remote learning, as many came forward for help.: “... a lot of students who I would have not normally seen asked to be seen, and it's difficult, because when you're not seeing students there's a lot of kids that go quiet or you don't see them until there's a problem.”

In a remote setting, she was not able to fully understand the situation students were in which made it a lot harder to give students the support they desperately needed.

This academic year, there have been stronger efforts to help the mental health of all students. There has been more communication between staff members than ever to discuss what is best for their students, with Ms. Hernandez having introduced Well-being surveys to identify students who need extra support. Additionally, there are guidelines for parents on how to support their children’s mental state.

The impacts on mental health have spread beyond the students to the staff - Ms. Hernandez said that there is a sense of fear for her and her fellow colleagues in coming to work every day, as they risk their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones. This year brings a heavier workload for teachers, which is increasing their stress on top of the aforementioned safety concerns.

Hernandez encourages students to talk to anyone they trust about problems that they are facing, and that it’s okay and normal to ask teachers for extra help or extensions. Teachers are understanding for students in difficult situations. Students, especially blended learners, should also try to stay in contact with friends as much possible to help endure these challenging times.

Mrs. Hernandez wants all students to know, “It's okay to be struggling and it’s fine to have a hard time because you are not alone, remember that you have people who will help and support you.”