



# The Camp Newsletter

July, 2021



## Counselor Crisis in a Post-Covid Summer

*We have heard so many stories this summer regarding staff issues we thought it would be helpful to have our Crisis Team Mental Health Expert, Gwenn Kuder Gelfand, Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Board Certified Diplomat, weigh in with some background on the problem and some possible helpful hints. Gwenn weighs in below.*

If we thought we would be able to start up camp life seamlessly after a year and a half of Covid, we were very mistaken. Although many campers seem to be resilient and most parents, despite anxiety, are coping, counselors are the group that appears to be really struggling. Camps are preoccupied with how to deal with these young adults, and the severity of this problem constitutes a “counselor crisis”.

Overall, our society is in the midst of a mental health crisis. Depression and anxiety have increased significantly, especially among young adults. In my 35 years of practice I have never seen so much illness and struggles with mental health as today and it appears that this will only increase in the short-term as our world continues to open.

These young adults have experienced a great deal of loss. They have lost graduations and proms and may have started college isolated and zooming from home or dorm rooms. This is certainly not what they expected or signed on for. As a result, we have one angry group of older teens and young adults. This anger has manifested itself in low frustration tolerance, irritability, argumentativeness, and verbal and at times physical abuse towards others. For some, we are also seeing this anger turn inwards, and self-harm and suicidal ideation and gestures have increased as well. Many in this age group are struggling with guilty feelings about thinking of their own losses and disappointments when so many people have suffered more intensely from Covid and many have died.

It is also difficult for some counselors to handle campers who are dealing with post-Covid issues when the counselors themselves are struggling to deal with their own issues. More than any other age group, counselors have been lying in bed for over a year – zooming, sleeping, watching Netflix and remaining isolated from their peers. They have lost motivation, stamina, and even some resilience. They are now expected to work an

incredibly challenging job both physically and mentally with very long hours, fewer breaks as camps are understaffed, and the inability to leave camp during their time off due to Covid constraints.

Lastly, counselors have had too much media exposure during a polarized political climate. Protests have been widespread, and many young adults have come to believe they have the right to protest about their dissatisfaction and have a sense of “activism entitlement”. In many camps, counselors are joining in groups demanding change or threatening to quit. Directors are often struggling to do their job of running the camp as they are preoccupied with dealing with counselor issues and disruption to the camp.

This picture seems daunting. What can camp directors and staff do to address these issues?

Perhaps most key is to validate, validate, validate. I cannot stress this enough. These young adults need to be heard. They need to feel that their thoughts and opinions matter and are taken seriously. They want and need to feel needed and wanted. They want to feel respected. Clearly, it is hard to feel these things when their behavior is focused on protest.

Even though it is challenging to find a way, counselors need to be given breaks, time off, and places to go on camp property. Covid precautions have restricted counselors from leaving camp. Starting up “counselor canteens” is a positive option. This would be a safe place for counselors to socialize together. In addition, renting out spaces in a controlled environment out of camp for an occasional evening gives the counselors something to look forward to and an incentive to do a good job.

Paying staff more and proving bonuses at the end of the summer based on performance are important ways of recognizing hard work that counselors put in.

If counselors have their own therapists from home, encourage them to reach out and set up consistent appointments. Consider hiring mental health professionals either in person or by zoom to work with the counselors as an important next step.

If you have the time and the inclination to do so, hold support group sessions for counselors with you leading the discussion to help problem solve and validate.

So, hang on to your hats – we have a long summer ahead. But also recognize that this is part of the process of resuming our lives in the wake of this pandemic. As difficult as this summer is, it is a transition to better times ahead.

## **About the Author**

Gwenn Kudler Gelfand, LCSW, BCD has over thirty-five years’ experience in counseling kids in crisis. She has offices on Long Island and in NYC and has been an integral part of our camp crisis team for many years. She is also a former camp group leader, former camper, and mom of former campers.