

Guidebook addresses anxiety in children

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A newly written workbook to help middle school aged children cope and manage anxiety is nearing completion. The authors are in the process of seeking artwork from students from the Newburgh Enlarged City School District to be added to the final published workbook.

The new workbook project is being co-authored by an interdisciplinary team comprising Dr. Michele Winchester-Vega, Dr. Sharen Casazza, Dr. Caroline Wright and Corrine Varnavides, a licensed clinical social worker. The title for the workbook, according to Winchester-Vega, is "Anxiety Stoppers."

"It's more for the middle school aged children, in terms of techniques and strategies they can use in their daily life, school life, sporting life, to deal with anxiety," she said.

The workbook will feature several chapters covering a variety of anxiety-related topics, such as situations or environments that make us anxious, anxiety with social media, strategies to use when dealing with anxiety and also includes coping cards for the children to use.

For the student artwork component, Winchester-Vega is eager to see what will come from the students' interpretations. "I think it [the art] has to be organic. I don't think we're going to describe what we want; I think we're going to give the title, and let them submit art for that chapter," she said. "I think that's really much more appropriate, because some of them are going to be of the age that this book is written for."

The workbook project would be another collaboration between Winchester-Vega and the school district, after the project "Are You My Sister?" Winchester-Vega co-authored that book with her daughter, Natasha Vega. It was published in 2013.

Winchester-Vega's next book, "Chicken Little Come Out, The Sky Is Not Falling" published in 2020, was mainly aimed for young children,



Dr. Michele Winchester-Vega

providing skills to express and cope with anxiety while providing resources and tools for parents and caregivers to help with their child's anxiety. The book was co-authored by Winchester-Vega, Casazza and Varnavides. Katie Helpley, a licensed marriage and family therapist was also a co-author of the Chicken Little book as well.

Much like Dr. Winchester-Vega, Casazza is equally eager to see what the students have to contribute in terms of their art. "We would like illustrations that relate to different parts of the book," she said.

She added, "We hope that with this workbook, readers will go from one page to the next, examining themselves and trying to use words, sentences, art, games, to let other people know why they're having trouble. We hope to help children have the words to use to express themselves."

A licensed clinical psychologist in private practice, Wright's work mainly focuses around helping adolescents. She recognizes the mental health crisis today for all individuals, but she says the impact of COVID on children and teenagers has added to the crisis even more. "The fact that this book is really focusing on 9- to 12-year-olds is really important, because they just lost so much due to the pandemic," she said.

With the workbook, Wright and her colleagues hope to further address the

mental health crisis, specifically in the age group that the book is targeting. "Specifically, what chapters I think I contributed the most to would be the technology chapter and the anxiety surrounding social media, especially because that is such a massive impact on children's mental health right now," she said. "It's been a really long time to get this workbook from the idea to having it be almost completed. It is actually a really awesome feeling."

Varnavides, a licensed clinical social worker, also shared similar sentiments on the importance of the workbook. "Anxiety in children is becoming increasingly common. I think it's crucial to provide resources and support for this age group that we're targeting," said Varnavides. "By writing this book, we provide children with an ability to possibly address their unique experiences and challenges, through reading the vignettes and finding something that is relatable to them."

Kristen Johnsen, Director of Fine and Performing Arts for Newburgh schools, has been in communication with the authors and shared that the project was discussed with all art staff and teachers back in January, and students at all grade levels were invited to participate.

She also shared her insights on the progress for the book. "Working with the authors of this project has been a collaborative and insightful experience. We have engaged in open communication and shared our ideas and perspectives on how to effectively convey the theme of anxiety through student artwork. The authors have provided valuable guidance and feedback, helping to refine our creative process and ensure that our illustrations align with the overall vision of the book. The authors have also been very respectful of the need to ensure our students' own mental health is protected throughout this project," said Johnsen.

According to Johnsen, the ideal timeline for the project is for the students to see the final product before they leave for summer vacation.