

Just Talk to Someone

An Interview with Prof. Keara Kumler, LCSW, Professor of Social Work, Seton Hall University

In addition to being a therapist, parent and high achiever, Professor Kumler has been a social worker for 23 years and professor of social work for 9 years. She has worked with over 100 individuals in private practice and 1,000+ individuals in group, classroom and agency settings. This conversation explores Professor Kumler's perspectives on adolescents and young adults, the role of community and groups in supporting wellbeing, the importance of talking to someone you trust and the helpfulness of naming your feelings. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

William Sueling

Thanks for meeting with me today. I struggled a lot my first two years of high school with loneliness, depression and anxiety. Beyond Achievement is my attempt to bring more awareness and conversation to the mental health challenges of high achievers.

Keara Kumler

I think it's so important what you're doing. Being a therapist, being a parent, and in the last nine years, being a professor at colleges and seeing the struggles firsthand of that demographic, it's really lacking. Thank you for sharing about your experiences in high school. I think in college, from my perspective, it gets even harder. You're more isolated, sometimes away from home for the first time, and it's so important to just talk about it. I'm glad you're doing this.

William Sueling

Thank you. So just to begin, could you share a little bit of your background and experience with this topic — your role and what you've seen?

Keara Kumler

Sure. I have been a social worker since 2003, so for 23 years, and I have been a professor in both bachelor's and master's social work programs for the last nine. In the social work field, I have done private practice work. I started out working in schools and hospitals and outpatient mental health. I've done in-home therapy through early intervention, and pretty much have worked in any capacity you could imagine as a social worker. I've done a lot of grant writing and funding work. But as I had my own kids, I started to realize that I needed to branch out. It was really hard to have kids the same age as the kids I was working with. So when my kids were little, I had a harder time working with very little kids, and I started working more with adolescents and moms around parenting challenges and postpartum depression and anxiety. In the last nine years since I've worked with college-age students or graduate students, I've worked more with adolescents in therapy as well, and young adults. I really like focusing on that area now, even though my own kids are also teenagers now. It gets a little tricky sometimes, but I still enjoy this focus.

William Sueling

Okay, great. It sounds like we have a ton we can talk about. So mental health overall is a problem that seems to be growing. I'm sure you've seen that over the course of your career.

How do you think the situation is different, or not different, for high-achieving kids and young adults?

Keara Kumler

I think you said it best when you first introduced yourself. From my perspective, high-achieving kids are able to mask it a lot easier than some other teenagers or young adults I've worked with. When you are a high-achieving individual, you're very good at keeping things together (or appearing like you're keeping things together) because that's kind of the positive reinforcement you've received your entire life when you do something well, when you show up prepared. I find that those types of students, in some ways, are further along in their own struggles before they finally reach out for help, because not presenting themselves as together, successful, or perfect is so adverse to them.

William Sueling

Yeah, we get really good at hiding anything that feels less than stellar. What are a few less obvious things, beyond phones and social media, that you think are contributing to this problem?

Keara Kumler

I think there is a moving away from community activities. Young adults, teenagers, even kids, used to come together more through sports, and it didn't have to be club-level, going-pro sports. Recreational sports, day camps, even just riding around on bikes – you don't see that type of community in the same way. I think that adds to the feeling of loneliness.

William Sueling

Yes. For me and most of my friends, we didn't seem to struggle with finding moments of community when we were young – like 5 years old. As people get older, where do you notice the sense of community starts to break down?

Keara Kumler

I think it's adolescence. Because you start to worry more about what everyone thinks about you. Whereas when you're five or ten, you might be like, I like to sing, so I'm going to be in this play at school, or I like chess, so I'm going to be in the chess club. For some teenagers, it starts to become: what is everyone going to think if I'm in the chess club? How does that make me appear to my peers? I'm sure that's always been the case to an extent. It just seems a little bit amplified now.

William Sueling

Yes, I agree. How do you think adults are inadvertently making it harder for kids?

Keara Kumler

This is a great question, and one I think about all the time. I'm lumping myself into this category for sure. As a parent, it's really hard not to think: if my child's struggling, then I did something wrong. And if we can fix it before it gets too bad, then I didn't fail as much. Parenting now is just at a more intense level than it was for my parents. For my parents, and my husband Kevin would say the same, it was a little more like: they're going to do their thing and live their life, and I need to teach them how to do that. Whereas now, it feels like parenting means laying a path for your child to have every single thing turn out well. Parents now are less likely to let their children struggle, and because of that, oftentimes those children don't know what to do when they are struggling. The students I work with – 18, 19, away for the first time – they're struggling and they don't even know what to do with it, because they haven't really struggled much before.

William Sueling

They've almost had a path to laid out for them. Where do you think this pressure has come from? What's changed between now and, say, 30 years ago, when parenting was more relaxed?

Keara Kumler

I certainly didn't get a lot of pressure from my parents to be perfect, or to live a different or bigger life than they had. Now, from my perspective, kids are expected to be the best in their sport, and if they're not the best in their sport, find a sport they're the best in. Get into any school their heart desires. Grades should never slip. Those expectations certainly weren't the case when I was growing up. Perhaps that's why I did better in some ways — my parents didn't put a lot of pressure on me, so I put it on myself instead. But I think there is a lot of pressure put on kids now, and it ties into that idea: if my kid's successful, then I'm successful, then I've been a good parent, then I'm validated. I don't think parents 30 years ago were feeling that in the same way.

William Sueling

Interesting, it feels like the parents are looking for validation or success. What do you think is helpful for kids in these situations?

Keara Kumler

Honestly, just talk. Being able to talk to someone and finding the right fit. What I always say the first time I meet with a client is: I'm not for everyone, and if at the end of this session you don't think you're getting my vibe or you don't think I can help you, I'm going to help you find somebody who can. You're not going to hurt my feelings, this is part of the process. I think that's really helpful, especially with young adults and teenagers, because I've heard from so many teenagers who meet with someone once and say, this isn't working, therapy is not for me because they don't feel comfortable, or it's not a good match. It important to let parents and teenagers know that you're allowed to have a say in who you work with. Just talking about it with someone who's trained makes such a difference in terms of getting it out of your body and out into the world. It feels different, the act of talking about it.

William Sueling

Sometimes it feels hard to start talking, but I always feel a bit better after I get it out. What would you recommend for students who may not have access to therapy?

Keara Kumler

Every college campus has some sort of facility or program to help whether it's therapy, a group, or check-ins, so I would say to college-age students: you need to find where it is and figure out which services they offer. I personally haven't spent much time on the CBT online options and the AI chat-based tools so I can't fully verify them. But from my perspective, if there's no other alternative and you can find something specifically approved for cognitive behavioral therapy, then that's better than nothing.

William Sueling

Thinking specifically about men, what have you seen that works for male mental health?

Keara Kumler

I would say: the younger you can encourage boys and young men to express their feelings and feel like they can speak them, the better. In some ways, my best advice is prevention. Treat

your young men the same way you'd treat your young women — it's okay to talk about feelings, it's okay to cry. A story that was so meaningful: all my kids play soccer, and my son is 13. He was playing a game a couple weeks ago, and this kid got cleaned out — he fell hard and started crying immediately. The ref came over, knelt down as the coach was coming out, and said to him, "Stop crying, you're a man. Men don't cry. You don't want to cry in front of all these people." My husband was looking at me because I was about to say something. But the coach knelt down and said, "No, you're good, little dude. Real men feel all of their feelings." We need more people like that coach, telling kids on a field, or teachers in a classroom, or parents: you can feel all your emotions. There are no expectations put on you based on your gender.

William Sueling

That's a great moment. I can really imagine you being furious — I would have been too.

Keara Kumler

I was. My husband knew. I wouldn't have let it go unsaid, because that's really harmful. Think about those kinds of messages and how they fester inside of you. So then when you do cry, you feel guilt or shame immediately and that's the antithesis of what we're supposed to be doing.

William Sueling

What do you think teachers and adults, beyond parents, could be doing better to support kids? I think they sometimes have a more intimate or different kind of relationship than parents do.

Keara Kumler

A lot of times adults don't realize how much weight their words carry. With my kids, I could talk till I'm blue in the face and they tune me out halfway through. But I see them hang on their coaches' words. I see how much they take in. So, I think more training for coaches and teachers to an extent, around mental health. I don't think they get the level of training they should in terms of what things to look out for, how to say something to someone, what to do if you see them struggling. Teachers and coaches get a lot of training in how to spot abuse, which is great and important, but there are other things we could be doing more. Even in the doctor's office: I just had my twins in for their 13-year-old physical, and there's a depression and anxiety checklist. But they just say, "oh, mom, you can fill it out." I try to ask my kids each question — Have you felt like you might harm yourself in the last three months? Have you felt hopeless? Have you felt like you shouldn't be here? My kids give me a look like, do you really have to ask this? But I say yes, because it's important. If questionnaires like that were taken more seriously across the board, and doctors were asking those questions directly to their patients, I think you would catch a lot of this earlier.

William Sueling

I agree. Less box checking and more conversations would help. What do you think students could be doing better to support each other?

Keara Kumler

I wish there was more of a community around mental health. I believe therapy is really helpful, but I wish there were more students coming together to support each other and to say, you know what, it's okay. Talking about this stuff is usually not as much of a group thing. I think being open about it, and sometimes being the brave one, like you're being right now with a project like this, that's where it starts.

William Sueling

Thank you. How do you think students can foster that sense of community more?

Keara Kumler

On the college level, most universities have some kind of counseling service center, but there usually aren't groups coming out of it – no peer-to-peer support, which I think could be really beneficial. I would start there. How can we make projects like yours more communal? How can we have people reaching out through their studies? On the high school level, I think it's about encouraging more community activities – things people can do together, more volunteer opportunities. There have been studies on volunteerism and mental health showing increases in positive feelings and decreases in negative symptoms when you're volunteering. How can there be more opportunities to volunteer in high schools and colleges that get students together?

William Sueling

I like the idea of creating community through talking but also through an activity like volunteering. What's one mindset change you wish all kids would make to improve their mental health?

Keara Kumler

Trying to name their feeling, at least once a day, even if it's just to themselves. During COVID, I had these little scales at my kids' desks with clothespins and different feelings on them, so they could move the clothespin to show me what they were feeling. I couldn't believe how helpful it was. If you're not naming your feelings on a regular basis, the feeling inside is just "bad." That might be the case, but why, specifically? If you can start to say I'm feeling anxious versus I'm feeling lonely versus I'm feeling sad versus disappointed, the more you can name the feelings you're having, the more it helps you sort through: where did that come from?

William Sueling

Almost like taking extra steps on the wheel of emotions — going deeper rather than stopping at the surface level of sad or bad.

Keara Kumler

Yes, absolutely.

William Sueling

Cool, thank you so much. Is there anything we didn't talk about that we should have?

Keara Kumler

No, we covered a lot of ground today.

William Sueling

Thank you so much, Professor Kumler. I really appreciate this call. It's been wonderful talking with you.