

Beyond the Test: Connecting Communities Through Pathology

Bonus Episode: Mindful Minutes

Elsa (00:04)

Hi everyone, and welcome to the first episode of Mindful Minutes, a podcast mini-series dedicated to educating youth on the causes and effects of mental health issues, both in our communities and around the world. In this series, we're taking a few mindful minutes to explore what truly shapes mental health. Today's episode focuses on where mental health begins — in our homes, schools, and communities.

To help us understand this, I'm joined by two individuals who have served families in different settings. Bella worked with Renew Communities in North Chicago to help clean and prepare affordable housing, and Gabby volunteered at Kai's Constanza Residential Home for Children and School in the Dominican Republic, guiding younger students through lessons. Let's start with the reality.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, alongside the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association, has declared child mental health a national emergency. Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts among young people have risen alarmingly since the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to social isolation and related challenges.

In Chicago, nearly 40% of high school students report experiencing depression. Moreover, in 2021, 40% of youth experiencing major depressive episodes were unable to receive treatment.

One contributing factor many people may not realize is housing insecurity. Research from Lurie Children's Hospital shows that exposure to housing and food insecurity significantly contributes to poor mental health outcomes in youth.

This brings us to Bella's experience in North Chicago.

Elsa (02:01)

Hi Bella, thanks for joining me today. Could you tell us a bit about what your role looked like during your North Chicago mission trip?

Bella (02:10)

Yeah, thanks for having me. My school sent a team of us to North Chicago every day for a week to help an organization called Renew Communities. They provide sustainable housing for people who don't have access to it.

Elsa (02:34)

I believe you worked not only in homes directly for families, but also in a warehouse, right? What was that warehouse going to be used for?

Bella (02:44)

Yes, they had just received the warehouse as a donation, and part of our job was to clean it out — lots of sweeping and organizing — so they could use it to store and build items that would later be used in house construction.

Elsa (03:05)

Very cool. So you didn't just clean affordable homes; you also helped establish a base for their continued work. What stood out to you emotionally while cleaning the homes?

Bella (03:24)

Cleaning might seem mundane to someone who does chores at home, but it made me realize there are people who can't even think about chores because they don't have a house to do them in. There's a huge difference between worrying about cleaning and worrying about finding shelter and a place to rest. I think that's something a lot of people aren't aware of.

Elsa (04:03)

That's so true. Many of us get caught up in everyday life and don't consider the struggles other families face. Research from the National Institutes of Health shows that living in poor physical home environments can be a significant source of stress. Additionally, the American Society for the Positive Care of Children states that clutter and disarray can cause anxiety in young minds, while clean homes improve focus in children. So Bella, how does it make you feel knowing you weren't just doing physical labor, but also reducing stressors in families' lives?

Bella (05:01)

I think it's really cool that I got to be part of that. I enjoyed the physical work, but I did it because I wanted to serve people and show love to them. It may not seem exciting, but I'm glad I could help families and children, and maybe brighten their day or future a little.

Elsa (05:33)

That's such a powerful experience. Many young adults don't realize there are local opportunities to serve, and even a week can make a meaningful impact. Would you encourage others to participate in similar work?

Bella (05:58)

Yes. You can go for as long or as little as you want. Cleaning a house is something everyone knows how to do, so taking time to do that for people who are struggling with housing is meaningful. I'd encourage everyone to try it at least once, even just to raise awareness.

Elsa (06:24)

Thank you so much, Bella, for sharing your experience.

Elsa (06:36)

Hi Gabi, thanks for joining me today. We're here to talk about your experience in a completely different part of the world — the Dominican Republic. What kinds of activities did you do with the kids you worked with?

Gabi (06:52)

I went to the Dominican Republic twice during high school. Both trips centered around physical labor and engaging with kids at a school. We played with them a lot, but we also had classroom time where we tutored and helped with subjects like math and English. Most of what we did, though, was simply engaging with them — through play and attending their practices.

When we first arrived, the organization's leaders explained what was appropriate and what they hoped to develop in the kids. There was a language barrier, but the kids looked to us for cues about what was appropriate. We made sure to model gentleness and establish healthy boundaries.

Elsa (08:04)

What did playing with the kids look like? What kinds of games did you play?

Gabi (08:15)

With the older kids, we played sports like basketball and volleyball. It was great because those games are shared across cultures and didn't require much explanation. With the younger kids, we played simpler games like tag and Duck Duck Goose. They loved running and chasing. It was fun figuring out what they wanted and engaging with them in it.

Elsa (09:11)

Was there one game you enjoyed most?

Gabi (09:21)

Definitely tag. Younger kids love being chased — they scream and laugh, and then they want to chase you. It brings you down to their level and helps you connect with them.

Elsa (09:46)

It's powerful that even with a language barrier, you were able to build relationships. Research from UNICEF shows that in Latin America and the Caribbean, suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 19. In the Dominican Republic, 16.8% of adolescents ages 10 to 19 struggle with mental disorders, and about 20% report thoughts of self-harm.

Did you notice signs of emotional stress or resilience during your stay?

Gabi (10:28)

Yes. We arrived after one school had closed and students had merged into another school, which initially created resentment and division. But the leaders had worked hard to integrate the students and model loving relationships. What stood out most was how that love was reflected back to us. The kids welcomed us with curiosity and warmth.

Elsa (12:02)

Would you describe your relationship with the kids as both peer and mentor?

Gabi

Yes.

Elsa (12:31)

Research shows supportive peer and mentor relationships decrease depressive symptoms. Apart from helping the kids, did the trip help you grow?

Gabi(12:52)

Definitely. I grew in my passion to serve the communities I'm part of. I also developed as a leader and mentor and now apply those values to mentoring kids at my church and school.

Elsa (13:21)

Did those service-minded values influence your decision to go?

Gabi(13:39)

At first, the international trip was just appealing as a freshman. We were originally supposed to go to Kenya, but due to scheduling changes, we went to the Dominican Republic. After my first experience, I chose to return because of the meaningful work with the kids and the mentor-student relationships we built.

Elsa (14:24)

Would you recommend others serve abroad?

Gabi

Absolutely. And even if someone can't go abroad, I'd strongly recommend serving locally. There are always ways to contribute to your own community.

Elsa (14:54)

These conversations highlight one key truth: mental health is shaped long before adulthood. It is influenced by our environments — our homes, schools, and social surroundings.

Learning how Bella and Gabi's mission trips supported families' well-being shows that everyone can contribute to their community in meaningful, sometimes unexpected, ways.

Thank you to Bella and Gabi for sharing your experiences in North Chicago and the Dominican Republic.

For more information, resources, and links, visit this episode's show notes. To learn more about the CAP Foundation, visit foundation.cap.org.

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