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Vol. 37, No. 09

MAY 15, 2026

## Help for youth struggling with their mental health

by Mary K. Miller

**M**ay is Mental Health Awareness Month established in 1949 to reduce stigma through education, advocate for better policies, encourage people to seek help when needed and promote mental wellness and prevention strategies.

Although schizophrenia only affects one percent of the population, the impact of the disease can upend the lives of people experiencing psychosis. As described in her memoir, Elyn R. Saks wrote about the condition: "The center cannot hold. The 'me' becomes a haze and the solid center from which one experiences reality breaks up like a bad radio signal."

A program launched last October at the Hanna Center aims to short-circuit the disruption of early-onset psychosis in youth aged 12-25 and help them and their families navigate treatment. Called Hanna Ahead, it's a non-residential, voluntary program that starts with careful evaluation and education, including introduction of a slate of available treatments and services, and puts participants in the driver's seat to guide their own treatment choices and goals.

"At Hanna Ahead, a young person doesn't just see a therapist in

isolation," said Evelyn Hernandez-Brown, clinical director at the Hanna Center. "They get a whole coordinated team around them,

nandez said. An explicit goal of the program is to reduce the duration of untreated psychosis in Sonoma County. "We find that the earlier

beliefs, unclear thinking or speech, difficulty with attention, memory or problem solving, and feeling flat with a loss of pleasure or motivation. Signs of early-onset psychosis in younger people can include social withdrawal and isolation, declining academic performance, unusual or magical thinking, perceptual disturbances (hearing things, feeling watched), disorganized or odd speech, emotional flatness or inappropriate emotions, and sleep disturbances.

While many people experience some of these mental and emotional changes at some point in their lives, the intensity, frequency and persistence of one or more of these changes that last more than six months can signal a more concerning disorder such as schizophrenia. Untreated, schizophrenia can lead to cognitive decline, social isolation and a deteriorating ability to function in everyday life, which is why mental health professionals encourage anyone experiencing persistent or unusual mental and emotional disturbances to reach out for help as soon as possible.

Hernandez said it can take several years of treatment for participants and their families to as-

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Source: Hanna Center

Peer support session for youth at Hanna Center.

including peer and family support, education and case management, and psychiatric care with medication management all focused on early intervention."

Losing control of one's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions can be overwhelming and confusing at any age, but especially so for a young person experiencing symptoms for the first time, Her-

we identify and teach skills, the better the outcomes across a person's adulthood," she said.

### Defining the disease

Psychosis is a clinical umbrella term defined by the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th addition*) as a range of symptoms including auditory or visual hallucinations, delusional thoughts and

## Hanna – continued from page 2

semble their individual tool kits to manage the condition. Although there is no known cure for psychosis and schizophrenia, there is hope. “Success, she said, “means a young person can pursue their own goals and daily life in spite of psychosis. It may not be ‘cured’ in the traditional sense, but symptoms can be managed, the most distressing experiences can be reduced, and there is real hope for wellness.”

### Offering hope through team work

Hanna Center recognized that early treatment for young people experiencing psychosis was especially critical. They received a grant from the state to work with UC Davis as a training partner to employ an evidence-based, coordinated care model called EPI-CAL (California Early Psychosis Intervention). Participants in the program and their families are introduced to the care team during the early stages of treatment, and they choose which parts of the program work best for them. It can include psychotherapy, psychotropic medication management with a psychiatric specialist, peer support services for families, and employment and education support services to help a participant’s path to independence, confidence and success in life.

The team also includes a peer support specialist, someone who has first-hand experience with psychosis and can relate to what a participant might be going through.

“I think my role is the spear point of trust,” said Michael Allen who serves as the peer specialist for Hanna Ahead. “I have lived

experience and can offer hope because I’ve been through it myself and found the support system that works for me.”

Allen, a Marine Corps veteran, wrote a memoir about his experiences called *The Turkeys Came to Berkeley: A Manic Search for Home* (2025). The book tells the story of his return from service and experiencing symptoms of PTSD after the suicide of a close friend. He was attending school at UC Berkeley and under stress from his studies when he had a psychological breakdown and was hospitalized.

“I was lucky the VA had a coordinated care program,” Allen said. “Every time I went into the hospital, maybe three or four times, my support system grew. The school stepped up, my family came and there was no room for me to be left alone to deal with it.”

### Advice for Friends and Families

Both Hernandez and Allen stressed the importance of reaching out with empathy and listening to a family member, friend or loved one struggling with their mental health.

“You don’t have to have all the answers,” Hernandez said, “just listen and care.” She also stressed that even if a young person won’t engage, a parent or family member can still call the Hanna Ahead consultation line to describe what they see and get education and options. “You and your family are not alone in this; there are professionals and peers who ‘get it.’ There is hope for stability, function, and a meaningful life, even with psychosis.”

## Mental Health and Crisis Services

*According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1 in 5 adults experience some form of mental illness each year, and half of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14.*

Hanna Ahead is hosting a community event on May 22 for anyone interested in understanding more about the program. See details at <https://hannacenter.org/calendar/early-psychosis-forum>.

### Hanna Ahead Consultation Line

707-933-4482

Monday to Friday: 8:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

## Resources

### Crisis Text Line

Text “GO” to 741741

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call or Text: 988

### Sonoma Valley Hospital

347 Andrieux Street, Suite SNE, Sonoma

### Sonoma County Sheriff

707-565-2121

In case of an imminent emergency, call 911 or proceed to your nearest emergency room