

What Can I Do?

A SERIES TO HELP UTAHNS ENGAGE



NO. 13 | MARCH 3, 2020

What Therapists Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

UTAH WOMEN &
LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2020 gathering of 25 therapists and other mental health practitioners. As society becomes more aware of how mental health impacts overall wellbeing, therapists will play an increasingly influential role, not only to their clients, but in the broader community as well.

CULTURE

The stigma surrounding mental health issues is gradually diminishing, thereby allowing informed practitioners to drive and shape cultural conversations about mental health. Years of training, combined with the experience of treating patients facing a wide range of challenges, puts therapists in a position to positively influence local culture as they do the following:

- Recognize the authority and credibility mental health professionals hold in society, and of the related responsibility to speak, write, and engage in media in a way that supports good mental health.
- Raise awareness of the damage that comes to girls and women as a result of society’s focus on “perfect” bodies and diet culture; share relevant data through public channels about the dangers of eating disorders and how women can be healthy at all sizes and body types.
- Address the sexualization of women and girls in society and the related negative effects, including objectification, pornography, rape culture, and devaluing women’s contributions in general.

- Engage boys and men in conversations on these topics, and ensure they receive appropriate education on the specific challenges women face; give men concrete ideas on how they can be advocates to change negative societal pressures.
- Be mindful of the unique religious and cultural environment in Utah and the role this plays in mental health; while respecting the positive elements of this environment, challenge those factors that can be damaging to girls’ and women’s overall wellbeing.

IDENTITY

Therapists recognize that many of the core challenges Utah women face are related to identity development. With numerous (often conflicting) external voices telling girls and women who or what they should be, counseling provides a chance for women to discover and decide for themselves who they really are. This work can include the following:

- Invite clients to recognize external messages of expected identity coming from a variety of sources (e.g., family, friends, work, church, media, society), and ask them to see which seem to fit; give them “permission” to discard labels or identities they may have internalized but that don’t feel authentic to who they are.
- Affirm clients’ efforts to define their own values and the role they play in identity formation.

- Teach girls and women about forces that can negatively impact or lead to distortions about identity, such as trauma, authoritarian or controlling relationships, and excessive media exposure.
- Encourage clients to think critically about social expectations placed on women generally (e.g., caretaker, object of desire, follower, pleaser, superwoman); questioning these pressures can give women the space to set aside stereotypes that don't work for them.
- Become informed and plan to address the additional pressures many Utah women face in terms of intersectional identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status).
- Question the either/or mentality women may hold when it comes to embracing different roles; empower women to imagine, aspire, and pursue whatever suits them as unique individuals.
- Explore the social and emotional costs of both accepting or rejecting identities that are inauthentic, and help clients navigate this difficult process.
- Become trauma-informed in all aspects of mental health practice, including identifying and naming trauma, creating safe spaces (physically and emotionally), recognizing perceived threats to clients, and being prepared to address the long-term, deep-seated emotional challenges trauma survivors may face.
- Be deliberate in learning how to detach from one's own worldview and values when working with clients; refrain from imposing personal values, but rather assist clients in discovering and using their own moral system through the therapeutic process.
- Build multicultural competencies in order to address challenges faced by clients of any gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or identity.
- Invest in ongoing education focused on current research and evidence-based best practices and treatments; seek out mentoring and guidance from other professionals to ensure high quality care.
- Solicit buy-in from colleagues and peers to prioritize an industry-wide commitment to professional development in order to support women and girls specifically in their practices; find ways to overcome barriers such as lack of time or resources, fear, uncertainty, or reliance on the status quo.
- Create, gather, and share resources to assist the mental health community in their efforts to adopt a gender lens in providing quality care.

SKILL BUILDING

In addition to the deep work of identity development, a key component of successful therapy is mastering new skills in order to successfully manage life's challenges. Therapists can empower women and girls by assisting them in developing the following skills:

- Teach clients to recognize, name, and celebrate their strengths; share proven methods for building confidence, self-efficacy, and accountability.
- Encourage self-care and self-compassion practices; many women are taught to think only of others, but good mental health is impossible when women do not value their own wellbeing.
- Help clients develop critical relationship skills (e.g., communication, boundaries, assertiveness, consent, and self-advocacy); educate girls and women about healthy relationships, and train them in identifying and responding to abuse or domestic violence.
- Empower clients to see beyond a diagnosis (to not equate themselves with a mental health condition).
- Equip girls and women with the tools needed to reject the pervasive body-obsessed culture, enable them to find passion and purpose with their whole selves (not just bodies), and to reject the common practices of body shame and judgement.
- Encourage women to develop a healthy attitude toward physical pleasure (e.g., eating, sex, movement); diet culture creates the idea that pleasure is shameful, yet it is a critical component of good mental health.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mental health is a dynamic field where new developments, theories, and practices are being adopted regularly. To best serve their clients, therapists must receive ongoing professional development (including training focused on issues that affect women and girls specifically):

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Finally, mental health professionals recognize that in addition to serving their clients and growing in their own professional expertise, they can also positively impact women and girls in Utah through community engagement:

- Become familiar with relevant services, resources, and organizations that may be valuable to clients; form partnerships in order to best meet the unique needs of women and girls.
- Volunteer at local schools to educate and empower students and teachers; promote self-care and self-compassion; support clubs and activities focused on bolstering mental health.
- Host lunch and learns, parent nights, and other gatherings to build relationships and share information throughout the broader community.
- Connect with churches and other faith organizations to share information on how to best support the mental health of their members.
- Advocate at the legislative level for better education, funding, and support for policies related to mental health, including maturation, sex education, improved health education curricula, domestic violence, and sexual assault.

CONCLUSION

Good mental health is a critical component of overall wellbeing; hence, the influence of therapists is expanding in Utah. As they increasingly recognize and address gender-specific challenges, mental health providers can positively influence girls and women, as well as families, communities, and the state as a whole.

Utah Women & Leadership Project • www.utwomen.org • uwlp@usu.edu

Thank you to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Foundation for supporting this project.

Utah State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity institution and is committed to a learning and working environment free from discrimination, including harassment. For USU's non-discrimination notice, see equity.usu.edu/non-discrimination.