

**Vanderbilt Health DNA: Discoveries in Action**  
**Season 3. Producer's Cut Episode**  
**Producer's Cut: Mental Health x Teens**

**Clark Buckner:**

The DNA podcast hit a big milestone a few weeks ago — it went real-time!

Season 3 is experimenting with new concepts emphasizing collaboration and conversation. We're using evolving digital tools like Twitter Spaces to bring in outside voices and discuss ideas that come up in the episodes.

And since the four episodes that drop in September explore the complexities of mental health — particularly the disproportional impact on children and adolescents.... It was clear we needed to hear from actual teens about what's on their mind ... so we invited the Boys & Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee to join a live conversation on Twitter about teens and mental health.

We're living in a world of amazing uncertainty and in just a few years, these teens and their peers will be joining us as leaders and colleagues of tomorrow. They're going to be the next group to pick up the baton in this relay race that we call life.

As you'll hear in the upcoming season 3 episodes, we're products of what's around us - what we see and hear - what we have access to - our genes - and so much more. ...

But the first step in having better collective mental wellbeing is talking about mental health. Being open and breaking the stigma. So that's what we did - take a listen to the highlights from the live conversation

**Holly Fletcher:**

Anybody wanna chime in about how social media or, or digital platforms maybe gives you some freedom to talk about private experiences away from, um, away from people. I know that we all see how, um, having that digital facade between you and the other people can, can really kind of, um, empower you and give you confidence to share because you don't have to make eye contact. And I'm curious about, um, what, whether that makes a D D difference or whether you would use talk space or some of the other apps as you think about, as you think about mental health,

**Clark Buckner:**

This is Holly Fletcher, Director, Media Equity and Emerging Platforms at Vanderbilt and one of the producers of DNA

**Melissa Smith:**

I will, um, jump in on that one. I know that with my team, they were very excited when they realized that they did not have to be on camera for this, that it was just their voices coming through. Um, but yeah, uh, a Reba on the, um, any of you guys wanna jump in on that one, does it, uh, feel safer, so to speak, it's easier to be, um, on, on, on a digital platform?

**Clark Buckner:**

You're listening to Melissa Smith, Director of Virtual and Blended Learning for Club NEXT at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee. The teens in this conversation are part of her program

**Teen from Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee:**

Yeah. Um, I think I could add something. I think sometimes, um, it can be like a little nerve wracking to like actually come out to the people that, you know, and like, say that you're struggling with something. And so in this way, it's a bit easier to go to people that like have nothing, like they have no knowledge about you. And so it's kind of easier to just come out to like someone, um, like online and you don't know anything about them and they don't know anything about you, but you can like, kind of like bond or like share, um, what you're struggling with. And like, they could also be struggling with the same thing. And so in that way, because there's kind of like, no, like, will they see me in a different way when I share this? Or like, will they like not treat me the same? Um, because that's like not a part of your conversation when it's online. It's like easier that way to kind of like share and like receive and get help.

**Melissa Smith:**

Absolutely.

**Teen from Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee:**

Sure. Yeah. Um, I can add on, I think just, yeah, like having like a anonymity, like online, um, just helps people. I feel like I feel less self-conscious like, um, Ms. Melissa was saying like, without having a camera on, I just feel like I can like talk, um, there's a little bit more freely and just not like being super self-conscious, like what I'm saying. Um, and like the last speaker said, just like, not worrying about like how people will see me because they don't necessarily like, know me, um, like personally in my like day to day life, like just being able to like talk more freely. Um, yeah. Um, and I also had another question, um, for the experts on the topic. My question, um, is just kind of like what resources are available, um, like at no cost to us, um, as teenagers and kids,

**Clark Buckner:**

Let's hear from Dr. Meg Benningfield, Director of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Vanderbilt

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Be aware of a lot more resources, um, for kids that are available without cost. Certainly there are the crisis hotline, um, resources available. So for emergency use, um, for day to day, I think,

um, others on the call have talked about, um, working within your network to connect with, um, with teachers, with friends, with, um, parents of friends, with a pastor, um, and really thinking about, um, connecting around those community resources, um, when, when the needs are more related to healthcare and really kind of focused on managing illness, um, it becomes more challenging, certainly. Um, the, the medical, um, resources that are needed should be covered by health insurance. And so, um, for many of us that, um, is an avenue for the kind of support that we need, but what we recognize is that for lots and lots of families in our community, um, even with good health insurance, it's hard to access adequate mental health care that the providers are not in our network or, um, they're not covered by our insurance. Um, and so that's a really important, um, gap that we're focused on as a community to try to highlight, um, just exactly what you say, how can we provide better resources, um, that are available for teens without a cost. Um, some folks are, um, building, um, networks, um, together, um, kind of in a school group or other kinds of, um, informal supports. Um, and those are resources that certainly, I think I would love to hear more about, um, if you all have ideas about ways that we can be innovative in those spaces.

**Melissa Smith:**

Yeah. Um, so let's point the circle back to, um, my guys, as my teens go ahead and think through, like, what are some, some things that you guys would consider helpful, like in your school settings or in like, even, even in the boys and girls club, like what are things that you guys would like to see? Um, but my question, uh, for the experts is, um, how, you know, reliable, how useful, um, are these like, you know, text apps that, um, I see a lot of that are like, you know, text to talk to a therapist and it's, and it's free. Um, like have you looked into those, are those valid? Are they worthwhile? Like, are they useful? Um, just would be curious to see what your guys thoughts are on those

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

I'll jump in to start. And then I'm curious about whether there are other experts on the call who have more knowledge about the specific apps that are out there. Um, certainly we're seeing significant innovations and the availability of, um, digital responses to the needs for, um, connection with therapists and with treatment. Um, I would say that generally there's some really great apps out there that are focused on wellness and building, um, healthy habits and, and for example, um, incorporating mindfulness into our everyday experience, um, and encouraging, um, healthy, um, eating and more physical activity. And all of those, um, efforts certainly have an impact on our mental health. Um, for those of us who experience significant challenges in mental illness. I think it's important to really continue to think about when it's important to engage with traditional, um, medical services, um, to make sure that at least we are, um, screening for, um, potential medical illness that could be contributing to mental health as well as, um, getting the, um, you know, the indicated support when it's necessary.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Um, but I do think that we're gonna continue to see some, um, better and better innovations in the digital space. Um, that'll continue to support health and, um, and potentially even provide

treatment. Um, I, I think that, you know, I grew up in a, um, and, and trained in an era where we were really suspicious even of telehealth. Um, and we thought that therapy has to be done face to face, um, in a therapist's office and what we're learning. Um, and this has been facilitated by the pandemic for sure. Is that actually connecting over video chat and connecting by phone actually can be just as powerful as being present in person. So I think there's a lot of opportunity for us to innovate in the way that we're providing mental healthcare. And I'm excited to see where that leads

**Clark Buckner:**

This is Dr. Jessika Boles, an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and Human Development and a Certified Child Life Specialist at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt.

**Dr. Jessika Boles:**

So to add on to some of the Dr. Benning Fields's and Melissa's comments, um, some specific apps that I can think of that I try to encourage teens to use just for kind of handling general stress, which also could be helpful. Um, in times of more chronic distress, um, are things like, uh, calm is a really good app where you can use music and affirmations and sounds and imagery to kind of help yourself relax when you need to, um, another good one is head space, and it has all these different, um, guided meditations to kind of help you get into a mindfulness state that can really focus on your body and your breathing and what you're feeling.

**Dr. Jessika Boles:**

And then there's actually a really fun one that, um, I've seen a lot of teens use called mood potatoes. <laugh> where you actually track your mood throughout the day when different things happen or, you know, different periods of the day, or whether you're in school or at home, um, by using these little potato emoji guys to kind of try to summarize what it is you feel in that moment. So I think there's some really useful tech tools like that that can be incorporated day to day. But again, those aren't replacement for formal therapy. If, you know, you're struggling to the degree that it's more mental illness, rather than just, you know, struggling a little bit with my coping today. Um, and then another resource that I thought of, like, if you want more information about what does it mean for somebody to have depression or anxiety or bipolar disorder, you know, those terms that you hear, there's a website called kids health, the.org/teens.

**Dr. Jessika Boles:**

Um, that's posted by ne Moore's hospital. And it's actually a really great site of information for, um, uh, really great site for any information about medical diagnoses, which is inclusive of mental health diagnoses. So they have different sheets on, you know, what does it mean to have depression? What can treatments for depression look like? Um, how can I tell if someone's struggling with depression? How can I get help if I'm feeling like I might be depressed? So some more kind of tangible, specific pieces. Um, specifically if you're trying to learn about something, that's a really good site to do that, but I will say it is a hospital website. It's like, it's not super cool and engaging. It's kind of like lame and mostly text, but you can find some really cool information there that hopefully can help you with whatever you're thinking about or

needing to help get help with.

**Melissa Smith:**

It, any of my guys wanna chime in on, what are some things you guys would like to see happen in your school settings, in the club settings and so forth?

**Teen from Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee:**

Um, yeah, I think probably like the most helpful places for like help, um, with mental health issues would be like, yeah, like miss said, like schools, I think like, obviously there's like so many kids there cause like a lot of, um, mental health issues also like stem from things in school. So I think addressing it, like at the root of the problem would help a lot of students. Um, also I feel like social media apps and stuff, uh, which is another like source of stress on anxiety for a lot of people. So like having like different like checkpoints, um, and like safeguards in place to like prevent kids from like developing, um, mental health issues from those sources would be really helpful.

**Holly Fletcher:**

Dr. Benfield would you indulge me and talking just, um, very quickly about how mental illness is not someone's fault and give some overview of how it can run in families. And if you have a parent who has one who has some kind of mental illness, you might be at risk for something else, give yourself. I think the genetics piece is really important in that. And to also remember that we are products of the world that we live in, we are living in really uncertain times. That is the most cliché thing I could say, but in order to keep it PG 13, I'll just say that. And I think it's just really important to remember that our brains can absorb only so much. And some of that is very much out of your control. Um, that is the overarching theme and message that will be coming across in September in those episodes. And, um, I would love to hear you chime in to Dr. Benningfield.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Uh, sure. I'd be happy to do that. So you're right on target Holly, um, psychiatric illness, our mental illness, um, and mental health runs in families. And there's both a genetic component to that as well as an environmental component to that. So, you know, our brains are probably the most complex organs, um, in our bodies and we still are doing a lot of work. Um, and several folks who are on the call today are active in, um, really working to discover more about how our brains function, so that we can potentially have even better ways to, um, to prevent and to treat mental illness. Um, Holly, you mentioned that, um, having as a parent, having a mental illness, um, generates some risk for our kids and that's true. So, um, if I experience postpartum depression after the birth of a baby, um, getting treatment, um, in that early phase, um, is really important to promoting healthy development.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

And we know that that's partly about kind of the ways that parents are engaging with children as their brains are developing, but it's also about, you know, the genetics related to vulnerability for

those illnesses. So the most important thing I think for families to know is that, you know, this information doesn't mean that there's no hope what it means is, um, there's a lot of opportunity to engage early and, um, practice healthy habits that promote better health. So just like we focus on like nutrition and our, our diet in terms of the foods that we consume. I think there's also, um, a lot that we can do in terms of our media diet and what we consume day in, day out and the impact on our mental health. So when we, um, spend a lot of time focusing our attention on things that cause us to feel lousy, it generates a pattern where we keep feeling bad.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Um, but Holly, you also notice that like right now, sometimes it's hard to escape all of the negativity. Um, and when we think about climate change and we think about, um, the toxicity in our political discourse, and we think about the risk that we face in terms of, um, you know, people's rights potentially being, um, infringed on and is it safe to be who I am in the world? Am I gonna be targeted? Um, just for being myself, those are things that teenagers face in the real world day in, day out. And so, um, you know, there's this balance between, um, kind of being focused on our media diet and, and what we surround ourselves with. And also just recognizing the reality of these are really uncertain. They're really, um, anxiety provoking. They're really, really difficult times. Um, and so I like to think about, you know, our responsibility to come together as a community and to support one another to really, um, start with engaging around, you know, how can we just increase the amount of kindness that we show to one another every day? How can we increase, um, a sense of community and belonging? Um, how can we let people know that, um, no matter what, um, you know, we all are worthy of acceptance and love and belonging. Um, so that comes across as pretty cheesy, but in the bottom, in the, you know, at the end of the day, those kinds of messages are actually really important for our mental

**Teen from Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee:**

Um, hi. Yeah, my name is Lamont. Um, I do have a question, like how can you make someone with mental disorder feel comfortable in environment that really doesn't support it? Like if you're out in public,

**Holly Fletcher:**

That's a really great question,

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Dr. Fila. I wonder if you have thoughts on that one. I think, you know, you do a lot of work with people who have really severe mental illness and experience psychotic disorder. Do you have some thoughts about how we can help, um, folks with severe mental illness feel comfortable in communities?

**Clark Buckner:**

This is Dr. Brandee Feola, a Research Assistant Professor Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences who studies how individuals respond to stress

**Dr. Brandee Feola:**

Sure. I'm happy to chime in a little bit and Meg, if you wanna build on it as well. I think Lamont, are you specifically talking about if you're out in public and someone you can really tell is having a struggle or dealing with their mental illness and this might be morbid bit or thinking about in these kind of more severe mental illnesses, like psychotic disorders or something like that. And I think what we've been saying all along for all different types of mental illness, being comfortable to talk with that person and try to understand what's going on and having those people around that they can be really comfortable and open with is really important. Um, and also being able to kind of assess when and what kind of a theme we've been talking about, assess when it's too much for you to handle on your own and might maybe how you can bring in other supportive people from their families or environment that you know are trustworthy and they feel comfortable with communicating, um, and moving kind of handling that situation in an appropriate way.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Thanks for that. Brandy, another thing that I think of is that, um, you know, many of us have experienced significant, um, trauma, especially, um, people with significant mental illness have experienced a lot of trauma over time. And so really focusing on one of the most important things we can do is to stay kind of regulated and calm ourselves. Um, and you know, if we can't be calm, then maybe kind of, um, stepping away and taking a break, um, but letting the other person know like, Hey, I can, I can take this. You can let me know what's going on. And if we're able to just hear someone else's story and stay connected with them, um, and let them know that, um, their experience is not something that, um, that needs to lead to shame that recognizing that you still care about them and that you can be there. Um, that's one of the most important things. Um, some of the, some of the folks on the call earlier made some really important comments too, about checking in with the other person and asking them what it is they want and need. So really being open to learn from that other person about their experience, um, I think is pretty critical.

**Dr. Brandee Feola:**

Can I add a little something MIG? I think that's so important to highlight true, like truly regulating your own emotion when you're hearing about things. Especially if some of the things you're hearing about are pretty bizarre or things you really aren't experiencing yourself, like something like psychosis and delusions or seeing things that people aren't seeing. Um, but being able to regulate your own emotions and just know that and can talk to your friends and let them know that they're not alone, I think is so crucial and important.

**Holly Fletcher:**

We are coming up on a hard stop for our team guests. So I want to be wrapping this up. Um, thank you all so much for carving out some of your time to participate in this conversation on a platform that is new to a lot of people. You know, we are all experiencing so many new things right now, and, um, we are perpetually looking for new ways to connect and thank you for part, for being a part of this experiment. It's it has meant a lot to, uh, the Vanderbilt team. And I hope that the boys and girls clubs have met middle Tennessee also found it, um, helpful and in, and, uh, and, and interesting, um, alright with, oh, um, yes, Melissa and

**Melissa Smith:**

Yeah. Um, so just, you know, thank you for putting all of this together. Um, I know that it, it was really refreshing, you know, talking with, with my teens, from the club about, you know, what were we gonna talk about? And so it was really, you know, it's been eye opening to me, just the difference of, you know, how I see things compared to how they see things. And I hope that they take this as an opportunity to, you know, continue the conversation in their circles, um, continue the conversation and let's, you know, work to normalize it. Um, any of my guys, do you, do you guys have any last remarks you guys wanna give?

**Teen from Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee:**

Yeah. So, um, thank you so much for this opportunity. Um, I learned a lot with like the tangible, like resources I can like go to and like share with my friends, if we ever have like something that we need to talk about. Um, and I also learned like how best to like talk to people that are, or like people I know that are struggling with mental health as well as like who I can reach out to. So, yeah. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I learned a lot.

**Dr. Meg Benningfield:**

Yeah. I'm so grateful to you guys, um, for, um, being engaged and being willing to support, um, one another. And, um, I hope that if you've got ideas about, um, resources that you wanna put together, um, don't hesitate to reach out, um, at the, the child psychiatry division here at Vanderbilt would be really excited to partner with you. Um, if you've got ideas about how we can do a better job of providing some support, um, in your schools, um, in your area, um, and keep the conversation going.

**Clark Buckner:**

I had so much fun participating in the live conversation - in fact I had to remind myself the next day that it wasn't a dream!

The mental health conversation we hosted on Twitter was such an important message for young people — and really anyone who has mental health and sometimes feels world weary. Head over to [@VUMC](#) underscore insights on Twitter and sign up to get exclusive access to the full conversation with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Middle Tennessee and let us know if you want to participate in future live sessions.

The public conversation around mental health is pervasive — but there's still so much to grapple with. Does it make me weak? I hear there is a therapist shortage - what does that mean? Why is there a divide between mental and physical health? How do I talk to someone about whether they are okay ... and is it okay for me to actually be okay when our culture is normalizing mental health disorders? (Yes it is!)

We're on the cusp of a paradigm shift around our brains and wellbeing and how we each travel the mental health journey.

Check back every week in September for deep dive episodes as we chart this course together.