

# Santa Cruz mental health symposium addresses adolescent mental health management



UC Berkeley psychology professor Dacher Keltner talks the audience through meditative, breathing and relaxation techniques at the Jon E. Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium at the Cocoanut Grove on Friday. (Dan Coyro -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)

By [Michael Todd](#), Santa Cruz Sentinel



About 400 people attended the Jon E. Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium at the Coacoanut Grove on Friday. (Dan Coyro -- Santa Cruz Sentinel)

SANTA CRUZ >> Busy, busy lives.

It is among the catalysts of current adolescent behavioral health problems, said Emiliana Simon-Thomas, the science director of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. She spoke Friday during the 20th annual Jon E. Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium at the Boardwalk's Coacoanut Grove in Santa Cruz. The daylong event taught the behavioral health benefits of applying positive psychology to childhood stress and trauma for about 400 social and health care workers, and educators.

"Overscheduling and perfectionism," Simon-Thomas said are the root of many behavioral health challenges youth face today.

"When we are in situations where we don't have a moment to see what's happening around us and instead, we are constantly planning ahead or reflecting backwards on our busy, busy lives, that's something that can really get in the way of our ability to connect with others," Simon-Thomas said.

Adolescents are busier and academics more difficult, but behavioral health resources are disappearing, said Dacher Keltner a UC Berkeley psychology professor who specializes in the origins of compassion, awe, love, power and social inequality.

Well-being, he said, depends in part on prosociality — behaviors meant to help others, according to the National Institutes of Health.

“We’ve had an assault on the systems that are prosocial. Our schools don’t have aides and you don’t have funds to provide a safe context,” said Keltner, who also spoke during the symposium. “It is a real degradation to their social services and in this climate, it’s the antithesis of prosociality. And kids feel it.”

### **HUGE NEED**

Jon Ervin Nadherny was 23 years old when he committed suicide in 1995. He was a Palo Alto native who graduated from Archbishop Mitty High School in San Jose. His mother, Linda Calciano of Aptos, said she wanted to protect other parents from the profound grief she faced.

Calciano said growing support of the annual symposium reflects a “huge need” for behavioral health services and innovations in Santa Cruz County.

“I wanted to do something to leave a legacy so that other families would not have to encounter this tragedy,” Calciano said. “The other idea was for our eight other children. I really wanted to be a positive role model.”

After two years of collaboration with the Dominican Hospital Foundation, the family started the Jon E. Nadherny/Calciano Memorial Youth Symposium to strengthen adolescent behavioral health resources, according to [calcianoyouthsymposium.org](http://calcianoyouthsymposium.org).

Joshua Nadherny-Calciano lost his brother, Jon Ervin Nadherny, when he was 18 years old.

“I kind of grew up really quick,” Nadherny-Calciano said. “Those early adolescent years, I felt those years were kind of taken from me. But we’ve been able to take that loss and pain and turn it into something remarkable.”

### **SUBSTANCE RELIANCE**

The nation’s opioid epidemic has connections with feelings of isolation — the opposite of compassion and empathy, Simon-Thomas said.

“There is reason to think that one of the draws to opioid use is loneliness,” Simon-Thomas said. “Chemically, it’s a very similar system that gets engaged when you use opioids or interact in a deep and bonding way with another person.”

Stress and trauma can be obstacles to a person’s natural empathy, Simon-Thomas said.

“We’re making the case that we already are prosocial. It’s essential to our humanity,” Simon-Thomas said. “We’re not selfish and hostile and competitive and learning to be prosocial by politeness. The task at hand is to enable and uncover that behavior as opposed to try to teach it.”

### **CONSTRUCTIVE MOMENTS**

Keltner, the psychology professor, said there are affordable means to address adolescent stress.

“Let’s say you’ve got 10 minutes with a child and they’re stressed out and have had a traumatic event. Get them outdoors and teach them to breathe and teach them to practice a little gratitude,” Keltner said. “Use language to represent their stress. Those are non-ideological, inexpensive things we can do.”

#### **EMPATHY BURNOUT**

Karen Gosling, director of Health and Rehabilitation at Dominican Hospital, said the symposium was designed to empower the professionals who work with children and adults enduring trauma or behavioral health crises.

“Right now, we need hope and positivity more than ever, especially for our community. Things can feel very stressed and dark,” Gosling said. “There’s a lot of empathy burnout right now because there is so much suffering. How do you manage all that stress when you’re the person put on the planet to help ease suffering?”

Beverly Grova, vice president of Dominican Hospital Foundation, said the symposium provides the same information to a diverse group on topics that are not straightforward or easy to handle.

Next year, the symposium will address substance-use disorders spawned by the opioid epidemic from behavioral health and medical perspectives, Gosling said.

“We really need to look at how we release reliance on that substance,” Gosling said