



**Mental Health Update
Summer 2023**

Prepared by Dr. Daniel Olson, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Research, NRC

This mental health update builds off the Mental Health research from summers 2021 and 2022. Data for this update mostly came from a detailed survey sent to all yoatzim and rashei edot who worked at Ramah camps in 2023. There were 30 responses from rashei edot and 30 from yoatzim, all at overnight camps.

The survey asked about many aspects of mental health care at camp in 2023 including training, effective and less effective methods of mental health care, and ideas for improving mental health care at camp.

This update focuses on four key areas:

- Comparing mental health needs across the past three summers;
- What yoatzim and rashei edot do to support camper mental health, and which approaches are most successful;
- What training helps rashei edah feel prepared to support mental health at camp; and
- The ratio of campers to yoatzim.

How did mental health needs compare over the previous three summers?

Table I compares the frequency of issues reported in 2023 based on camper age. Certain issues were more concentrated among certain age groups. For example, anxiety was most present for high-school-age campers, while homesickness and challenges with executive functioning were most present for elementary school campers.

Table I

Mental Health Issue (Campers) 2023	Total	Elementary	Middle	High
Needing repeated and direct instruction to do basic camp activities	9%	15%	5%	9%
Anxiety	8%	4%	6%	13%
Homesickness	8%	19%	7%	2%

Challenges with executive functioning	6%	12%	3%	3%
Bullying or being bullied	5%	2%	5%	6%
Difficulty with emotional regulation	5%	4%	5%	5%
Disordered eating	3%	0%	1%	7%
Difficulty with anger management	3%	3%	4%	2%
Depression	2%	1%	2%	2%
Discussion of self harm (including cutting)	1%	0%	1%	1%
Self harm (including cutting)	0.40%	0.20%	0.50%	0.50%
Suicidal ideation	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%	0.20%

Tables II and III show the change over time for campers and for staff members. Across nearly every single category for campers, the frequency of these mental health challenges decreased from 2021 to 2023, matching anecdotal reports from the summer.

Table II

Mental Health Issue (Campers)	2021	2022	2023
Needing repeated and direct instruction to do basic camp activities	17%	13%	9%
Anxiety	14%	11%	8%
Homesickness	14%	9%	8%
Bullying or being bullied	8%	8%	5%
Challenges with executive functioning	10%	8%	6%
Difficulty with emotional regulation	9%	6%	5%
Depression	5%	5%	2%
Difficulty with anger management	6%	4%	3%
Disordered eating	2%	3%	3%
Discussion of self-harm (including cutting)	3%	1%	1%
Suicidal ideation	1%	1%	0.20%
Self-harm (including cutting)	1%	0%	0.40%

Responses to an open-ended survey question about camper mental health in 2023 vs. 2022 reveal more nuance. One yoetzet who worked with high school students shared, “Overall mental health was better, but most of the post-COVID mental and behavioral issues persisted, such as lack of attention span, disconnection, heightened anxiety, and an inability to control behavior.” Another point of comparison raised by these open-ended responses was in camp’s preparedness to support mental health issues that one yoetzet said were now “chronic.” A rosh edah who worked with middle school campers reported that even as they saw similar presentations of camper mental health issues, the camper care team was stronger.

Staff mental health issues also declined (see Table III), but not by as much as for campers. Notably, staff anxiety in 2023 (15%) was almost double camper anxiety in 2023 (8%). This (8% vs. 15%) seems to be a continuation of a trend in 2021 (14% and 25%) and 2022 (11% and 19%). Many staff mental health challenges were caused or exacerbated by the pressures of the job. When asked to name additional staff mental health issues beyond the ones listed in Table III, one yoetzet shared, “Staff members tended to need general help to address daily situations with campers.” A rosh edah observed, “Most of the tzevet are very young and have never dealt with even minor behavioral or emotional dysregulation.”

Table III

Mental Health Issue (Staff)	2021	2022	2023
Needing repeated and direct instruction to do their jobs	19%	26%	18%
Anxiety	25%	19%	15%
Homesickness	6%	7%	5%
Difficulty with emotional regulation	8%	7%	5%
Depression	9%	6%	6%
Challenges with executive functioning	3%	5%	6%
Difficulty with anger management	4%	5%	4%
Bullying or being bullied	2%	4%	2%
Disordered eating	1%	2%	3%
Discussion of self-harm (including cutting)	1%	0%	0%
Suicidal ideation	0%	0%	0.40%
Self-harm (including cutting)	0%	0%	1%

What do yoatzim and rashei edot actually do to support camper mental health?

Tables IV and V report the approximate average frequencies of the following mental health care practices:

Table IV

Yoetz/et Camper Care Practice	Average number of times per week
Having one-on-one conversations directly with campers	6.5
Coaching counselors on working with campers with mental health needs	5.57
Talking to camper parents on the phone	3.83

Coaching rashei edot on working with campers with mental health needs	3.81
Responding to a crisis as it unfolded	2.5
Facilitating a conversation between two or more campers	1.5
Supervising/organizing/coordinating camper sessions with clinicians from home	1.31
Talking with an entire bunk about an issue that has come up	0.75
Creating a behavior plan for a camper	0.52
Talking to other professionals connected to a camper on the phone	0.38

Table V

Rosh Edah Camper Care Practice	Average number of times per week
Talking with staff one-on-one about camper mental health needs	7.21
Bringing camper mental health issues to a yoetz/et or administrator	5.53
Checking in one-on-one with campers directly	4.15
Addressing camper mental health needs in staff meetings	3.48
Accounting for camper mental health needs in planning programming	3.07
Responding to a crisis as it unfolded	2.82
Facilitating a conversation between two or more campers	1.52
Talking to an entire bunk/tzrif about an issue that came up	1.03
Talking with groups of campers about mental health	0.4

Which of the above mental health care practices were effective in supporting campers?

In their open-ended responses to a survey question asking about effective mental health care strategies for campers, the following four themes appeared across responses:

- **Self-Care Techniques:** Including taking a break, breathing exercises, and mindfulness. Sensory spaces mentioned as a helpful resource.
- **Individualized Support:** Tailored attention, personalized plans, and individual check-ins for each camper, often based on information from parents gathered before the summer.

- **Communication and Emotional Support:** Encouraging open dialogue, active listening, and building trust.
- **Planning and Routine:** Clear plans, routine check-ins, and schedule previews.

What preparation helped rashei edot feel ready to support camper mental health?

Even as staff members expressed a desire for more training to feel better prepared to support mental health issues in camp, the most effective tool to help rashei edot feel prepared to support camper mental health was chatting informally with the camper care team and other camp leadership throughout the summer. (See Table VI.)

One returning rosh edah reflected on the Youth Mental Health First Aid course they took before the 2022 camp season: “I found [Youth Mental Health First Aid] incredibly helpful. I still refer to those notes. That training is comprehensive, and so might I suggest continuing to encourage staff to use and refer to it.”

This finding represents something critical in preparing to support all kinds of camper challenges in camp, whether mental health related or behavioral. Training, while valuable, is not nearly as effective without a talented team of leaders that staff, from rashei edot to counselors, can trust to teach them skills and guide them through some of the inevitable challenging issues that will arise in camp.

Table VI

Rosh Edah Training and Preparation	Average effectiveness on 0-10 scale
Informal conversations with camp administration and camper care team throughout the summer	8.39
Sessions with the camper care team on specific camper mental health needs prior to camper arrival	7.68
Staff week sessions on general camper mental health	6.07
Youth mental health first aid training provided through camp	5
Rosh edah staff week training (pre-camper arrival) on staff mental health	4.82
Ongoing formal hadracha (professional development) about mental health throughout the summer	3.87

What were the ratios of campers to yoatzim in 2023?

Table VII reports the actual ratio of yoatzim to campers at each Ramah overnight camp in 2023. It uses Full Yoetz Equivalent (FYE) and Full Camper Equivalent (FCE), the average numbers of yoatzim and campers at camp at a given time during the summer. Directors of camper care are included as yoatzim. This ratio decreased or stayed the same at most camps from 2022 to 2023.

These numbers alone cannot be used to interpret how successful supporting mental health at camp was in 2023. Other factors to weigh include training, experience of yoatzim, scope of the yoetz role, staff morale, severity of camper need, leadership, and many more.

Table VII

Camp	Total Yoatzim	FYE (Full Yoetz Equivalent)	Ratio of FCE (Full Camper Equivalent) to FYE 2023	Ratio of FCE to FYE 2022
Berkshires	12	8	64.75	111.81
California	17	10.25	52.88	56.24
Canada	6	4.5	73.78	82
Darom	9	6	65	84.4
New England	12	8	70.88	54.73
Northern California	6	3	57.33	49.67
Poconos	9	6.15	59.02	76.68
Rockies	13	6.75	25.63	43.35
Wisconsin	13	5.75	69.57	61.79