Mentoring as Preventive Mental Health: Connecting the Disconnected

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In 2012-13 the Gates Foundation followed 1,300 youth for 13 months and compared mentored youth to a similar group who had not been mentored. Their conclusions stated that mentoring should be broadly available, as youth with all types and levels of risk benefited especially in the areas of reducing depression later in life. Perhaps most Importantly, the study indicates that with the right type of support, volunteer mentors can help higher-risk youth make meaningful gains, which may put them on a path toward healthy, successful futures.

The MentorSuccess program focuses on the use of mentoring in preventing or reducing depression because other studies are emerging showing a troublesome pattern of growing depression and disconnection in youth. There appears to be a strong correlation between the advent of cell-phone usage in 2007-8 and the rise of several mental conditions including late onset of autism and depression. In his 2016 book "Disconnected: How to reconnect our digitally distracted kids," T6homas Kersting cites an array of university and foundation research probing the impact of electronic devices on young people's brains. In her 2017 book "iGen,"Jean Twenge cites even more research to question the impact of too much digital influence on the development of student's brains.

To help counter these trends MentorSuccess uses a structured, customized non-digital approach with books and games to help mentors make meaningful and caring connections with troubled youth, inspiring success. This session will report on the results from two of our programs showing significant impact on the lives of challenged youth.

Introduction

There is a tremendous need for preventive mental health in our society today. Perhaps a few personal stories will help before the research studies are provided to support this statement. Allen (not his real name of course) came to us as a ten-year-old who was showing signs of late onset autism. Normally autism is diagnosed at ages 4-6, but he had not previously shown indications. He would not make eye contact and was recently having difficulties relating to other students and family members. Once a lively and engaging young man, his behavior was disturbing. He was professionally evaluated and received counseling but seemed to linger in his isolation. When we first engaged him in mentoring he refused eye contact or to do more than nod assent to some questions during the 45-minute session. After about the third session he reacted to some questions about his interests and hobbies. After the fourth one-on-one session, he broke his silence, especially as we talked with him about active listening and how to build relationships. After two years of one-on-one mentoring he has re-engaged with school and family and loves his mentors and mentoring sessions. He is back on track in school and even has some real friends, not just casual on-line chat room people.

A second person is Eric, a 30-something up and coming young executive one of the authors mentored in a high-tech management setting. He had great quantitative and analytical skills and was a social networking expert. When he was promoted and had to actually interact with and lead people, his lack of personal skills led to disaster. When he was assessed using professional instruments it confirmed what his employer's observations had indicated. He had minimal people savvy and seemingly had great difficulty relating to other people. He did not accept the evaluation and became very agitated. Instead of confronting him we just asked him if he had any significant others who could level with him. After great thought he did have one remaining long-time friend who he felt would tell him if the instruments findings were accurate. A few hours later, after a very heated discussion full of denial, came a very emotional phone call. His friend agreed with the diagnosis and apologized for not previously being open with him. The good news is after several mentoring sessions and acquiring some relationship building tools Eric was able to begin to relate to his team better. He began to realize that while he might never be a people savvy person, being able to relate to people helped him be a better leader.

The Challenge

What do both of these real-life anecdotes have in common? We believe there is a great problem with people needing to learn how to build healthy, productive, positive relationships; how to connect to others today. We've known for years that the greatest predictor of life satisfaction is not educational attainment, career success, or even money. George Vaillant's famous Harvard Grant and Glueck study followed 268 Harvard undergraduates (the Glueck study) and 468 low SES (Social Economic Status) Boston males (the Grant study) for 75 years and found it was strong personal relationships and social connections, not money and status, that made for a happier and healthier level of life satisfaction (Vaillant, 1977). However,

it has been evident for quite some time that the social fabric supporting such strong relationships has been fraying. In a paper first published in 1995, Robert Putnam called the phenomenon bowling alone, and then followed the paper with a book by the same name, in which he cited America's declining social capital (Putnam, 2000). He concluded people seemed to be increasingly drawing back from social contact. He saw this as a growing and disturbing trend toward disconnection and isolation in American society. He hoped it would get better, but predicted it would get worse, and it has.

While the trend toward disconnection started before electronic devices became prevalent, and we know that correlation does not mean causation, the indications are that increasing use of screen time and electronic devices could be part of the root cause of this social disconnection and isolation. In 2007, UCLA began studying technology's impact on the brain and discovered when subjects spent as little as one hour on-line and/or using electronic devices the pattern of their brain activity began to change dramatically (Small, 2009). The researchers posed the question, could all this screen time be causing neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections) resulting in people beginning to show more inattentiveness, lack of focus, and disorganized behavior in their daily interactions? It should be noted that 2007 is also the date that cell phones began entering into usage in the United States. It is also notable that the number of teenagers diagnosed with ADHD rose 52% from 2003 to 2015 (Collins and Cleary, 2016). In 2012 researchers observed an abrupt shift in teen-ager behavior and emotional states. These dates coincide with the crossover point where the majority of Americans of all ages started using cell phones that could access the internet anytime and anywhere. (Twenge, 2017). And the problem was not just with teen-agers. Researchers are finding that workplace loneliness is also spreading. Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United Sates, says solid research indicates that when we rely on devices to connect with others, our social relationships weaken (Murthy, 2017).

This phenomenon is being observed among people of all ages, not just children. A Wharton School of Business Study on 672 employees and 114 supervisors found a strong correlation between loneliness and isolation at work caused by extensive use of electronic devices in place of personal interaction and poor performance and lack of loyalty to the organization and fellow workers (Ozcelik and Barsade 2011). The connection between workplace isolation and overuse of devices is continuing to grow. A study on 1,787 young adults at the University of Pittsburgh cited in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found that just two hours of electronic device usage doubled the risk of social isolation (Malloy 2017). Other studies have found that the more active people of all ages are on social media and screens the more they are at risk of depression (Carroll, 2017). This is especially disturbing when a study in 2013 American Academy of Pediatrics found eight to ten-year-old children were spending up to eight hours a day with various digital media while teens were spending over eleven hours in front of screens. While there have been some indications of reduction in this usage, possibly because of growing parental awareness, the reduction has not been significant enough to change the negative outcomes of too much media usage (Reid-Chassiakos, Radesky, & Christakis, 2016). In another study by Pew Research from 2012-2015 they found students were texting over 100 times a day (Lenhart, 2015). In 2015, Common Sense Media conducted the most up-to-date survey on young people's usage of all types of devices and screens and found it was on average nine hours a day, 63 hours a week (Dersting, 2016). The question that could be asked is what did young people, and adults, do with all those hours before we became so immersed in our devices and social media?

One casualty seems to be the health of relationships. Observers are seeing a growing decline in empathy and a resulting rise in narcissism, as indicated from longitudinal studies on college students starting in 1999 through 2009 (Konrath, et.al., 2010). The researchers said they believe this to be influenced by the use of social media. Why? Our ability to sense the thoughts and feelings of others is learned one-on-one, based on seeing their faces, watching their body language, hearing their voices, all of which appears hindered when using social media. (Uhls, et.al., 2014) Time spent on screens and devices is usually not being spent on learning to relate.

Another issue is a change in the type of media we are using. In an article in Scientific American, Ferris Jabr notes that as we continue to grow and engage technology, it appears we are beginning to neglect reading books and magazines. When we use electronic devices like Notebooks and iPads our brains do not function at the same levels or in the same ways as when we read hard text from books or when we engage in the activity of writing. Part of the problem is that screens do not have the defined pages and completeness that books do, and so our brain does not make the visual connections of the size of the book if we are reading it in electronic format. In addition, other studies he describes have shown that when we use electronic devices for reading and information, it appears that instead of reading for knowledge we tend to scan or just glance over the material in front of us. The result is that our reading comprehension level decreases and we have trouble remembering what we are reading and the content of that reading. (Jabr, 2013)

Another factor in the equation is that it appears people do not take the time to read stories to children any more. Instead screen time is growing to over 8 hours a day for American's aged 16-45 and even more for younger children. (Brown, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, this screen time usage apparently has a huge negative impact on a person's ability to read non-verbal emotion cues that are crucial to developing relationship skills. (Uhls, et al., 2014) It used to be television, then it was video games, and now it is electronic gadgets of all sorts.

We also seem to be losing the importance of story sharing and telling that seems to be crucial to good social development of all children from every SES level. Jonathan Gotschall in his book The Story Telling Animal (2012) says this about the similarities of stories across all cultures:

"Why do stories cluster around a few big themes, and why do they hew so closely to problem structure? Why are stories this way instead of all the other ways they could be? I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by story," (Gotschall, 2012, p.56).

Other people who have studied humans in diverse settings across the world also find storytelling and sharing to be not only a universal human trait, but a key activity where it seems people go to practice the essential skills of human social life (Boyd, 2009). For example, researchers at Princeton scanned the brains of storytellers and listeners and found there was neural coupling taking place. The brains of the story teller and listener light up not just in areas controlling speech and language but also, more significantly, in areas known to be involved in processing social information crucial for successful communication, including the capacity to share the beliefs, desires, and goals of others (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010). It also appears more children and young adults are becoming emotionally fragile and lack competence in critical thinking and coping skills because they are not spending enough time engaged in the real world, person-to-person. This is a result of what researchers call neural pruning. Neural pruning is the process by which unused synapses are eliminated. (Costandi, 2017). In simple terms, if you don't use it you lose it. Neural pruning is a normal occurrence as our brain matures, but these changes aren't always positive.

"If young people spend most of their time communicating through social media and texting rather than face-to-face, the brain will weed out the neural pathways that are necessary for becoming a good face-to-face communicator." (Dersting, 2016, p.9)

Jean Twenge, in her 2017 book called iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy, and completely unprepared for adulthood, states that the result of this over use of devices is that many young people today can't handle job interviews or face-to-face interactions of any sort.

The Solution

Faced with these challenges the His Heart Foundation has under taken a two-pronged approach to providing a solution. Our strategy was heavily influenced by a 2013 longitudinal study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It followed over 1300 mentored students compared to a group of similar youth who had not been offered mentoring. "Compared to their non-mentored peers, mentored youth self-reported fewer depressive symptoms, greater acceptance by peers, more positive academic attitudes and better grades," (Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013). The decline in depressive symptoms was particularly noteworthy, since almost one-in-four youth involved in the study had reported worrisome levels of depression at baseline. The primary finding of the study to His Heart Foundation suggested placing a stronger emphasis on the mental health needs of youth and the benefits that effective mentoring can provide in this area, including depression and suicidal behavior.

Two years ago, His Heart Foundation established a mentoring partnership with a private school and then last year with a public school, both located in Washington. In addition, over the last two summers we worked with an inner-city Portland, Oregon, summer program for challenged children. The program provides structured, customized, and focused mentoring based on learning leadership success skills. These include such social emotional skills such as active listening, expressing warmth and empathy, goal setting, and team work. Carefully curated books and games that focus on these skills have been provided to the schools. The mentors are trained to use scripted questions that encourage higher order thinking and creativity, and are taught to read with and engage the students in the mentoring activity, specifically focused on learning the leadership success skills that children need to navigate life. We describe the program as having three key elements based on our research on effective mentoring programs:

1) Structured: The structure in our program provides easy to follow instructions for mentors. It also provides accountability and more time on task. Our mentors have carefully scripted directions to help them guide student activity and learning assignments. Many students having difficulty in class often lack structure at home. This provides the structure they need. Both the mentor's time and the student's time will not be wasted!

2) Customized: The award-winning literature we use is carefully analyzed and is appropriate to the students age, reading level, and especially to their self-identified interest areas. It is also customized to leadership success skills they need to develop. This customization encourages the student to be engaged in their own learning.

3) Focused: Our one-on-one mentoring experience is concentrated on teaching each student what highly successful students learn at home. The learning can be at the students preferred pace, adjusted to the students learning style, and allows for a lot of interaction between the student and mentor. The focus is on the student and inspiring them to succeed.

Studies such as the Gates study previously described show that mentoring and mental health is deeply connected. Mentoring can be a positive and protective factor for fostering mental health and emotional well-being. The objectives achieved through the MentorSuccess™ program will have a cascading and preventive effect in developing mental health throughout the participating children's lifetimes.

Results:

The children selected in the program usually represent the bottom 10% of the school population based on behavioral or family issues and selected by the principal and/or social worker. The program's effectiveness has been established by using the K-12 Reading Evaluation instrument where 92% of the participating students in the summer mentoring program showed significant improvement in their reading scores. For the 36 students mentored in the private school setting, over 86% self-reported improvement in their behavior and attitude toward school, findings confirmed by a teacher and parent survey. Also, student academic performance using the MAP (Measure of Academic Performance) indicated all of the students showed significant academic improvement. At our first public school program, a behavioral survey conducted with teachers and the school social worker of 30 students reported significant improvement in all the students as far as a decline in disciplinary rates and an improvement in school attitude, including a reduction in bullying and improved attendance. We will be expanding the program in all of the participating schools and adding two more sites this year, giving us a total of five mentoring programs with a highly diverse student population.

Preventive Mental Health

For adults, His Heart Foundation has established Mental Health Academy which is a mental health awareness program and can be found on our www.hisheartfoundation.org website. It includes a mental health blog that covers titles dealing with depression, autism, and other mental health topics. It also provides courses on identifying and dealing with mental health issues especially helping families. It is dedicated to overcoming the stigma of mental illness. It also emphasizes a preventive mental health approach. In conjunction with the academy the foundation has also established a network of carefully vetted mental health counselors and has seen 693 referrals to our program since its inception over two years ago. Over 92% of our participants have given us a positive rating and have stated they will refer us to others.

Conclusion

Results from the first three years of activity are very positive and encouraging. The results demonstrate that mentoring can play a very positive role in establishing preventive mental health. Helping people to prevent mental health problems before they occur or become life challenging is our goal. We are looking forward to many more years of helping people lead healthier and happier lives and creating caring

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