LESSONS I LEARNED FROM MY STUDENTS

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The “problems” started long before high-school
Over 11% of high schoolers are seeking therapy
At KSU, we see about 8% of the student body
Students seeking counseling at KSU have higher symptom severity than most schools
COLLEGE COUNSELING CENTERS

• Resources vary greatly, but most consider themselves under resourced to handle the quantity of students seeking services and the severity of their problems
• Some schools carry lengthy waitlists
• Some schools prioritize access
• The median number of contacts is 1, with most seen for 4-6 sessions
SO WHAT PROBLEM DO YOU THINK WE ENCOUNTER MOST?
ANXIETY

• Anxiety is the most common mental disorder in adults, including college students
  • 42% of those seeking counseling
  • 18% overall in US compared to global prevalence of 7%
• Increase in anxiety in teens and young adults since at least the 1940s
• 25% of teens will meet criteria for anxiety disorder at some point
LESSON 1: WE DON’T FEEL SAFE

A History of School Shootings
WE DON’T‘ FEEL SAFE

• The causes of fear differ amongst racial groups
  • For example, black people are 3x more likely to be killed by police
LESSON 2: OUR FUTURES ARE VERY UNCERTAIN

• The career and economic prospects are not nearly as favorable

• These are societal ills that individuals seem to take a lot of responsibility for
  • Normal setbacks are experienced as crushing blows with long-term implications
HIGH ANXIETY

• Because they’re paying attention
  • Violence
  • Economics
  • Racism
  • Homophobia
LESSON 3: WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO CONNECT
CRAVING CONNECTION

• Your students spend an hour a day less interacting with their peers than the previous generation

• They do everything social less
  • Fewer parties
  • Fewer dates
  • Fewer movies
  • Less driving around with friends
  • Less bars and nightclubs

• The time at home is less interactive as well
IT'S NOT JUST A DIFFERENT TYPE OF CONNECTION

- They are not just connecting differently through screens, the amount of connection has decreased across all spheres
  - Highly social teens are more social online and in person, but on average it's less

- If electronic communication was just as good as in-person, it would be just as good for their mental health and happiness

- The research is clear that more screen time, regardless of the type, results in more students reporting being unhappy
Stages of Psychosocial Development

- **Early Childhood**: autonomy vs. shame and doubt
- **Preschool**: initiative vs. guilt
- **Infancy**: trust vs. mistrust
- **School Age**: industry vs. inferiority
- **Maturity**: ego integrity vs. despair
- **Adolescence**: identity vs. role confusion
- **Middle Adulthood**: generativity vs. stagnation
- **Young Adulthood**: intimacy vs. isolation
SOCIAL COMPARISON

• Individuals have an internal drive to gain accurate self-evaluations (Festinger, 1954) and do so by engaging in upward or downward social comparison.

• Comparison kills connection

• Social media didn’t cause comparison, it amplified it
SOCIAL COMPARISON

• More social media use results in more social comparison
  • Depression
  • Low self-esteem
  • High anxiety
  • High body dissatisfaction
  • Low perceived physical attractiveness
SOCIAL COMPARISON

• Increase in visual content may lead to increased social comparison
  • Visual information remembered more readily than written information

• Following more strangers associated with increased depressive symptoms and social comparison

• It’s clear that screen time causes unhappiness and loneliness and not that these feelings lead to increased use of screens

• Results consistent across demographic groups
HASHTAGS CAN HURT

• #fitspiration
  • Disordered eating and poor body image
SOUNDS FAMILIAR

• The earlier one starts using it the more likely they are to have problems with it
• The inability to use it in moderation leads to negative consequences
• Anxiety often aroused when not able to use
• Reducing use or stopping can becomes very difficult
LESSON 4: WE DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH OUR FEELINGS

• We learn affect regulation in relationships
• Less connections means less learning
• Less learning means less coping
LESSON 5: SUICIDE IS A REASONABLE RESPONSE TO MY PROBLEMS

• Interestingly, there has been a decline in homicide and rise in suicide among teens that mirrors the rise in online activities
  • Physical harm has been replaced with emotional harm
SUICIDE RISK

• And its not just about happiness and loneliness, 3 hours of screen time increased the risk for suicide
  • Risk starts to rise at two hours or more a day

• Cyberbullying seems to be the underlying culprit of this risk
  • 1/3 of teens reported experiencing cyberbullying in 2016
LOW SELF-EFFICACY

• They are aware, sometimes painfully so, that they don’t yet have the tools they need
  • Part of the problem is a false expectation that they should
  • Or that everyone else does and something is wrong with them because they don’t
JOINER’S THEORY OF SUICIDE

- Thwarted Belongingness: “I am alone.”
- Perceived Burdensomeness: “I am a burden.”
- Capability for Suicide: “I am not afraid to die.”

Desire for Suicide

Suicide or Near-Lethal Suicide Attempt
WHAT DO TEENAGERS AND YOUNG ADULTS SAY MAKES THEM FEEL SUICIDAL?

SUICIDAL MESSAGES

- Often relationships are the context
- Loneliness especially salient
IDENTITY STIGMA

• 3 major themes:
  • Gender
  • Sexuality
  • Physical Body

• Expressions of Internalized Stigma
FAILING TO MEET EXPECTATIONS

• School stress
  • Personalization
• Peer comparison
BEING HELPLESS

• Not knowing what to do
• Not able to change circumstances
FEELING WORTHLESS

- Self-hatred
  - Weight or physical features
  - Gender identification
  - Nothing to contribute
MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

• Discussing diagnosis, especially depression
• Mental health problems not taken seriously by others
• Often talked about suffering but not seeking help
SO WHAT DO WE DO?
Reduce negative impact of the problem, and improve quality of life for those struggling with the problem.
TARGETS

- Reducing loneliness
- Acceptance of difference
- Mindfulness
- Realistic expectations and failing well
- Focusing on what one can control
- Inherent worth of all persons
- Practicing gratitude
- Connecting to values
- All nonscreen related activities reduced loneliness and depression
MESSAGES TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS

• Evaluate the level of services offered
• Don’t abandon the things that got you here
• Understand the differences in environments
• Semesters can be ruined quickly, so don’t wait until the ship is sinking to ask for help
QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?