

The World is Falling Apart: School-based Relationships Help Boys Survive Stress

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What is happening in the world?

Sustained High Intensity Trauma

- The war in Ukraine
- Worldwide humanitarian crises due to war, climate, earthquakes...
- Climate change is accelerating
 - Heat waves in Australia, droughts around the world and huge snow falls
- Rights for women and those with gender concerns are being abridged
- Gun related deaths which include mass shootings and suicide especially death by police shootings of young men
- The effects of the pandemic – and other public health concerns

How students are dealing with world events

- **Habitual Checking Behaviors**
 - Results in changes in the brain's anticipation of punishment and social rewards
- **Exposure to smart phones seems to increase the risk for cognitive, behavioral, and emotional disorders**
 - Such as lowered self-esteem, slower learning (correlation or causation?)
 - Boys with Internet gaming disorder were found to have brain changes resulting in difficulties with rewards leading to addictions, probably dopamine driven
- **Social Media Use (SMU)**
 - Resulted in lower self-concept especially in academics and feeling constantly judged by peers – obsess about what other people think about them

Stress/Anxiety/Fear/Anger

- Physiological response to emotional or cognitive beliefs about events
 - responses are under your control, the result of perception
 - Stress exists in the immediate moment event related, anxiety is over time
 - Anxiety can result from chronic stress, can also result in depression
 - Fear is legitimate concern about danger in the environment, may involve a physical threat, but can be emotional threat
 - Anger results as means to protect self, striking out against threat
- Fight or Flight
 - Adrenalin driven, increase in HR, BP, breathing, increase blood sugar, eyes dilate, blood goes to muscles and away from skin and gut, ends in exhaustion
 - Body prepares to fight the stressor or run
- Tend and Befriend
 - Oxytocin driven, HR and BP may increase but not much, breathing does not, eyes constrict, blood goes to skin and gut, no movement, just as exhausted
 - Fawn : Totally freeze, protecting self and valued others

Prefrontal Cortex and Stress

- PFC – last part of brain to develop, in males around 20-25
 - Responsible for reasoned decisions and impulse control
- Stress involves the amygdala, hippocampus, and PFC
 - Amygdala involves emotion and develops early in males
 - Hippocampus involves memory develops early in females
 - Shift to using the PFC occurs earlier in females
- Stress can lead to an increase in dopamine
 - Dopamine involved in addiction, and this is the reason for adrenaline junkies and behavior that results in an increase in adrenaline
 - The problem is that this can lead to PTSD in which the individual cannot forget the stressful event and relives it over and over

The 14-year-old brain

- What we used to think
 - Brain is at its most plastic when in infancy, so as we age, we are less able to learn from experience
- What we now know
 - Limbic system (emotions) is rapidly developing in the adolescent, but the prefrontal lobe (decision making) is not – creates a mismatch
 - Limbic system involves amygdala, hippocampus, pituitary gland (initiates adrenaline release), thalamus (4 Fs), pineal gland (circadian rhythm)
 - Rapid brain growth combined with neuronal pruning creates a brain which is changing rapidly – can be very scary to both adolescents and those who work with them, but also creates a huge opportunity to develop new approaches to learning
 - Individuals become very responsive to social cues and to rewards

Relationships

- Perceived teacher-student relationship predicts positive attitude toward school for both boys and girls, but when there is no connection, boys report more boredom and anger (limbic system)
- Friendly class climate seemed to result in boys having more positive attitude toward class. Theory was that boys needed social support for academic success
- Earlier research discovered that boys require social atmosphere for learning
 - Boys more responsive to social goals and will self-handicap to maintain social status
 - Very responsive to cues from agemates, especially when working in groups
 - Supports Reichart & Hawley (2014) Boys as relational learners

How Connections Help

- Skills in prosocial learning increase in adolescence
 - That includes acquiring skills in benefiting others which is necessary to develop social network
 - It takes time to develop these skills
- Situations that result in better development of social networks include
 - Smaller rather than larger social contexts
 - Peer presence rather than being anonymous or in large groups
 - The house system
- Structured community service helps students develop social skills by providing organization and social support within a trusted environment with supervision

Respect for self and others

- The connection to others is also a need to connect to the world
 - Prosocial peers help students develop prosocial behaviors, particularly same-gender peers
 - Contributing to society helps guard adolescents against depression and anxiety
 - Contributions need to be real, valuable, and effects need to be obvious
- How boys' schools make a difference
 - The difference in PFC and stress response means that boys and girls manage stress reactions very differently
 - Girls become depressed, boys become angry – classroom management involves very different approaches and in a coed situation, boys become the identified problem
 - Boys' schools see boys' behavior as an opportunity to teach prosocial behavior and not as evidence of inborn aggression and violence

Substances

- Do not help in any way to deal with stress, only postpone the consequences
- Negative experiences especially for early teens
 - Harmful events may lead to vortices from which it is difficult to recover
 - Early experimentation with drugs and alcohol more likely to result in addiction particularly for the early adolescent
- Marijuana
 - Link to schizophrenia for males (but problem with cause and effect)
 - In young adolescents, results in delayed brain development in PFC
 - Suggest that pregnant women and adolescents not use due to developmental issues in brain
- Alcohol
 - Early alcohol use results in long term cerebella problems later and smaller PFC especially boys. Additional problems in attention, verbal learning, visuospatial processing, and memory with use

Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria

- Connected to ADHD
- Sudden emotional reaction to the belief that the individual has been scorned by those who matter. Additionally, the individual may believe that they have failed to meet the expectations of oneself or of others
- Can look like sudden rage at self or at person perceived to have caused the event – intense but do not last very long
- Because these events happen suddenly and are brief, the best treatment is stress management and knowledge about the cause of such events. Individual may be embarrassed and not want to discuss what happened

Conclusion

- For our students, the world is a stressful, unstable place
- Boys' schools provide a stable, understandable place where they feel that they belong
- Social support from inside and outside helps our students develop the prosocial skills they will need to succeed in the larger world
- Giving students skills in stress management, such as purposeful relaxation techniques, exercise, and support will help
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