

on your mind

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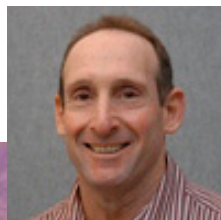
WORKING TOWARD EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

With the theme “Working Toward Emotional Well-Being,” this edition of On Your Mind takes a different slant than previous editions. Over time, mental health counseling has evolved from a perspective of solely treating illness to one that also promotes well-being and happiness. More and more people are seeking counseling to work toward becoming healthier and happier individuals rather than because they are suffering from a severe case of depression or anxiety. The clinical staff of Child & Family Psychological Services has welcomed this evolution over the years and values opportunities to help those seeking our services find more meaning and joy in their lives.

One example is a former patient of mine who had struggled with relationship and low self-esteem problems for many years. He had reached the inaccurate conclusion that he could not be loved and accepted for who he was. Further, he wouldn't try to talk about these feelings and beliefs with friends and family since he assumed he wouldn't be understood. Through the counseling process, which included both individual therapy and group therapy, he was able to truly see that these long-standing assumptions he had made about himself were unfounded. The reality was that he was a good communicator and that he could be accepted, valued and loved for the person he was, imperfections and all. Counseling helped him learn to focus on the good in himself as opposed to dwelling on his flaws. This is just one example of many where a person's overall well-being has been enhanced through counseling.

On the following pages we've focused on the process of working toward well-being as it pertains to different stages of life, as well as how we can promote wellness in our relationships. I sincerely hope that you find some helpful and practical suggestions in these articles that will allow you and/or your loved ones to enhance your lives. I welcome your feedback on this issue via our website at childandfamilypsych.com. Thank you for taking the time to read On Your Mind.

Larry Beer, Ed.D.
CFPS President



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FOSTERING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN TEENS

by **PATTI CRISWELL**

Licensed Master's Social Worker



Raising an emotionally healthy teen is no easy task these days. Our culture presents emotional challenges

for teens that many parents feel are impossible to prevent or protect against. Often parents feel powerless because so much of what their teen goes through is out of their control. Believe me, if there were a place to escape these challenges, I'd move there! The fact is that any family, any teen, is one bad incident away from a crisis. Not a very reassuring thought. However, there are things parents can do to increase their teenager's chances of navigating rough waters and fostering emotional well-being.

First, we can help our teens by fostering resilience. Many well-meaning parents overprotect their children, keeping them sheltered from challenging situations, but it's these situations that help children grow. Take the example of a child who falls and skins a knee. We can express sympathy, dress the wound and comfort the child, or we can encourage resilience by pointing out her strengths, expressing faith in her and admiring her recovery. Equally nurturing, one approach fosters resilience, the other doesn't. Now fast forward to teenhood. Teenagers who have had a lifetime of being cheered on,

their strengths noticed and their courage admired are much better able to handle setbacks and painful experiences.

A sense of acceptance in the home and family is also central to emotional well-being. Knowing you're "one of us" gives young people a sense of belonging. The idea "you're loved because you are, period" is a great mantra. The world can be cold and cruel and we all need to feel like someone's got our back, no matter what. Sibling rivalry can sabotage this, and it's time well spent to work on creating boundaries and promoting healing after fights occur.

We can also foster a sense of safety in the home by coaching our kids through the mistakes they make (and have to make right). By avoiding shaming our children, we foster that crucial sense of self-acceptance and self-worth. I have been in practice nearly a quarter century and if a universal truth exists, it's that young people want to be close to their parents. It's our job as parents to create a home where they can be close and at the same time grow into individuals in their own right. We have to check ourselves on being too critical or too controlling. Both are easy traps to fall into, especially when our own needs are not being met. The

bottom line is that when we and our partners and our children walk in the door at the end of a long day, it needs to feel different — it needs to feel like we're home.

Creating a sense of emotional safety in the home is easier said than done in our busy world. We've all seen the family in a restaurant where everyone is focused on their

cell phones, barely interacting. The sad truth is that many parents spend more time connected to their phones than their kids. Part of staying close is connecting to our teens in very real ways. We connect by managing the role of electronics in the home and by talking with our teens rather than at them. We connect by really getting to know them, by finding out how they

feel and think about things versus focusing only on accomplishments or compliance. We connect through touch and hugs (when the timing is right) and sometimes by biting our tongues. It is important to hear them out, and accept them as thinking



people with their own opinions, trusting that life will teach them a lot. If they don't think we will listen, they are likely to give up trying to talk to us. A little restraint and patience can go a long way in fostering a close connection to your teen.

Last, it's natural for teens to want to spend time with their friends, and it's important to let them grow and form relationships outside the family, but at the same time we can foster emotional well-being by spending time with our teens. Just being present with them, in the same room at the same time, has value. Like any relationship, if you don't spend time together, you will lose the closeness and connection that teens so desperately need but rarely ask for.

We can't prevent situations that challenge our teens, but if we foster resilience by having Faith in them and offer Acceptance, Connection and Time, we will surely be giving them an advantage, and that's a FACT.



HABITS OF HEALTHY COUPLES

by **JESSICA HANSEN**

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist
Licensed Professional Counselor



Intimate partner relationships can give us a sense of safety and comfort or be a source of anxiety and unhappiness.

Individuals who feel satisfied in their partnership tend to be healthier, get sick less often and may actually live longer. So what does it take to have a healthy, long-term relationship?

Healthy couples make their relationship a priority. This can be difficult when kids, jobs and other responsibilities also require the couple's time. Healthy couples are able to find a balance and know when to say "no." The message to their partner is always apparent: "I value you, and I value our commitment." These couples never stop dating one another. They do thoughtful things for each other and show through their actions and words that their partner is important to them.

Healthy couples have a solid friendship. They enjoy spending time with one another, are fond of and admire their partner and have shared interests. They also have Positive Sentiment Override, a term from John Gottman, a researcher and therapist who has spent years studying couples. Positive Sentiment Override means that both partners tend to think positively of their relation-

ship. They give their partner the benefit of the doubt and trust one another. I once worked with a couple who worked on their "self-talk" whenever they were angry or hurt by their partner. They focused on changing their thoughts from "He always does this" or "She doesn't care about . . ." to "Maybe she had a hard day" or "I know he cares; I'll talk to him tonight after the kids go to bed." For this couple, changing their self-talk from negative to positive led to calmer emotions and reduced stress and set the stage for more productive conversation in the future.

Healthy couples are very good at communication and conflict resolution. It's not important how often couples fight, but how they fight. Healthy couples are great at taking responsibility for their part in a conflict and use "I" statements. They are open to hearing the other person's thoughts and feelings, listen attentively, offer empathy, validate the other's perspective and show interest and respect. They remove criticism and judgment of the other's character. They focus on the behavior/actions and express themselves using non-accusatory language, such as, "When you came home late and didn't call, I felt disrespected."



Healthy couples check in with one another frequently. They often talk about their relationship — what is going well and what areas need growth. Healthy couples know to take a time-out from a conflict if it feels unsafe or unproductive.

Healthy couples set healthy emotional boundaries. This means that both partners have a secure sense of who they are and are aware of their feelings. They practice good self-care by taking time to identify their own thoughts, feelings and needs. They take responsibility for themselves but not for their partner's emotions. They express their thoughts, feelings and needs in an assertive and respectful way while also showing empathy and validation for their partner's thoughts, feelings and needs. These partners are connected but always remain two separate individuals. They are able to identify the boundary where one person stops and the other starts.

Having a healthy relationship is a goal I think many of us share. It can be challenging to sort through the complexities of our feelings and how they intertwine with our partner's. Many individuals and couples find that seeing a therapist can help them sort through these complexities. Finding a professional therapist who can create a safe and productive environment for growth can be very helpful in this process. Remember, you and your partner are worth it . . . and you just may live longer.

INFANTS: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU GET, IT'S WHAT YOU GIVE THAT MATTERS

by **NICHOLE HOLLIDAY**

Limited Licensed Marriage & Family

Therapist

Licensed Professional Counselor

A happy couple expecting their first child has just returned home with bags bursting with the newest “best for your baby’s well-being” items. They unpack the loot in the nursery that they painted the perfect shade and discuss how they are certain they have checked every item off the “must have” lists the parenting magazines and blogs have raved about. They laugh together as they look around at how cluttered the room has become and discuss how their baby is already spoiled. They boast that they certainly must be in the running for parents of the year!

It is true that these two people are going to be wonderful parents and will have an immediate attachment to their daughter once she arrives, but it is not because of the research that went into each item they purchased. These parents have fostered wellness for their infant in so many other

ways – many of which they may not even be aware.

They will be connected to their daughter because when telling each other about their day they took time to talk to that round belly, too. When their daughter moved they placed their hands on her and spoke gently to her, letting her know they were excited for her movement. When a pan was dropped while preparing dinner and the mother felt her baby jump, she spoke to her in a consoling tone to calm her. This baby heard her parents laugh and surround themselves with things and people that are healthy for

During the first three years of life, an infant forms attachments that will set the tone for every relationship for the rest of her life.

them and for her. This baby will enter the world knowing that her environment is safe. She will start her life with a foundation of wellness and security.

During her first three years of life, this infant will form attachments that will set the tone for every relationship for the rest of her life. There are many things parents can do to encourage healthy attachment and emotional security.

Being physically present and emotionally attuned are two of the most important gifts a caregiver can give an infant.

Infants thrive in peaceful, positive environments where caregivers make eye contact,



smile and talk to them. Parents should express warmth through appropriate touch and play that is sensitive and responsive without being intrusive or over-stimulating. Emotionally attuned parents are more likely to accurately read their infant’s cues and meet their baby’s needs. In turn, their babies will learn that they can trust and rely on their parents while they explore their exciting new world.

A stable environment that includes a stable and supportive relationship between the parents and that is predictable and consistent enhances an infant’s opportunity for wellness.

There are many healthy ways to parent children but no matter what approach is chosen one thing is certain: promoting infant wellness begins from the moment parents learn a baby is on the way. Most importantly, even though shopping for baby items and showering a newborn with gifts may be one of the most enjoyable things on earth to do, there are so many ways to encourage infant wellness that don’t cost a thing. It’s not what you get, it’s what you give.



KEEPING A HEALTHY PERSPECTIVE ON AGING

by **PAMELA MAIRS-PELLERITO**
Limited Licensed Psychologist



Following is an abridged version of an article written by my mother, Jackie Sheldrick, and published in the April 2014 edition of the

Senior Times of South Central Michigan. The article gives her perspective on aging and how a person can age well. I particularly like her assertion that even though we have to cope with a great deal of loss as we age, it is still possible to keep a healthy perspective on aging. Her strategies, as you will see, include keeping a sense of humor and finding a silver lining in what could otherwise be a challenging situation. Her positive perspective is inspirational to me, and I hope you find it to be so, too.

Don't we all go through our early years thinking infrequently of aging, particularly our own, and thinking it is so far away that for all practical purposes it won't happen to us? And we all know about, and maybe fear, the negatives of aging: among them wrinkles, stiffness, poor eyesight, poor hearing, illness, loss (oh so very much loss), less mobility and horror of horrors, loss of memory. But as the years pass, somewhere along the way we realize we are aging into the black phase of life. How, then, do we handle that?

I and many of my friends now find ourselves either in or nearing this stage (which of course varies according to one's perspective) and must find a way to deal with it. The first surprise for me is how much humor there is in being "old." I never cease to find this stage of life funny! Maybe as we age many of us take ourselves less seriously and feel more comfortable with our imperfections. An example in my own life was when I

stepped down from a golf cart and realized to my horror that one foot was at an odd angle and I was falling flat on my face! Not being injured, the whole thing struck me as ridiculous. The incident turned out well but when security guards were concerned about injuries (and no doubt lawsuits) and wouldn't stop asking if I was OK, my friend said, "How much would she get if she wasn't OK?" and they backed off. Beware of old folks' humor.

Looking in the mirror reminds me of the saying that there is no such thing as reality, only perception. I choose to see how I feel rather than how I actually may look. The wrinkles, of course, the numerous little hairs that stubbornly grow faster and coarser and longer, droopy or puffy eyes, sagging chin and far-from-perfect skin are all there, but in the grand scheme of things, none of these seem to be very important. If I feel well and am reasonably happy and content, so what? I don't want the same things I wanted when young.

In my working days, I thought having time to smell the roses was a rather pathetic state to be in and, in fact, did have a hard time when I retired getting used to the "my" time I now had to fill. Keeping busy wasn't hard but feeling I wasn't contributing to society in some meaningful way was difficult. My husband helped a lot by saying my job now was to enjoy myself! What a novel idea, as well as a challenge. Time to choose what to do and when and how is a hard concept when one is used to being somewhat programmed. The odd thing is that I still feel rushed many times, though

it is often because I've been "admiring the daisies" and not getting ready for whatever I have chosen to do.

My friends and I make a point of having fun. Whatever "floats our boat" we try to do — going to plays, the symphony, the movies, out to dinner, entertaining each other, or bigger things like traveling while we are still able.

"If I feel well and am reasonably happy and content, so what? I don't want the same things I wanted when young."

Friendship becomes more important in old age in some ways. I've noticed myself being drawn to connections with people from the past like I'm completing a circle. And the "elderly," possibly because we recognize we are all in this together, often tend to look out for each other, and when we do, it becomes very fulfilling. It is an awesome feeling to be able to share another's loneliness or fear or pain and by being there to ease them through it.

Dealing with loss is an especially difficult part of life and no one needs to be told. As we age, there is more and more accumulated loss in our lives. But each time we deal with it, no matter on what level, we can see some kind of sense in experiencing the loss. We

gain new perspective on life and learn that loss can make us stronger and more appreciative of who and what we have. And loss of loved ones is never a total loss, as they become part of who we are.

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ALL I REALLY NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT LIFETIME WELLNESS . . . I LEARNED IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

by **CHRISTINE WEISS**
Limited Licensed Psychologist

Ah, middle school . . . where the physical awkwardness of puberty and the underdeveloped frontal lobe collide, while the familiar landscape of childhood gives way to unknown territory.



This is a time that forces young teens to develop the skills that separate those who thrive from those who merely survive. As much as the growth hurts, we owe our mental wellness in adulthood to the development of social and emotional regulation skills early in life.

What are these skills?

Social skills are based on the development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills which allow us to connect with others authentically and appropriately. We must be able to specifically describe the emotion we are experiencing and appropriately communicate its intensity. We also must be aware of the non-verbal cues we perceive and demonstrate, and we must be able to regulate our verbal and physical impulsivity. We must stand up for our own needs and preferences but also find appropriate ways to honor the same for others.

Emotional regulation allows us to make choices in the midst of our emotions and supports our ability to “bounce back” from a time of difficulty. As humans, we tend to apply meaning to every-

thing around us, and this affects how we react on both an emotional and behavioral level. If we misperceive a communication from others, it can cause us to over-react, and others might feel put off by our reaction. These misperceptions are called cognitive distortions. Our own cognitive distortions include all-or-nothing thinking, a tendency to personalize others’ behaviors and a tendency to overfocus on negative as opposed to positive realities. Recognizing and regulating these patterns allows us to find a more balanced perspective, which leads to healthier emotional responses and better interactions with others.

How do young teens benefit from having these skills?

Young teens who develop strong social and emotional skills are able to distinguish between the values, habits and expectations of others and those they hold themselves. These teens are more assertive and foster self-respect, guarding the boundaries that support physical and emotional safety. Well-developed communication skills allow a teen to connect with others, which reduces internalized behaviors such as self-mutilation (cutting) or disordered eating (under- and overeating). Teens with

well-developed social and emotional skills are flexible, resilient and able to balance their own personal needs with the needs of others. This allows them to negotiate trusted peer, parent and mentor relationships. Having positive, trusting relationships will help the teen feel connected and focus on other activities such as academics, athletics and/or the arts. These activities can promote a greater sense of self-esteem.

How do we use these skills beyond middle school?

When we intentionally nurture social and emotional development through those early years, we are better prepared for success and greater wellness throughout our lifespans:

- *Relational/social wellness* is based on mutually trusting relationships and satisfaction in partnerships, both of which require assertive and individualized communication skills learned in early teen years and practiced continually thereafter.
- *Financial wellness* within a personal or business partnership also requires clear and assertive communication skills and a combination of firm boundaries and flexibility. Financial wellness demands a balance between short-term and long-term vision, using impulse control based on emotional regulation.
- *Physical wellness* is based on self-care, which is based on self-respect. Our regulation of emotional impulsivity impacts emotional eating, which can affect obesity, heart disease, diabetes and cancer. A healthy body image requires that we intentionally nurture our physical body, appreciate our inherent value and

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AGING, ATTITUDES AND LONGEVITY

Research studies show that the key to aging well and living longer is attitude.

A study conducted by Harvard University psychologist Ellen Langer found that expectation, not biology, leads many elderly people to set physical limits on themselves. They assume they'll fall apart, so they let it happen.

"What we want to do is not get older people to think of themselves as young, but to change their mindsets about what it means to be older," Langer said. And being older doesn't have to equal decay.

A Yale University study showed that men and women over age 50 with more positive self-perceptions of aging lived 7.6 years longer than those with negative perceptions. Pessimism about aging can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Other studies have found that feeling younger than you really are is linked to better health, life satisfaction and cognitive abilities.



AGING (from page 5)

In many cases we have family in our lives, whether or not they are frequently in touch. It's so special to know we had a role, regardless of how well we played the part, in creating and/or raising our children and seeing them living their lives. If grandchildren exist, we love them, too, in a special way, just as each of our children are loved for the individuals they are.

Until my mother became older, more frail and more dependent, I would never have understood how much more precious an old person can be to us. It gives me comfort to think that maybe I, too, might have such love given to me.

In closing, I feel the need to mention that some of us, myself for one, enjoy life more because it is close to being over. It won't be long before we escape the physi-

cal and emotional pain of life, so why not live it up while we are still here?

To anyone who may fear old age and its prospects, I say, "Soldier on . . . You can do this!"



Emotional well-being

involves identifying and building upon the best things about you. It means working with your strengths and focusing on positive emotions.

MIDDLE SCHOOL (from page 6)

assertively pursue health for the sake of wellness rather than vanity.

- *Mental wellness* depends on balanced cognitive reasoning, which promotes emotional regulation and lowers the risk of depression, anxiety and addictive behaviors. A strong sense of self-respect and self-worth along with emotional regulation allows adults to develop successful relationships with oneself and with others and to maintain a positive attitude about their life.

Be well

While it is never too late to nurture the skills that open the door to lifetime wellness, it is important to recognize the opportunity we have to guide young teens through a very tough set of years and set them up for future success. Many young people operate with a whatever-it-takes-to-make-it-through-the-day mentality, but those who develop true social and emotional regulation skills early on will do more than survive the daily trials they face among their peers. They will be prepared to advocate for themselves and for others and to build an adult life full of meaning, resiliency, connection, security, stability and freedom. They will do well and be well.

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KALAMAZOO OFFICE 5340 Holiday Terrace, Kalamazoo, MI 49009
Phone: (269)372-4140 Fax: (269)372-0390

PORTAGE OFFICE 1662 E. Centre Avenue, Portage, MI 49002
Phone: (269)321-8564 Fax: (269)321-8641

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