Combating the Mental Health Crisis Facing Our Children

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Thousands of organizations across our nation will use their platforms to spread the message that, just like physical health, every one of us can take action to improve our mental health. But, our Mental Health Advisory Team offers a character-focused solution. Recent studies are alarming. Almost one-third of teen girls in the United States (30%) have seriously considered suicide. The research also reveals that boys are experiencing significant increases in loneliness and hopelessness. Our nation's young people are experiencing record levels of anxiety and depression.

Mental health researchers have identified social media as the chief cause of the crisis we're in. Over the past decade, we have learned that frequent use of social media triggers "social comparison" emotions that are particularly harmful to the mental health of our pre-teens. We also know that hyperbolic, doomsday narratives — ranging from the death of democracy to unstoppable climate change – are producing a generation of pessimistic teens who believe they have no agency.

Solutions abound to address this crisis, from universal mental health screenings to expanding virtual care. Yet none of these options focus on the power and efficacy of a character-focused approach. So, whether you are a parent, educator, or coach, here are four proven ways to equip the young people in your life with a range of character strengths they can use as a bulwark during the inevitable storms of life:

Reinforce the importance of purpose and hope

Research has demonstrated the significant benefits that emerge when teens have a purpose, which is often defined as the "stable intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self." When kids are self-motivated, they are in control of their own future. Rather

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than being rudderless and lacking agency, young people with purpose are fueled by the power of hope. Encourage the teens in your life to explain in their own words what gives them purpose and hope.

Ensure that every young person knows their character strengths

Too often, families and schools focus on what kids are not good at. Yet we know from the research that we "soar with our strengths." By middle school, young people should know their "signature strengths" and how emphasizing these positive parts of their personality can boost their confidence and reduce their stress. The nonprofit VIA Institute on Character developed a free survey that teens can take online.

Emphasize the practice of gratitude

We know that gratitude doesn't just feel good, gratitude is good for you. Research has shown daily gratitude affirmations improve health and lower stress and anxiety. Young people should be encouraged to find a gratitude practice that helps them notice and appreciate the good things in their lives.

Teach and model the skills of positive self-talk

Too often, young people get trapped in catastrophic thinking, that gnawing inner voice that keeps repeating, "No one likes me" or "I'm a failure." That's why it's critical for every teen to find or create for themselves a positive expression that refutes their negative self-talk. Research has shown the benefits of young people repeating to themselves a positive word or expression that has personal meaning to them. When the time is right, talk to the young people in your life about the power of this simple, yet powerful coping skill.

Today, let's come together and combat this epidemic of depression and suicidal ideation. Let's help Americans of all ages feel more connected, hopeful, and purposeful. Young people can be remarkably resilient when they have the language, tools, and skills to use and leverage their own character strengths.

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