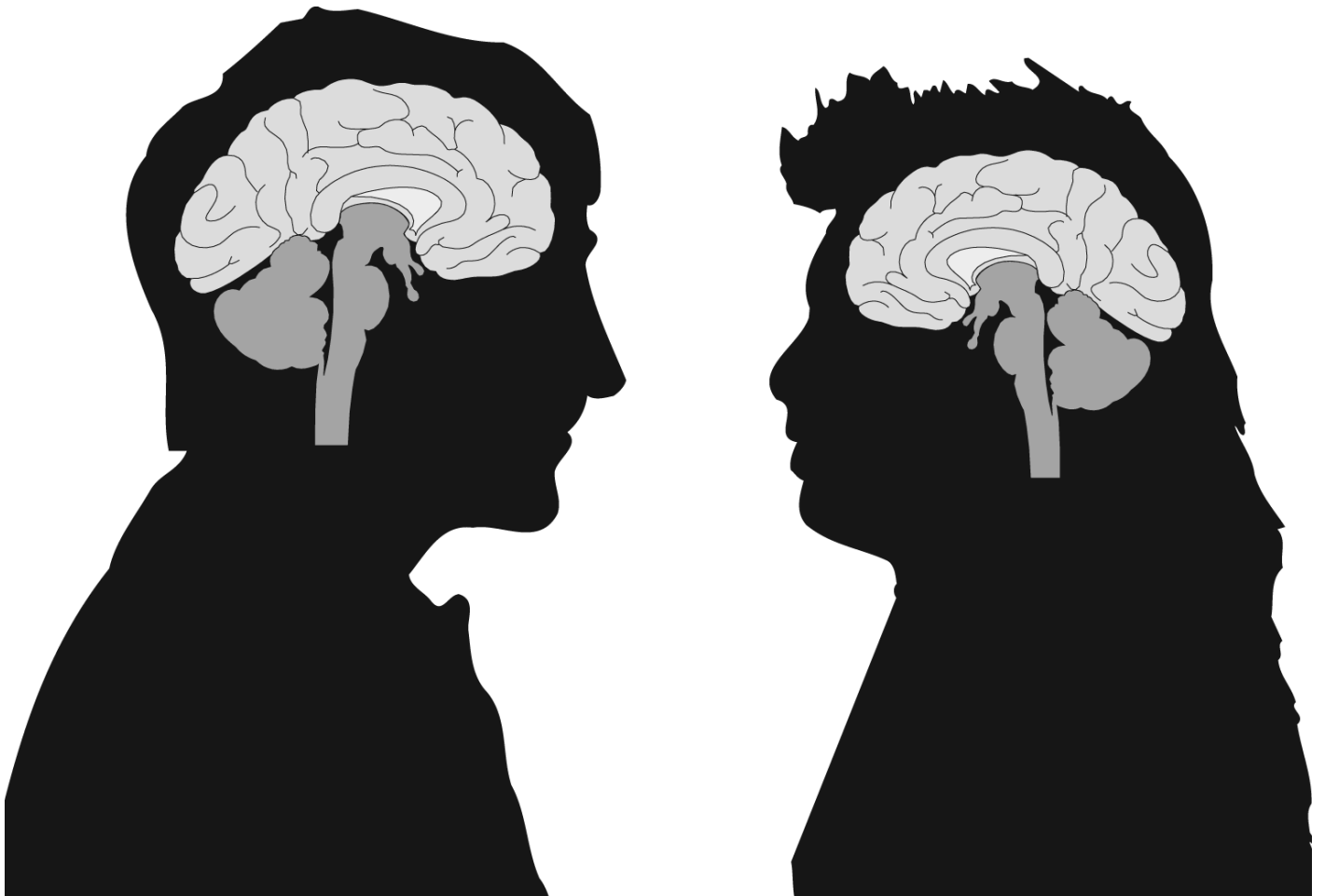


States of Mind

The Publication of the Mental Health Association in Tompkins County

WINTER 2012 - 2013

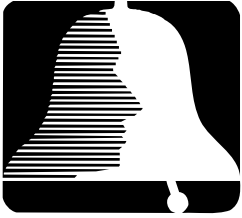


The Many Faces of Adolescents:

Mental Health and the Teenage Brain

To understand and improve the mental health of our community

a d v o c a c y • i n f o r m a t i o n • e d u c a t i o n



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The Mental Health Association in Tompkins County is composed of people working together to improve the mental health of our community. The goal of this publication is to inform the community about ideas, different viewpoints, developments and activities in the field of mental health; its contents are not intended to provide advice about individual problems. Such advice should be offered only by a person familiar with the detailed circumstances in which the problem arises. Unless otherwise noted, opinions expressed in *States of Mind* are the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of the Board of Directors, staff or membership. Submissions and announcements are welcome. Please call (607) 273-9250 if you wish to submit an article, poem, story or drawing, or send it to:

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Thanks to guest artist Michael Wedge for allowing us to use his paintings, “Sunup,” and “Spotted,” as illustrations.

Guest Editorial from : “Understanding and Preventing Bullying.”

by Horacio Sanchez,

President and CEO, Resiliency, Inc.

Ed. note: There seem to be increasing numbers of tragic deaths of teens and young adults due to bullying (both face-to-face and through the internet); the following is reprinted in the hope that it may be useful to adults and teen peers and assist them in devising strategies to meet the challenge presented by the pathological actions of those who bully.

Exposure to violence and abuse has long been linked to the occurrence of behaviors such as aggression and bullying. What has not been explored until recently is the impact that this exposure has on brain development. By understanding what happens in the brain and why, educators can take steps to prevent bullying and to help the bully learn more socially acceptable behavior.

The amygdala, an important part of the limbic system in the brain, is in charge of personal behavioral responses. Any stimulus encountered by an individual is filtered through the amygdala in order for it to assess if the stimulus is a threat. When the amygdala perceives danger, it will configure a chemical response designed to respond to the situation and release the necessary chemicals into the blood stream. By releasing the response through the circulatory system, the amygdala seizes control of the body in order to ensure immediate response. The amygdala reduces input from the cortex, which is in charge of reasoning and planning, in direct proportion to the level of the perceived danger.

The types of personal behavioral responses produced are directly correlated to the past emotional experiences to which an individual has been exposed. The chemical configurations designed by the amygdala to deal with these responses are then stored for faster response if the individual encounters a similar threat in the future. In cases of repetitive trauma, the response of the amygdala will become quicker each time. Repetitive trauma can result in a hypersensitive limbic system. A hypersensitive limbic system is prone to misperceive social cues, triggering extreme behaviors associated with past traumas.

The profile of a bully often includes exposure to violence and systematic physical abuse. The bully's aggression toward others is triggered whenever he or she experiences stress, defined as any stimulus that causes dramatic chemical shifts in the brain. The arousal level of the amygdala is lowered in situations in which there exists a perception of being wanted, safe, and successful. When experiencing these types of emotions, the amygdala perceives stimuli accurately and continues to receive input from the cortex. Since many bullies suffer from poor self-esteem and poor social skills, their level of anxiety often elevates when they are in group settings, such as school. If a pattern of school failure is established, school itself will produce anxiety and lead to aggressive behaviors.

Bullying usually occurs in the least structured parts of the school day. The increased stimuli experienced during arrival at school, change of classes, recess, lunch, and dismissal become consistent times for these threatening behaviors. To break the cycle of bullying, schools need to establish predictable routines and rituals that aid in lowering the bully's level of anxiety. In addition, schools that help students feel successful and wanted will naturally lower the arousal level of these students' amygdalas, thereby reducing impulsivity. Science supports the fact that interventions can lead to improved social behaviors in the school setting if they are designed to mimic the brain's process in developing a reinforced practice.

MY STONE IS SARDONYX

mother, not
my mother
only (?)
woman who bore me

I search for you
through half-hidden stories,
his blank pauses,
her lowered lids

the night I began,
near Hallow's Eve,
you were seventeen—did you
dress as a Gypsy that year?

I see you holding
your boyfriend's hand,
his eyes brown and steady
as mine in the mirror

will the smell of leaves
stay with you forever?
Pumpkins grinning
as his hands held your hips?

twenty years now
I have lived with others,
your unknown name
like a ghost at heart's edge

I call you She-
Who-Once-Touched-the-Moon
and I wake aching
in October light

--Katharyn Howd Machan

BOP POEM: WHISKEY, 1969

my mother taught me to drink
alone, her bottles my bottles,
dark-time words sad-slurry stones,
downstairs then upstairs
a queen-of-hearts' moan,
a white blossom blown

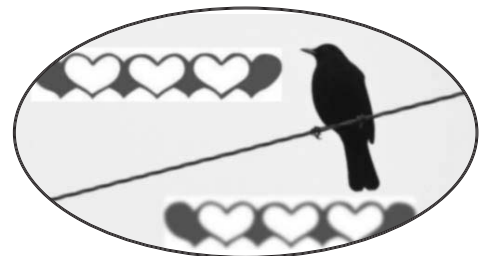
bird on a wire
...in a midnight choir

years with her eyes turning paler
than gray, a garden gone wrong,
me needing more, getting less
each day
of what every Alice
should not have to say
a good queen should give:
April's showers to May
just weren't her way

bird on a wire
...in a midnight choir

I learned how to pour, how to gulp
straight down, love a thorned
stem,
off with my head in my secret
town,
just like my mother,
her cracked golden crown,
her rose-splattered gown

bird on a wire
...in a midnight choir



THE BUS

by Kathryn Russell

I was thirteen the first time it happened. I was walking down the long driveway toward home. I had just gotten off the bus. It roared on up the dirt road, a huge behemoth spewing diesel fuel and taunts.

I hated the bus, hated the long ride every morning and especially every afternoon. In the morning, they were still rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, not yet awake enough to focus their attention on me. But in the afternoon, it was different. I always hoped that sitting in the front, just behind the driver, would keep me safe somehow.

But the driver was a woman who had the rare ability to shut out what was going on behind her in the bus while she focused all her attention on the road ahead.

One morning, though, she did pay some of her attention to a few of the older teenage boys who saw a raccoon treed by two hounds. Stop, they said, stop, excited by the barking and the terror and the blood lust. She stopped the bus. We were out on a country road, no houses in sight, only trees and brush and fields. Let us out, c'mon, open the door, they said. And she did. She let them out of the bus. And they rushed over to the dogs and the raccoon and dragged the terrified animal out of the tree and beat it to death.

I don't remember what happened after that. I have no memory at all, but I know that I must have gone on to school, riding on that bus with the rest of the children, and then moving through the day because that afternoon, after those big yellow doors slid shut and I started walking down the driveway, that's when it happened the first time. At first it was just a small flicker, a movement in front of my eyes. It caught my attention. I stopped and stood, wondering. It grew – a space in the air, shimmering as if it were water. Then I could no longer see beyond it or through it. It became solid. I could see its boundaries and contours and I realized it was a person, but more than a person. Neither male nor female as far as I could tell. Glowing with a visible aura surrounding it, and within it. It moved toward me and enveloped me like a soft, warm cloak and we were together in that space. I felt loved. I felt safe. I felt only peace. There was no time, only that time. There was no memory of that morning's events, just that eternal, blessed moment.

The next thing I remember is waking to the sound of my mother coming in the back door, home from work. I was lying on the sofa.

How was your day, honey, she called from the kitchen.

Fine, I said.

I'm fine, I said, quieter this time, to myself.

The Adolescent Brain

by Sarah Moore

Introduction

The ‘adolescent’ developmental milestone elicits a number of stereotypes. From the rebellious and impulsive teenage boy to the insecure and sensitive post-pubertal girl, the adolescent years trigger thoughts of irrepressible behavior and emotional vulnerability. Although these examples trivialize complex developmental patterns, they also echo two critical themes in adolescent research. That is,

1) adolescence is a period of heightened risk behavior and 2) it is also the peak developmental period for the onset of psychological disturbance. But there is a third theme that is at odds with the idea of emotionally disturbed and uncontrollable youth. This line of literature highlights resilience, or the ability of teens to adapt and thrive in their increasingly social worlds. Neuroscience unites these themes by shedding light on the impact of the peculiarities of the adolescent brain on behavior.

The first overarching aspect of the developing adolescent brain is that all of the structures are present or ‘complete’. In fact, there are extra connections within these regions that are in the process of ‘neural pruning’, or the removal of redundant connections. Pruning serves to make the transmission of neural messages and the

functioning of higher order networks more efficient. Importantly, what is happening from the ages of 11 and 22, is that the long connections between brain regions, the connections that create neural networks responsible for complex thought and behavior, are still growing. The growth and pruning during adolescence establishes higher-order networks that we use for planning and regulating what we do.

The second key innovation is that of the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC). This region is undergoing rapid development, which is not surprising as it is the most interconnected area of the brain (i.e. it shares long connections with many regions and its own sub regions are highly interconnected with one another). In other words, the sub sections of the PFC constantly talk with their PFC neighbors as well as the overall brain ‘community’. The teenage brain is then truly “social!”

The Prefrontal Cortex

Often, the PFC is referred to as the ‘C.E.O’ of the brain, as it is involved in executive functioning. These executive functions include planning, decision-making, and the direction of working memory, or the ongoing thought processes that allow us to complete tasks and plan for the future. Less acknowledged, is that the PFC is capable of promoting such complex

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human thought because of its connections with other members of the brain community. Some of these are 'higher order' regions that like the PFC, function in ways unique to humans. For example, the PFC talks to regions that hold our memories, connecting important aspects of our day-to-day lives into complex networks

holding our past and present experiences. Another higher order region allows us to live in another person's shoes and experience his or her feelings. PFC connections with these regions responsible for empathy allow us to consciously contemplate and predict the behavior

of others. The PFC also connects to 'limbic' or emotional regions, diverse areas of the brain that direct our survival. We are driven by these circuitries to not only eat and drink and reproduce, but also to form social bonds that were key in our evolutionary history of overcoming hardships through cooperation in groups.

Emotional brain regions initiate both pleasant emotional states of desire, and negative feelings when we feel ashamed or rejected, because rejection from the social group could have meant death in our early history.

Our brains have adapted in such a way to ensure we are aware of the importance of social acceptance, and 'higher order' social networks of the PFC allow us to behave effectively in social situations. Beyond pursuing approval, the PFC guides our attempts to

impress and comfort others, and at having deeply meaningful exchanges with fellow humans about what we experience.

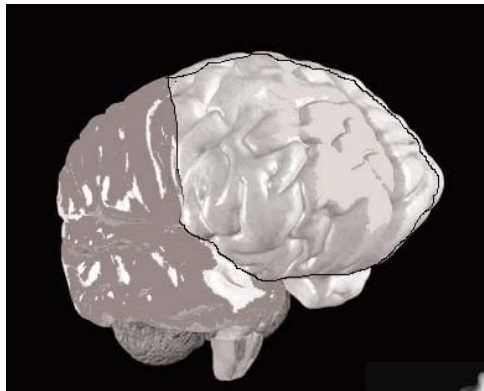
Adolescent Brains

In adolescence, there are drastic changes in how the PFC talks to the rest of the brain through long, quickly transmitting connections referred

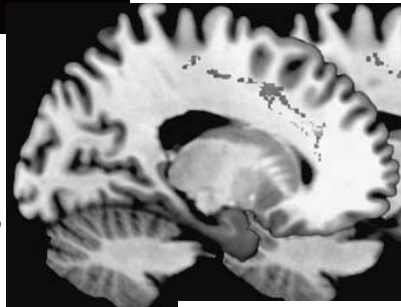
to as: 'white matter.'

These various long connections bridging the PFC to the structures outlined above form neural networks responsible for higher level processing such as self-perception, working memory and goal-directed behavior. The smart circuits finish their development last as they are continuously refined and polished across adolescence. Importantly, these circuits are crucial to making rational decisions and regulating emotional drives. This lag in the development of the PFC networks is critical to

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The PFC (left, light gray region) accounts for almost 1/3 of the brain's total volume.



White matter connections (right) extend to all regions of the brain, allowing separate structures to communicate.

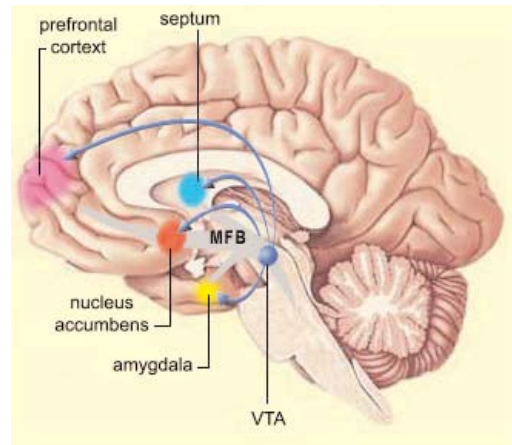
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the unique way that adolescents process their experiences and navigate their environment.

First, there is a network connecting the PFC to regions of the brain devoted to motivated, reward seeking behavior. A substance in the brain called Dopamine (DA) largely achieves the chemical signaling in this network. The DA chemical signaler shows excessive levels and a functioning high during adolescence, leading to higher activation of this region. In turn, adolescents demonstrate elevated exploration and reward-seeking behavior.

In addition, the PFC's connections with this region are still forming, and it is not at its full level of effectiveness in inhibiting the emotionally-driven behavior facilitated by high levels of Dopamine. These 'rewards' that an adolescent is after could be anything from drugs and alcohol to social acceptance. In the pursuance of positive feelings driven by this circuitry, teens may drink, do drugs, or have unprotected sex. They may also do a number of these things for a reason beyond the physical pleasure or 'high', but due to the positive and exciting feelings of acceptance by and belonging to a group or partner.

Interestingly, imaging technology allows scientists to view the kinds of behavioral effects these neural circuitries can have. When adolescents view emotional images (such as the disapproving or angry face of a peer), those individuals with higher synchronized activity, or conductivity in the circuits between the prefrontal cortex and the reward areas, score



MFB = Medial Forebrain Bundle (A group of fibers that carry DA)

as more resistant to peer pressure. These resistant adolescents' PFCs are more strongly connected to emotional areas (similar to an adult's brain), enabling them to regulate their behavior when faced with the pressure of social acceptance. They can inhibit the emotional drive to be accepted by peers with their PFC, and consider other rational sources of information to decide whether or not to engage in a behavior.

Another important biological system impacted by a lack of efficient connections between the PFC and emotional regions is the stress response system. When the PFC cannot inhibit emotional responses, and particularly negative emotional responses to threats (such as peer rejection), a cascade of hormones is released to initiate the arousing negative affect that we experience as stress.

"Social buffering" studies address how the presence of supporting and comforting others can decrease the intensity of the stress response, and thus the degree of negative affect. Research supports that during the adolescent period, social-buffering effects are amplified, such that teens more readily absorb

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the positive effects of social support in the face of stress.

Social Experiences in Adolescence

A final feature unique to the brains of adolescents is that they are more sensitive to social experiences. Higher levels of another chemical signaler, oxytocin, may in part lead to the tendency of adolescents to be highly sociable and sensitive to acceptance and rejection from peers, more so than children or adults. Adolescents are more attuned to how others respond to them, picking up on subtleties of social exchanges and attributing meaning to them. Adolescent girls mull over the details of exchanges with boys, trying to determine who has a crush on whom, and other teens' self-esteem is completely decimated by being picked last in gym class.

Increased sensitivity to the social world partly explains why social support can have an elevated beneficial effect for teens experiencing stress. However, attunement to social exchanges can also lead to peer-pleasing behavior. On top of high perceived social rewards from elevated Dopamine and lower ability to inhibit social reward seeking, adolescents are also just more attuned to these situations. This means that reward-seeking behavioral responses will be set off more frequently and by more situations. Adolescents interpret more social exchanges as either opportunities to show cohesiveness with the group, or as threatening to their self-worth as a desirable person that fits in with others. When more situations are interpreted in this fashion,

there is a higher likelihood of behavior to ensure social acceptance, which could mean activities risky to adolescent health.

Adolescent brain development provides some insight into why adolescents take more risks, have increased odds of experiencing psychological distress, and rely heavily on acceptance and approval by peers. But arguably, uncovering the features of the adolescent brain has done more to reveal that this developmental period is ripe with opportunity, rather than vulnerability. A new line of research suggests that the refinement of the PFC circuitries, although less efficient in inhibiting emotionally driven impulses, allows for greater cognitive and social flexibility. The fact that these circuitries are still changing and adapting to environments give adolescents an advantage in navigating their complex social worlds, and in creatively pursuing new friendships and connections by quickly switching attention to novel social features of the environment.

Take Home Message

Adolescents immerse themselves in a rich social world, with social benefits extending beyond popularity, helping adolescents to cope with stressors. Supportive relationships offset their hyperactive emotional systems. Neuroscience has informed us that the adolescent brain is not merely immature, but that it is perfectly suited to soak in the benefits from those close to us in our environments, molding future adult capabilities in navigating social experience and relating to others.

THE DAY I TURNED SEVENTEEN

12 September 1969

I ran away to New York City.
Paul came with me, Paul,
the boy with maverick eyes
who understood my need to run
and why I couldn't tell my mother
except for a note when she got home
to whiskey, ice cubes, bed.

Paul and I, we caught the train,
an hour south past smooth homes
humming, tracks a sure steel
silver taking time to a sharp
new way of being, me on the run
to New York City. Lights? Sights?
Seventeen and from safe suburbs

we didn't know which way to turn,
Grand Central a fast blur of questions,
which avenue to explore? Half
an hour, maybe more, I dared
believe I was in New York City—
throbbing crowds, two salted pretzels, an album
by the Rolling Stones and one by Jimi
Hendrix—and then Paul, my sweet
friend Paul, insisting he buy
me roses, perfect tiny soft pink
roses gathered in a tight bouquet,
perfume for my grateful fingers
along cool sidewalks back to the train
for our return by 10 p.m.:

him smiling kindly as we parted,
my mother long gone turned to stone,
my brother in his silent mask,
me a poet already knowing
I'd need someday to write about
Paul when I turned seventeen,
his knowing eyes, those roses.

--Katharyn Howd Machan



"Sunup"
original artwork by
Michael Wedge
(michaelwedge.ugallery.com)

Blind Doubts. Vie for Excellence.

By Will Schoch

If I told you how I felt, you wouldn't believe me.
My past is my future. I do need relieving.
I concentrate and contemplate on thoughts that are foreign.
My heart is a cloud and the rain is surely pourin'.
My fingertips tremble, from all of the rage.
Every time I write, I need another page.
The times that I engage. I end up finding
That what I'm looking for, I search for blindly.
A bounty I will give, to one that understands,
The complexity within me. Devotion is my plan.
To all that I do, and ones that will see,
What I am becoming, and what I will be.
These words are not complex, my thoughts however are.
My heart is very close, but physically, I'm far.
Days without love, and direct affection,
Turn my heart to steal, but I still feel connections.
To the ones I love. My family and my friends.
My life is at a halt, with many loose ends.
Some tie easy, but others take a while.
At times accepting failure, forces me to smile.
I was in denial, but not anymore.
I know I will triumph, and in the end soar.

POEM: by Jemma Macera

Between Mother Nature

and Father D.O.T.

Most of the city's grandfather/mother trees
are gone.

I recently watched in heightened sorrow
as a neighbor came down
section by section,

the funeral dirge sung

by a saw and four workers.

Checking in with inner wisdom
it was that friend who protected me
from newly arrived college boys
who tried to exploit this twelve year old girl.

Over His Dead Body

Whitney Wolff

I felt alone, without a clue
That you had the feelings I did too.
As time went on, so did we
Becoming closer than imagined we'd be.
Things seemed smooth, all going well
Little did I know, a path straight for hell.
I was young, naive or stupid you could say,
I rarely asked questions as to why you couldn't pay.

You slowly became sick, abusive and mean
This is what happened when he tried to wean.
Fights were too common, our relationship got worse
Why continue using, it only led to curse.
The break-ups were to follow, not lasting very long
The love I had for you was entirely too strong.
I thought I could cure you, like a miracle or somethin'
But I realized my danger, that's when I started runnin'.

You can't blame me, cuz' I didn't start this
Hello and goodbye, sealed with a kiss.
Sure you did your thing, as well I did mine
Life goes on, so I thought things were fine.
I guess that's what happens when you think too much,
The last time we spoke, I wish we had touched.
For I didn't know that'd be the last time we'd speak,
If I only knew you had reached the lowest peak.
When I found out that your life was taken,
My only thought, I was not mistaken.
Why so harsh and f***ing brutal,
Didn't you see that your life was crucial?

cont'd >

>

I thank God every time I remember you,
Those moments I don't, are seldom and few.
But did you think of me before you committed,
It seemed rational at that moment, or did it?
So I still feel alone, something we always shared
I will continue on, and think of how you cared.
As I sit above your body, below me cold and deep
Our love and memories shared, I will always keep.
See you soon, in the sweet heavens above
Nothing will ever replace you Cody, with all my love.

<3

Don't Talk Like an American

Jemma Macera

I see myself at pre-kindergarten age, making squiggly marks on a paper: one squiggly for A, another for B. But they all looked alike. Mom, you didn't read or write English; Dad worked all the time; it never occurred to me to ask Mary or Jim.

Non parlare come un'Americana.

When I shared with you that I thought I might like to be a veterinarian when I grew up, you told me in Italian, "You don't want to do that. You will have to work with cows and horses and other big animals in all kinds of weather."

Non parlare come un'Americana.

I always signed my own report cards and wrote my own excuses when I was absent from school. You never saw my A's in Latin and French and Chemistry. I never told you I was keeping a diary like Eleanor Roosevelt did when she was young.

Non parlare come un'Americana.

When I told you, Mom, I was applying to college you said, "Your two choices in life are either the convent or marriage." My diary pages were blank for eleven years.

Non parlare come un'Americana.

After my divorce I told you, Mom, I was going to take a college course at Cornell. You said I can't do that and take care of my children properly. Next, I'll stop going to mass. How surprised I was when my professor told me how well I write.

Non parlare come un'Americana.

I didn't tell you, Mom, I was depressed and in psychotherapy. You would have laughed at me. Mom died in 1973.

An Interview with Jane Powers on the 'invisible' homeless youth of Tompkins County

The 2011 Independent Living Survey Project was conducted to assess the numbers of homeless youth in Tompkins County and to describe the circumstances which brought about their situations and the conditions they endure. Previously and intermittently homeless young people were recruited to serve as research assistants for the project by the Learning Web's Youth Outreach Program, which is a program dedicated to providing education and mentors to struggling youth. The research assistants identified and surveyed the population of homeless young people in Tompkins County, that are referred to as the 'invisible' homeless, because they do not readily seek out services or stay at shelters. The project surveyed 225 youth, which is estimated to be almost 1/3 of the adolescent and young adult homeless population. The following interview is with Jane Powers, the Project Director, to get her input on the research strategy, the major findings and what they will contribute to improving the lives of homeless young people in the community.

Q. In a nutshell, who are the homeless youth in Tompkins County? What are their backgrounds?

A. They come from all over the place. One of the big lessons learned is that they are just like any of our kids. I could tell you demographically what they look like, but, I think for me the most meaningful thing was when we asked them about their goals for the future, they were just so normative. They wanted to get jobs, they wanted to finish their education, they wanted a family, they wanted to buy a house. The young people did not voice outlandish goals, like I want to be in the NFL or be a rap singer, they were reasonable. Every day kinds of dreams and hopes, and it made me note, because I have kids this age, that they have the same kinds of dreams and ambitions as my kids. But they don't have the kind of safety nets and support systems and caring adults in their lives to help them achieve these dreams that everyone in our society should be able to have. Some of them migrate to Ithaca, some of them come from here, a lot of them come from really dysfunctional families, that was pretty universal. They don't leave home without a good reason, it's not for adventure or excitement. It is because they come out of a really hard, bad, family situation, some of them have had parents with chronic mental illness or chronic substance abuse problems, and some with family homelessness. Basically it's very dysfunctional families.

Q. In general, what kinds of environments and conditions do these youth face day to day?

A. Some of them face pretty difficult conditions, they go from house to house, couch surfing. 75-80% are in one place when you ask where they currently live, but then you ask, dig further, about the number of places they lived in the last year, 83% lived in multiple places.

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“...invisible homeless youth...” continued from page 14

The conditions of these places, even with section 8 housing, the conditions are just very substandard. It's a vicious cycle. They can only find affordable housing out in the country, the surrounding areas but all of the jobs are in Tompkins and there is no transportation to get in. It is not great.

Q. What brought about this project, and specifically, the involvement of homeless youth themselves to survey this 'invisible' population?

A. I do work in positive youth development and one of the fundamental tenets in positive youth development is the importance of youth participation, youth voice, youth involvement, youth engagement. Young people need to be at the table where decisions about their lives are made and we should look at them as resources, not as problems needing to be fixed. They are problem solvers and can help us tackle some of the biggest issues facing their peers, as well as the community.

We would not have been able to access the homeless population without the assistance of homeless youth themselves. For this research, unless we engaged homeless youth to help us we were going to miss out. Through their personal networks they were able to find and convince other homeless youth off the radar screen to participate in the study. This ended up being an incredibly useful strategy to reach this invisible, disconnected population.

Q. How were the youth involved in the research process?

A. What is really cool about this project is that the young people were involved at every stage. The homeless youth that were our research assistants. They were involved with creating the survey, helping us frame the questions, developing a protocol, going out and collecting the data, and helping us interpret the findings. They helped us present the findings to key stakeholders in the community. They have gone to the county board of legislators, the United Way, the Homeless Task Force, just to name a few. A couple weeks ago they came with me to Albany and gave a presentation to the Youth Development Team, which is made up of people from all the major state agencies and organizations across the state that are interested in adolescent development. It was extremely well-received.

Q. What are some of the positive outcomes of this research project?

There have been some very positive results of this project. In the community, there has been greater awareness about youth homelessness. When we first started this project people were shocked that there were homeless youth in the county at all. We now have greater awareness, and increased services. The Learning Web has used this data for applications for increased funding for their programming, especially to support new housing

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“...invisible homeless youth...” continued from page 15

options such as traditional housing. Focus groups were conducted with youth to get feedback on what kinds of housing they want. And we were able to really incorporate their data in planning and services which is very gratifying.

As for the youth researchers, it was a very empowering experience for them. First of all, to develop skills. This was a job: they learned how to collect data, they learned about research, and had public speaking opportunities. They began to talk, and they really found their voice. One of them wants to go on to be a motivational speaker because of this experience. Some of them got jobs based on having this kind of track record. It really built their social capital, expanded their networks, and built their confidence.

There were great benefits for young people, for programming and the community. And I also think for the research process. I have been studying adolescents for decades and involved in a lot of projects. We pilot tools with adolescents, but we don't develop tools collaboratively with youth. When interpreting results, we make a lot of conclusions but we never ask what youth think. This has been very beneficial for the research process. We got a population of youth and set of findings that we wouldn't otherwise get if we didn't engage the young people as partners.

Q. What is the best advice you can give a young person struggling to make it on his or her own?

A. Support is critical. If somebody was like that I would send them to outreach programs like this one at the Learning Web, where there are caring adults that would provide case management to help them stabilize the housing situation and then be able to find employment or go to school. I mean doing it on your own is really hard, and this is a difficult county, because of the lopsidedness, and being able to find housing that is affordable because Cornell and Ithaca College stack up the housing markets. And getting a job is hard too because there are so many over-educated people in this community. But there are agencies where caring adults can support young people that are struggling to transition into a more stable lifestyle with support.

Q. In a perfect world, what would you like to see come of the results of this survey?

I would want people to know about this and be concerned about it. Create some public will. I would want people to care about homeless youth. In the best world really, I would want to prevent them from running away to begin with. There would be interventions with families so that they are not in a situation where they have to leave home.

Jane Powers interviewed by Sarah Moore

“No one believes in the youth today, and if their own parents don't, how are they gonna believe in themselves?”

- Quote from one of the surveyed homeless youth.

No Escape

When you're young, every little thing matters. Everything you go through is detrimental to your being. There's no where to put those deafening thoughts that race through your mind. The room you're contained in has no door, no window and four walls trapped with only yourself, and a bomb designed to detonate any minute. And when it does, even if you duck and cover, you'll still get wounded by the shrapnel every time.

The snow falls outside my window below and lays a thick blanket of virgin white. Not one footprint has penetrated its fragile layers almost as if there were nothing existing, except winter. That's how I feel every waking minute of my life. The sky slowly dims to a deep blue; a tiny sparkle peaks out among the stretch of solid existence, followed by another off in the distance. They begin to spew out all over the sky, sending an illuminating glow over the tree tops. I want to destroy the pure breadth of snow gathered across my lawn. I want to dive deep within it and scream out, let the slight burn of the frozen crystals numb me. My spine shakes as I reach for my window. I can feel the hum of the silence scraping at my ears and my body stops almost immediately. I let out a short staggered breath and shudder. Before I know what's going on my window is wide, and I'm flying. Throughout the air I see the stars. My hands reach for one, but I barely graze it before the cold freezes them. The frost wraps around my throat, my muscles twitch violently.

"No Dad, stop!"

The voice I hear is hoarse and raspy, almost not my own. I quiver like a small bird right after birth, hungry, nostalgic and begging for its mother. I pull myself up from my iced barricade and run; I run so hard the wind smacks my body back, but I continue on. I see the shapes of buildings and vehicles soaring by me, but the details aren't there. My eyes over concentrate and I begin to hallucinate. My hands swell up red and puffy, my feet begin to bloat and my movement slows dramatically. My chest heaves against the whipping wind while my mouth laps for moisture. I can't talk or scream, I have all I can do to breathe. As I continue on a steady pace I keep ramming into some invisible force. Every scuffle is followed by a screech, an ear piercing howl that fills my mind. Banshees circle around me, hollering and fussing. I break loose and take off, their slimy hands slipping off of me.

I can't take the constant noise, the inhumane creatures edging towards my feet. The fire licks at my toes and I curl up. Crying seems to be my only option, my last resort. I climb to a stance, my body chattering and spurting about like a doe battered and torn on the side of the road. I gaze into myself through the broken shards scattered along the ground, no tears have wet my face. I close my eyes and try to regain my composure. When the open again my reflection reveals my worst fear, there he stands behind me, hands placed firmly on my shoulders. I break apart into a million little pieces. No matter where I turn he'll always be there.

"It's okay Abigail. It'll all be over soon."

Written by Carli

Coping with Adolescence-Lessons Learned and Unlearned

by Jayasri Srinivasan

During my happiest adolescent memories, I am with my grandparents in beautiful Bangalore, the Indian city I grew up in. I was an adored first grandchild and my grandparents gave new meaning to the phrase “unconditional love”. That love cocooned me all through my life. My grandparents are gone but my memories of them continue to sustain me after all these years.

Every summer during my teenage years, I returned to the familiar solace of my grandparents’ home. What of the rest of the year? Here is part of my story.

I joined a residential school in 6th grade. I was the “chubby, new girl”. Enthusiastic and naive, I tried to make friends. This turned out to be next to impossible. I was trying to get accepted by a bunch of middle-schoolers who had been together in boarding school since grade 1. Who knew that these sweet-faced girls could close ranks so viciously and shut you out? I had done nothing wrong. The fact that I did well academically and was well liked by my teachers was enough to indict me. I needed to be “put in my place.” I had aced the class that year and my punishment was utter and complete banishment to the fringes of middle schooldom.

I was relentlessly taunted. During summer vacation of that year, while I came up for air, I made a decision. I would do anything to be “liked” by my classmates. To my 11 year old mind, there seemed to be only one solution in order for me to fit in— I had to be careful not to display any signs of competence or talent whatsoever. In grade 7, I started deliberately doing badly on tests. I made every effort to maintain a consistently mediocre performance. I became the class clown, joking around and making cruel jokes at my own expense before someone else did.

My efforts paid off. I made “friends.” I was admitted into a privileged albeit subversive sisterhood. All it took was utter self -denigration and loss of an authentic selfhood. But never mind all that. I was pathetically grateful. The short term relief I experienced came at great cost. I continued to underperform academically all through the end of high school. Over the years, my confidence slowly drained away. I awoke each morning with a nameless fear, not knowing what new forms of rejection to expect. I manifested a near pathological need to please everyone.

I developed habits of procrastination that continue to plague me. I suffered from a constant low -grade depression that has remained with me all through my passage to adulthood. Eventually, I learned to cope. I developed a rich inner life. I learned to use my day-dreaming tendencies as a way to escape from my everyday troubles. I sought relief in stories and lived an alternate reality in my head. I read until well past bedtime under the bathroom lights at school. I read to manage the anxiety that made my stomach constantly ache...

I became finely attuned to the moods of those around me and learned to hide while in plain sight.



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Adolescence is a time of seismic psychological and physiological change. If you are the parent or caregiver of an adolescent facing insidious bullying, what can you do? Listen to them with both your heart and mind. Tell them how much faith you have in their inner strength and ability. Some children may not share their problems explicitly. In that case, watch for mood changes and other behavioral or verbal cues. Be involved but do so in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. While you may feel rightfully outraged and emotional at the thought that your child is being bullied, try to keep the discussion calm and centered on the feelings of your son or daughter without reverting to blaming the perpetrators who may often be grappling with issues of their own.

Paradoxically, teenagers often withdraw from their parents even though they may acutely need their support. They may feel guilty for “snitching” on their peers. Brainstorm ways of dealing with this problem. Teach your son or daughter to be part of the problem-solving process. Ask them if speaking to a school teacher or counselor regarding the problem would be helpful. Explore all possible options including community resources.

Above all, offer your children your unconditional love and support. As for me, things took a happier turn. When I left school, things improved. I made some genuinely good friends in college. I also met and married my husband in grad school. He continues to be my strongest ally during my gloomy spells. My parents have been continually supporting us through their selfless grandparenting roles as we raise our two boys. I completed a Ph.D. program from Cornell University. I volunteer as a peer mental health counselor. I teach biology on a part-time basis. From time to time, I still struggle with depression. I sabotage myself time and again just as I am about to succeed at something. Now in my 30s, I have another life transition coming up and I often feel paralyzed at the thought of having to make choices.

Through this all, I am grateful for every single experience I’ve had and every person who’s touched my life. It has been a most interesting journey.



Rape by Anonymous

There are so many four letter words
So how can just one, make you feel like you
were stampeded by a herd.
It is just a word, or so they say...
So why is it that I cringe every-time I hear it and
feel this way?
Why did I have to be so naive?
And choose to ignore, what I should have
believed.
I am way too nice for my own good.
And trust too freely and more than I should.
I wish that I could just take back that day,
But, I know in my heart, it is here to stay!
It's like a nightmare that I keep waiting to end...

And why did it have to be someone I thought
was a friend?
So why didn't I put up more of a fight?
Sometimes I just wish, that I had died that night.
It sent me into such a state of shock.
It was as if my brain, would just not unlock.
I hate myself for letting him make me feel this
way.
They are bottled up inside me and here to stay.
I hope I can learn something from this...
And eventually return, to some form of bliss.
I want to be happy, instead of just sad.
So, I will work on myself, because he is a cad.

SSENKRAD/DARKNESS

Again the shroud of darkness
veils my mind
The pain of knowing is
too great
I no longer want to bear
The crucifix I've had bestowed
upon me
Where are the smiles and laughter
of long ago
What have I done to receive
this darkness
of my soul
To search for Death
too easy
To keep Life too
difficult
To Exist is to
be alone
in
DARKNESS.

(by Joyce L. Stanton)

I wrote this as a teenager of 14 yrs of age. I am now 56 yrs old. This describes some of the things that had gone through my mind as an adolescent.)



Promoting a Safe and Healthy High School Experience for LGBT Teens by Lisa Ching

Adolescence is hard enough for the status quo, but imagine the difficulty involved when trying to navigate through those formative teen years: painfully aware that you do not fit in because of your sexual orientation. In wanting to better understand the oppression faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens, I have spent some time exploring the dilemmas they are faced with due to bullyings, as well as ways to implement positive change.

Not all, but many school environments

seem apathetic to the intolerance that the LGBT students are facing. My interest stems from my studies to earn a Bachelor in Social Work, as well as having a gay teenager in my family who has been faced with oppression, stereotypes, and bullying. I would like to work to change school policy by providing education and advocacy to prevent the LGBT student population from being singled out and bullied. The apathy that is demonstrated by some high school faculty and staff towards its LGBT population sometimes is nothing more than a coping tool; the premise being that if the situation is ignored, it might possibly go away or work its self out. This thought process is dangerous. We all know from our own life experience that those tactics seldom truly ever work.

We need to advocate for the LGBT student population by changing existing views and apathy toward the LGBT student population to foster a more tolerant environment. "As a result of frequent intolerance, abuse, and lack of support from school officials, many LGBT feel isolated and depressed" (Hanlon, 2009, pg. 33). One approach would be to address the issue of bullying as a means to protect the existing LGBT student population. This would require educating faculty and staff to "...identify and challenge their own biases or misconceptions regarding sexual diversity" (2009, pg. 37).

To implement positive change, you have to be able to show that change is needed. Ordering people to change and arbitrarily making rules will fall on deaf ears. Change

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requires respect of others' values and ideas, patience, and a great deal of collaboration. Faculty and staff need to be motivated to be on board and actively participate in the process. Research suggests that students pick up on the homophobic attitudes and biases of the faculty and staff, fostering an acceptance of negative behaviors towards LGBT students (2009). “...educators need to know how to create an inclusive environment, support students who are struggling with their own sexual identity, and effectively address homophobic attitudes and harassment” (2009, pg. 37). Faculty and staff would need to present a united front indicating that such homophobic attitudes and harassment will not be condoned nor tolerated.

One idea would be the implementation of a “safe” zone that could be monitored by faculty or staff members, but also incorporate peer mentors with the purpose of providing advocacy and support.

“The adoption of peer support within a whole-school policy can create opportunities for bystanders to be proactive in challenging bullying when they observe it” (Cowie, 2011, pg. 291). Such a “zone” would be a needed alternative for victimized teens to go and decompress with support staff and peers after an incidence of bullying, rather than feeling the need to leave school grounds to escape the harassment. Giving student bystanders a role, such as peer mentors, draws them in as part of the solution, as well as sending a message to those that bully that such behavior will not be tolerated.

Educating the entire student body in regards to tolerance of diversity is also a needed step toward change. “Most educators assert sexuality norms and teach in a heteronormative manner... (the implication being) that heterosexuality is

normal and everything else is different and abnormal” (2009, pg. 36). Creating an environment of tolerance and acceptance to differences in norms of sexual orientation should be implemented early on in the school system.

Although, some are opposed to introducing elementary school students to the topic of sexual orientation, doing so is a vital component of the education process to combat bullying. (I am not suggesting children should be taught about the proverbial “birds and bees” of sexuality, but rather, Johnny has a mother and a father, however, Jill has two mommies.) Children need to be educated to be civil and tolerant of the differences between themselves and their peers.

The education component should focus on the most current information available on tolerance and civility toward one another. I favor the concept of implementing the creation of “safe” zones on school grounds. Offering LGBT teens, or for that matter, any students that are feeling oppressed due to bullying, a safe, secure and nurturing place to retreat to is one way to provide much needed validation to these students.

I like the concept of providing a nurturing atmosphere that promotes respect for individuals and shuns intolerance and bullying. Implementing positive change by using our abilities of advocacy and teaching, could prove to be a rewarding challenge if, collectively, we want to make a difference in the lives of the LGBT teens.

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The Joy of Existence
by Will Schoch

Silence above all. The essence of the sun.
Things that make me whole. Things that make us one.
The earth and all that share it, rely on good and fun,
Prosperity and clarity through time never done.
Foundations in this world, and blueprints from the past,
Make a thriving nation, we hope that it will last.
Though poverty is vast, and food isn't scarce,
The portions are uneven. This world is very harsh.
The fact of my existence, I thank procreation,
For life to go on, I give an ovation.
The succession of this world, built upon our minds,
Developed over ages, an endless fact of time.
It's hard to even grapple, the fact of man's existence.
What lies in the heavens? What are we missin'?
Was God up there forever? It seems so impossible.
Livin' in the moment at times feels so logical.
We've known the sensations, of pleasure since birth.
Indulgence in these things, we feel a sense of worth.
Life is not a curse, but feels like a burden,
Managing the days though some things are uncertain.
My heart hurts at times. I just have to trust,
The ones that look out for me. Enterprise is a must.

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