

Mental health Podcast  
Season 2 Episode 1  
October 2022

Dr Holtzman: Hello and welcome to Mental Health Corner my name is Dan Holtzman, I'm the principal of Great Neck North High School with me as always is my mental health team and I'll allow them to introduce themselves.

Dr Cheng: Hi, I'm David Cheng, school psychologist

Dr. Berzins: Hi, Dr Anton Berzins, school psychologist

Teng Bertner: Hi, Teng Bertner, I'm Dr. Berzins' intern this year.

Uana Burns: Hi, Uana Burns, School psychologist

Ms. Scholl: Hi, Oana Scholl, school social worker

Dr. Holtzman: So this is an opportunity for us to have a conversation about the varying topics that come up over the course of a school year. We've done a few of these already and we've received some positive feedback so we thought we would continue on in the podcast series. So today's conversation I would like to kind of focus on what it means to be a student and getting involved in the school community. So as you know we have talked as a team some of the challenges that students have faced over the past couple of years with covid, and now we are sort of reacclimating back into the educational process everyone's back in school that the mandates has been lifted excetra things are sort of returning to what we would consider to be a sort of a normal quote, unquote normal environment so having missed out on some opportunities you know I wonder if you're experiencing or seeing some challenges with students either wanting to get involved perhaps not knowing how to get involved or even what it means to be a student you know involved in the in the school as a part of the school Community what does that mean so I'm just curious, Dr. Cheng, from from your experience what does it mean for a student to be part of a school community in your in your mind's eye what does that mean for you?

Dr. Cheng: just taking part in everything of the school has to offer first and foremost classes being an active student in class also try to get involved in club, sports, extracurricular activities and taking advantage of everything it has to offer and becoming a part engrossing yourself in the school for the time that you have here.

Dr. Holtzman: Ms. Scholl, have you noticed or experienced in talking to students just either a lack of Interest or just a lack of experience and lack of knowing what that means and how to actually get involved?

Ms. Scholl: I don't think that there's necessarily a lack of interest so much, but I definitely think students did miss a year plus of kind of learning some of the ways to engage with school, whether that be how to be an active student, how to advocate for yourself if something is not going right or how to keep all of your school assignments and things organized but also a lot of the activities were not available and kind of get to the high school and there's so much more variety and ability to get engaged and involved that I think a lot of things are more abstract to students then they would have been in the past you know like they they don't know exactly what to expect so it's a little more maybe a little bit more if I jump to to join something and not know what do your jumping into.

Dr. Holtzman: Yeah, I think to your point, I think about half the school didn't know what Pep Rally was. They hadn't experienced it, cause we hadn't had one. One thing that was interesting was that the 11th I believe the 11th graders had their first pep rally. This is their third year in the building so I think it's little things like that but I think we tend to overlook. Dr. Berzins, sort of the same question a combination of things you know what is it that, how is it that you define being part of school community and have you and your experience and talking with the kids were the challenges there is it is it like what Oana was saying about just not having had the experience or is it that it just becomes so normalized that they weren't involved that now it's sort of a this obtuse concept about being part of the school Community.

Dr. Berzins: feels like when we offered the club fair, that was a new event for students where they were actually positively overwhelmed by how many clubs and organizations are available because prior years they be finding the sheet of paper with the virtual Club code and sign in codes and it just felt like it wasn't that personal , it felt pretty remote and maybe I'll just start logging onto something, or not, but when they saw members screaming and chanting and trying to engage them and pull them into their organization and then it felt like, Oh, I could see myself in that organization or with that leader so by having the activity fair kick-off this year, i know for my particular club, i saw my membership skyrocket because it's like "I like those Sr. Leaders, I like their energy. I want to join what they are a part of. Definitely, this was a major plus for students who wouldn't have engaged over the last 2 years. Now, it's like, I'll sign up, I'll participate, I'll go to the room, I want to be invested. So I definitely see that trend now, in a positive way. So, complimenting what Ms. Scholl had said, you have to know that resources are available to you and then access them. In a weird way, maybe those resources weren't available in a traditional way of face to face meetings, so now the students have to learn to navigate, negotiate and actually access what's been available. I definitely see a positive trend now that these opportunities are available at a set time and they can see who is leading the meetings.

Dr. Holtzman: Uana, what's your take on how this helps tell a story of a student? We've tried to encourage students to get involved for a number of reasons, obviously to be a part of the school to not go home at 2:30, what's your take on student involvement and how does it help shape a story that they ultimately could tell about who they are?

Uana Burns: So I think by all these students joining clubs, activities and sports, it really lets them form their individual identity, it really lets them grow as a person and make these new

connections and leads to more favorable thinking and just a lot of different opportunities and it might open a door down the line for college or beyond.

Dr Holtzman: Is the idea of commitments to a club to an activity a challenge for students? I tend to promote the fact that colleges don't necessarily want to see a student involved in 12 things for 1 year. They'd rather see, I think, a student who is chosen two or three different activities stayed with it for two three four years of high school because it shows commitment, shows dedication and I think, to your point, it really helps shape and define and explain who they are as a student vs. not really finding a place or not are not committing to a certain place. So I'm wondering if, you know, how do we share that kind of message? How do we help parents understand that? How do we help students understand that?

Ms. Scholl: I think both with grades and with activities, I love it when students are able to look at "what do I find interesting? What do I want to get out of this?" rather than having that end number or end goal, whatever it is, in mind. Because, I think, then your heart is in it. So if I'm really into learning about this topic or doing this paper on such and such that's really interesting to me, then I'm really going to get something out of it, versus "what is the grade going to be"? I feel that this is a great chance in life where students have the opportunity to explore lots of things, it doesn't cost them any money to be involved in our clubs. It's a really nice way to explore what's most interesting to me, who else is involved in this club who do I relate to in terms of the other people that join these clubs and just kind of finding aspect of yourself that maybe you didn't even know about by trying something new so I think if you follow that rather than thinking what's the magic number that I need for my next goal for what I wanted to do with my life after High School it it does tend to be that much more rewarding as well.

Dr. Cheng: I think it's a balance of why we are joining the club. We have some clubs that are very very social and we would encourage that, too. I joined this club that has over a hundred members because 5 of my friends joined and so we joined together. Then maybe later on in their career, they'll be thinking "now I'm starting a club that I'm really passionate about", or they hear more about a club that they were actually interested in from like a long-term planning career planning perspective, so then they join that club for a different reason, but it also shows their trajectory and their development as a student. We don't expect freshmen to know what they want to be, or their career paths, so it's a good way to feed both social and educational aspects.

Dr Holtzman: I want to ask a, not controversial question, but counter-intuitive question. So, we want students to be students right, we want them to be teenagers, we want them to explore and find their passion. But are we expecting too much by saying we want you to write your story? No one said that to me, I don't know about you guys when you were in high school, no one said "think about the story you want to tell" and that's sort of a message that we send but I wonder is it a clear message is it is the message focusing more on the academic side then perhaps it should? Are we not explaining ourselves about what that really means when we say we want what you do to tell a story? So I'm wondering, does it ultimately not accomplish what in our

brain we want to accomplish is the message that we're trying to convey not being clearly expressed?

Dr Berzins: I have a few thoughts on this. The first thing that comes to mind is maybe like, having the end in sight for certain students. Like getting into their dream college. And where it may be the big name school, or the highly touted school, or the status school, but in reality, there may be a different school that's a better fit for them. And you see the struggle in the family where my kid got into this iconic national school, but they'd be better served going to a smaller school. That's the family struggle, that's the student struggle, and that's us as educators guiding what's best fit for that student, your child. Maybe that's the thing that we can keep doing, saying what's your story, or what fits your story the best here. Some sort of a modification of the question that we're asking them. I'm reminded of Dr Robert Brooks, he's a Harvard psychologist and professor and he talks about islands of competence. He uses a shrink based approach, or a growth mindset approach by saying that most students use when they have an area of interest and it's celebrated and honored and fostered, they do better academically in not just that area, whether its music, arts, computers, cultures, but actually builds into their academic success. Maybe that can be part of our message, when we find your child's island of competence or area of strength, that can build on their story.

Dr Cheng: I don't think it's ever too early to ask the question, and the student will tell you if they aren't ready for that conversation. A lot of conversations that I have with many students is to get them to take that bigger perspective, to take that step back from thinking about the day to day to looking at the bigger picture. When they're ready, they will approach that question and respond to that question differently.

Dr Holtzman: And what that really entails by taking that bigger step backwards entails risk taking and it involves a lot of unknown factors which are probably very unsettling for kids, because I know it is for adults really not to know, so when you're 14 or 15 and you're being asked these kinds of questions it could be uncomfortable.

Dr Cheng: Definitely. And, for those kids, you take more of that micro approach, you go back to that day to day, one step at a time, they'll develop their identity without knowing it, or putting much conscious thought into it.

Dr Holtzman: How do we help students set the tone for themselves? We talk about how behavior is a form of communication. Oftentimes academics is really the high priority and nothing else, like school involvement. How do we help students, not so much because of what we experienced over the past few years, but just in general, coming into high school setting a tone to prioritizing and balancing?

Ms. Bertner: I think that when you talk about balancing, coming from a remote environment and having these transitions over the last six months or so into this normal world, i think that coming back to school and becoming involved and kind of taking it one step at a time and involving yourself into one thing that you can handle will actually make your academics better because

you end up getting more involved and as you go, taking on more. But trying to figure out how improving your social life can improve your academic life and vice versa goes back to school involvement and really immersing yourself in what's being offered in school. Even if you take one thing and go from there, it can help balance.

Dr Berzins: Jumping off that, taking the big, big perspective where they studied, one of the longest longitudinal studies, I think it was Yale who was following people for 50, 60, 70 years. And after 70 years they were saying what led to people's happiness, and it was their engagements, their relationships. So when students are engaged, they are happier, they are healthier. And two, they had a sense of purpose. So those were the two biggest findings in this 70 year research. Relationships make us healthier and happier and having a purpose gives our lives meaning. So if we can help students do both well, have healthy relationships and find a purpose that makes sense to them, then we have given them the cheat code to life.

Dr Holtzman: I think that's a great point. I think relationships play a huge part. Particularly high school relationships can be very volatile. One day you're best friends and the next day, you're not. I think that really has an impact on kids and I think that helping them navigate that would be of great benefit to kids.

Ms. Scholl: One of the things, for me, works really well, working in a school, but I think it would work for students as well. There is that break between school years and I think it's a rare opportunity to use that time to reset and really think about your intentions. So every school year, I encourage all the students that I speak to to think about what it is that they want this school year to look like? Is there something that you'd like to improve upon, and maybe it's that you want to get more involved, or maybe you've been meaning to start a club but you didn't think that you could put yourself out there and do it, but this year you'd like to make that a goal. Maybe it's more academic, and you feel that you could be more organized, so you try different strategies to improve upon that. Whether it's a mini goal to start, just to see how you're doing, to see your progress, or whether it's a part of a bigger plan for the year, I think there's something really rejuvenating that gets us much more engaged to get that refresh and use September and October as kind of a time to come up with "what is my intention?" or what is my goal, and how do I jump in this year that would be different than in the past?

Dr Holtzman: I think that's a great point. I think that's a great strategy and I think that's a conversation worth having with parents as well because that's a part of that whole school, home relationship that I think will drive goals like that for us forward. I don't think that we can expect students to walk in with that mindset on their own. It requires some intervention and strategies from our end. To parents, to help them have that conversation over the summer. Kind of reflecting and reviewing the success or areas of growth that the school year presented to you. Maybe some challenge that the school year presented. So in the event that you face this or something similar, moving forward, how do you navigate? What are some goals, what are some strategies that we can use as a family? What are some things we can do as a school, and at home together and try to mitigate those moving forward? I think that's a great platform to have discussions with parents.

Dr Berzins: There's one cool strategy that I unapologetically stole from the business world and it's the V2MOM. The first V stands for Vision, the second V for Values, the M for Methods, the O for Obstacles and the other M for Measurement. Basically, you help students and families look at what the vision is for the year, why do I want that vision, how can I achieve that goal, what are the obstacles in the way to achieving the goal, and then measurement, how will I know if I'm successful? It's a cool strategy that I use for all the students I work with. It could lead to a cool conversation at the dinner table "What do you want? Why do you want it? How are you going to get it? What can get in your way? How do you know if you achieved it?" It gives them a framework.

Dr Holtzman: I like that, I like that a lot. It's something we can explore further later on. Any final thoughts? Questions, comments?

Dr Cheng: Just, on the parenting note, recognizing all the aspects that will help make a student successful. Not just the academic avenue, but also the social, the athletic, the family relationships aspect. We want to make diverse, well rounded kids. We also need to recognize that different kids need different messages and strategies and support. We have to develop them through all avenues, not just academics.

Dr Berzins: They have the building admin, the guidance team, the mental health team, teachers and coaches. There are a lot of people in the building that are rooting for them and have aligned interests and values with them. There's no shortage of people that are supporting them.

Ms. Bertner: I agree, I think it's important to grow everything, not just academics. It's ok to have that self help moment where you want to do something just because you like it. That's ok to encourage that and everyone here is willing to support them.

Ms. Scholl: Absolutely! I second all of that!

Dr Holtzman: That's it. I'd like to thank my mental health team for joining me. This has been another edition of The Mental Health Corner. I'm Dan Holtzman, the principal of Great Neck North High School.