

INTRODUCTION

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



The desire for connection is strong for most people, but many may not realize how necessary it is in order to live a healthy life. In the 1940s, psychologist Rene Spitz observed the development of infants in two institutions—one a nursery in which the infants were raised by their mothers, and the other an orphanage in which infants were raised by overworked caregivers, each responsible for approximately ten three-month olds. The babies in both settings were adequately fed and bathed, and received medical care—the only thing different was the amount of emotional connection they experienced. After a year, Spitz found that the normative development of the infants raised in the orphanage steadily deteriorated, while those in the nursery thrived. After two years, the observations were worse; 37% of those in the orphanage died—those that managed to survive never learned to walk, speak, or feed themselves. This tragedy, while extreme, illustrates how human connection is not only desired, but is necessary for survival: “The high mortality is but the most extreme consequence of the general decline, both physical and psychological, which is shown by children completely starved of emotional interchange” (p. 149). This need to have relationships with others, of course, does not end in childhood, but continues as we get older. Relationships play an especially important role in youths’ lives, as relationships with peers

and partners become more essential and family relationships begin to reflect more balanced and equal interactions.

But in order for human contact to be beneficial, it needs to be healthy. While the characteristics of healthy relationships vary depending on the persons involved, the nature of the relationship (i.e., parent-child, best friends), and factors such as age, there are some commonalities. A healthy relationship between two people provides them with the opportunity to grow, share themselves, and form a bond that enhances the self and the other. Individuals in a healthy relationship exhibit trust, respect, and care for themselves and each other—and they listen to each other and work to make the relationship survive. This issue of *Focal Point* is about Healthy Relationships and their effects on young adults with mental health conditions. While most of the articles focus on the positive aspects of relationships, others highlight more negative experiences and their impacts.

Many different types of interpersonal relationships are featured. The family is often seen as the origin of a person’s relationship experiences; interactions within the family are seen as the precursors to other relationship success. Corinne Spiegel and her children share their experiences with living with a child with serious emotional difficulties, and Lynn Twigg tells her story of reconnecting with her biological family—for better and for worse—after years in the foster care system. Pauline Jivanjee and Jean Kruzich sum-

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marize their research about the importance of parent-child relationships during young adulthood, a time often associated with increased independence.

However, young adults need more types of supportive relationships than just those within the family. The importance of a strong therapeutic relationship is articulated by researchers Brittany Jordan-Arthur, Gabriela Romero, and Marc Karver. Michelle Munson writes about how natural mentors—whether they be family members, friends, or other trusted adults—offer advice and connection. But sometimes those closest to us do not always provide the support needed; a summary of Tally Moses’ research of how youth experience stigmatization within the family, among peers, and at school demonstrates how different relationships can affect youth in negative ways.

As children grow into young adults, romantic and sexual attachments become more important. Yet these types of relationships can be difficult to talk about, especially with young adults (never mind with young adults who have mental health challenges). Too often, adult supports want to ignore the reality that these seemingly vulnerable youth are engaging in intimate relationships which, when at their best, are some of the most wonderful experiences a person can have, but at their worst can have serious adverse effects on a person’s physical and emotional health. To that end, we offer two articles about intimate relationships: one that addresses how the sexual health needs of young adults with mental health conditions are different from those of young adults in general, and another on how early experiences with trauma—often found in young adults with mental health conditions—influence romantic relationships.

Two other articles consider how relationships with inanimate objects should be considered as well as those between people. An article by Beckie Child addresses the importance of having a healthy relationship with one’s medications and the people behind the prescriptions. Wesley Kittel describes how the internet has helped peo-

ple form connections and supports as he tells the story of building an online community for young adults with mental health conditions.

We hope that this issue of Focal Point encourages you to take a broad look at the meaning of “healthy relationships” and how all of us can provide supports for young people as they negotiate interactions with the many people that cross their paths daily, picking and choosing who they let into that inner circle of support that they—like all humans—need not just to have a fulfilling life, but literally for survival.

REFERENCES

1. Spitz, R. (1949). The role of ecological factors in emotional development in infancy. *Child Development, 20*, 145-155.

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