



Parent & Faculty Education Conference EMPOWERING OUR KIDS Menlo School, February 6, 2016

Ross Szabo

Attendee Notes

Introduction

Ross lives in LA and everything went wrong with his flight and car rental...

Thank you to Menlo for all the preparation. Urged to book hotel for Super Bowl weekend. Did not think of that as a Raiders fan!!

Behind Happy Faces - Taking Charge of Your Mental Health

Everyone has different views of what "mental health" means

We don't have a clear definition of mental health that's clear for everyone

Mental health is not having a problem. **It's how you balance everything in your life.**

Good mental health is something all of us should have.

We need to build it and take care of it.

I build my physical health by running, Crossfit, etc.

I build my mental health by exercising how I communicate, cope and deal with emotional situations.

My personal story:

I was diagnosed with bipolar disease at 16. My senior year in high school, I was hospitalized for trying to take my life. But I ended up getting better and graduating from high school.

Then two months into freshman year, I relapsed and started having extreme substance abuse problems that lasted through college. I'm not trying to scare you. I'm trying to get you to think about decisions.

Overview of mental health

Stats are overwhelming, e.g. suicide is 3rd leading cause of death in teens and young adults

What I'm sick of – society tells us what's wrong without telling what to do about it.

They know they're stressed out and can't sleep but nobody knows what to do about it.

We teach physical health from K to 12.

We only teach mental health during a breakdown

Menlo offers many programs, but nationally we don't do much.

Why don't students seek help? Tweet answers to @rosseszabo

Why won't kids seek help or talk about it?

Audience: stigma, lack of sympathy, sign of weakness, lack of vocabulary, they talk to peers instead

This is the first step. Start talking about this in the community. Address the barriers.

Our society is focused on fixing things, but we need to take a step back.

Mental Health Spectrum

5 categories of mental health challenges

Everyday Challenges	Environment	Significant Events	Mental Health Disorders	Developmental Disabilities.
Stress Lack of Sleep Low Self Esteem Poor Body Image	Verbal Abuse Bullying Sexual Abuse	Death Divorce Breakups Major illness	Depression Anxiety Bipolar Disorder Schizophrenia Eating Disorders	Intellectual Disabilities Autism Asberger's Syndrome ADHD

Where are you on mental health spectrum?

Balanced Life	Difficult to Balance	Need Help or Constant Assistance	Not Able to Balance
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Stress

Good Stress vs. Bad Stress

Good Stress: A burst of energy that basically advises you on what to do • Helps you meet daily challenges • Motivates you to reach your goals • Produces the fight-or-flight response • Can improve your heart and protect you from infection

Bad Stress: Inability to concentrate or complete tasks • Get sick more often • Body aches • Headaches • Irritability • Trouble falling sleeping or staying awake • Changes in appetite • More angry or anxious than usual

Students live a competitively stressful life. Students seem to have competitions of stress – I didn't sleep last night; next student says I had 4 tests; next student says not sure how to pay the bills
Nobody can win.

Students focus on bad stress. Good stress motivates you and makes you good at what you do. However, we normalize bad stress.

Sleep

Lack of sleep impairs immune system, mood, and memory.

When brain development and connections are growing rapidly, sleep is even more important.

Most effective way to break a human down is to only allow them to sleep only 3-5 hours per night. This is in line with military psychological breakdowns. Many high school students average 4-6 hours per night.

Anxiety and Depression

Mental health is something you need to build and foster and grow.

Most people do not know difference between feeling nervous and having anxiety disorder

Nervousness – we all have

Anxiety is that nervousness that's debilitating. Anxiety is overwhelming, takes over, feels like panic and it is consuming.

Most don't know difference between feeling depressed and having depression.

I had a bad day – those are feeling depressed. Understand the cause, take care of yourself.

When you have depression, everything sucks and hurts and you don't know why. Depressive symptoms last for long time.

Feeling depressed is when there's a known cause. Depression is **without a cause**.

Ross' Personal Story

I grew up in Pennsylvania. Born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. There is no hospital in Nazareth!

I got married in October, no kids yet

Shows photo of his family, typical 80s family. I'm youngest of 3 boys.

Picture doesn't show that my father grew up with an alcoholic dad who beat him regularly. My mom grew up where women were never allowed to cry.

On both sides of family, ripe with bipolar, addiction, etc

When they had children, they consciously tried to do things differently. They hugged us every day. They did everything to try to have a healthy, happy family. But they didn't know what they couldn't see. The family's biology that was not their choice. But they used the coping skills they knew to try to help us.

I had night terrors so bad. My parents tried to calm me down, let me sleep with my brother. In 3rd grade, I was ripping hair out of my head. My parents met with specialist and found I had anxiety.

When I was 11, my oldest brother was hospitalized, committed to a psych ward while in college. He was in hospital for 4 months, and eventually graduated from college. He had access to treatment, and was a success story.

During that time while my brother was in the psych ward, the next year my grandparents died and my best friend was killed in car accident. I developed the ability to make everyone laugh, but I never talked about what I went through.

K-8 factors: biology, environment, emotional self-regulation

Self-regulation is the scariest and so important.

At 16, I had symptoms of not being able to sleep for 4 days in a row. I started drinking a bottle a night to pass out. My middle brother noticed, said something to my parents, and I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. By 17, my symptoms got worse. Voices/hallucinations. I went into a deep state of depression. But I kept making everyone laugh and smile. I started having thoughts of death and suicide but I didn't say anything. Kept making people laugh.

On January 5 of my senior year, it seemed like a normal day. On the way home, I decided I no longer wanted to live. I was hospitalized for attempted suicide. In hospital, I went to group therapy. I didn't know what to say about why I was there. I instead outlined my accomplishments my resume, my external life (3.8 GPA, athletics and student government involvement),. Inside, I was Ross, who hated himself. I realized I was sharing my resume but not the life I lived.

Then I went back to high school. Got accepted to American University and attended. But I had a severe relapse, and came home. I was in and out of hospitals for 4 years.

I went back to American, and first semester back – 13 shots of vodka in hour. Passed out for 22 hours.

When I woke up finally I started crying. I realized I must change. That night, at age 22 I finally accepted I had a problem. During all the treatment, nobody asked me WHY.

All the time – they had been empowering me and enabling me. It's a very hard line to walk.

In recovery, I finally learned that I didn't choose to have bipolar, but I could choose how to cope with it. I could start reading and writing and exercising, building my mental health. Eventually I graduated from American University. Bipolar doesn't go away. **I have to work on it all the time.** I continue to grow.

Factors for Recovery: acceptance, self-awareness, discipline and responsibility.

You can teach people how to manage.

Coping: how you deal with stress from adversity, disadvantage.

Students cope every day. How can we cope better?

It's all about the brain and the synapses.

The longer you use a coping mechanism the more automatic it becomes in your brain. The deeper the pathways get, the harder it is to change them. Like top athletes (e.g. Stephen Curry - 3 pointers), they don't think about it, they just do it, it's automatic.

Your brain is wired.

We've learned so much in past 5 years about the brain. Exciting.

Our brain changes every day and we are learning more and more about the brain.

We need to build our brains, rebuild our brains.

How do we help young people build tools for mental health?

Story: At my 21st birthday, my parents took me out to eat.

My dad started crying. He told me "we didn't think you would live to be have this meal."

So many families live in that terror. It's the worst feeling in the world.

We all have one life, one chance. We need to find our place of meaning. We need to include our mental health and our internal life in that conversation.

Please share your personal story. It matters. Both inside and out.