

Teenagers' Transformational Training: Evaluating 20 Years of the "Teenager Dynamic"® Personal Growth Program in the UAE

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Introduction

A professional psychologist offering clinical services for teenagers usually encounters two major areas of concern from parents and teachers and community leaders. The first set of problems falls within the realm of psychopathology and psychotherapy. How can we re-ignite enthusiasm in a teenager who is depressed, de-motivated and has lost all interest in studies? How do we really bring about significant change in a teenager who is showing signs of clearly defined, DSM-classified psychological disorders like depression, anxiety, ADHD, eating disorder, conduct disorder, adjustment disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, etc and other behavioural problems like aggressive behavior, non-compliance, arrogance, social withdrawal, school refusal or other issues and problems that call for effective remedial therapy.

The second set of concerns lie within the realm of positive psychology. How can we further enhance efficiency, productivity and wellbeing in normal teenagers so that they do better in areas of their life including academics, communication, relationship, decision-making, emotional adjustment, freedom management etc.? These concerns are subject matter for training, coaching, mentoring and other forms of generative interventions leading to personal growth and improved level of functioning.

Dr Kaliaden, GJ, Teenagers' Transformational Training, Ch. In Psychology in the UAE
Dr. Carrie York Al-Karam and Dr. Amber Haque

Is teenage life so full of problems that they would need professional help and support for enhancing their personal growth and well-being? The answer is in the positive if we give a wider definition to the teenage problem so as to include skill deficit issues as well as adolescent psychopathology. In this sense, it is difficult to quantify the prevalence of teenage psychological issues and problems in any community or country.

Professional psychologists are called upon to address both types of teenage issues. The question is how effectively we can provide professional help to this segment of the population (teenagers and the youth) who may be least inclined to receive advice or counseling from parents, teachers and other authority figures. Can psychologists provide valid, reliable, and cost-effective solution to parents and teachers and help them address these teenage issues? Can a brief therapy model or a group counseling model work in the case of teenage clients? Can the goals of therapy or coaching be achieved within a short period by applying carefully designed individual and group interaction processes between the therapist and the teenager. If so, can the effect of such intervention be clearly and undeniably established? Can such quick changes in skill levels, attitudes, behavior and overall level of functioning, brought about within such a short period, be sustained over a long period? In other words can a permanent change or real (verifiable) transformation of the teenager take place as a result of a pre-designed (short)intervention program? Teenager Dynamic® program designed and offered by the author since December 1994 and presently training its 141st batch of trainees (in 2014) is an experiment that addressed the above issues and problems mainly within the multi-national expatriate community in the UAE.

Some Real-Life Cases of Teenagers Referred for Professional Help

A 15-year old Bangladeshi student studying in a British curriculum school in Dubai is suspended from school for self-injurious behavior. He scratched his hand with a glass piece and was sent to the nurse's room with a bleeding hand. Another 10th Grader in an Indian school has refused to go to school from last week and he gets uncontrollably upset when he is forced by parents to go to school. A ninth Grader experiences what his neurologists refer to as pseudo-seizures mostly when he is over-stressed or he is exposed to any continuous buzzing sound like that of a fan or motor. A 11th Grade boy is found to make preparations for killing himself by hanging from his bed-room fan because his grades for the pre-board exams were embarrassingly too low and he cannot imagine facing his rival who keeps daring him to do better than them. A senior student of an American IB school is so depressed that he has stopped going to school after his friend sustained major injuries from a car accident they were in together. A teenage girl runs away from home and is missing for three days, and the parents and the police are searching for her desperately until she is finally found on the open terrace of a friend's building living on the food and water supplied by her friends. A 9th grader has turned out to be a threat to his own parents and brother as he get into a wild rage, breaking household stuff and beating up people around if he is stopped from wandering with his unruly gang of friends known for their anti-social activities. A highly talented 11th Grade student of an Indian school commits suicide on the terrace of his building after failing badly in an examination, unable to deal with frustration, anger and resentment over the subjects he was forced to study. A divorced, single mother of a teenage student is calling for help as her only son is in jail. The police arrested him for some suspicious activity and the mother is fed up

with the boy's unruly, aggressive and reckless behavior. A teenage girl in the second year of college in Dubai hates herself as she is depressed, confused, angry and frustrated. This is what this girl writes to his father: "...I feel useless, guilty and an absolute failure. I feel there is no point in living at all... I feel like a loser; I feel like I am born to fail in every aspect of my life. My friends say that I get angry easily. When I get angry, I start becoming different and I feel as if I am going crazy, and I feel I can't remember anything. I am having difficulties in concentrating. I sleep too much- at least 14 hours a day. My eating patterns are erratic. Some days I don't eat and some other days I keep eating too much... My mind is pre-occupied with death.... At times I start hitting myself for not doing anything good in life....I can feel myself changing into a different person – at which I am scared. I want to scream and shout and ask this different person to go away. But it does not leave me. ... Very rare thoughts of self-abuse and suicide come into my head...Tears are rolling out when I am writing this." This very vivid description of the goings on in a depressed teenager's mind will give us an idea on the extent and severity of teenage problems prevalent in UAE community as in any other society in the world.

Cited above are real cases of teenagers in the UAE who have been referred by doctors, principals or parents for psychological help. These, however, are what the teacher-parent community would refer to as deviant cases.

The following are some the most common problems reported by parents of teenagers in parenting workshops:

- 1) Avoids study, hardly spends any time at home for personal study.
- 2) Is aggressive with parents, defiant and non-compliant

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- 3) Is addicted to social media, internet or mobile applications
- 4) Shy, socially withdrawn. Has very few friends. Spends most of his/her free time watching TV or listening to music.
- 5) Is arrogant with teachers, challenges authorities.
- 6) Too disorganized, is late for everything, fails to complete school assignments.
- 7) Fights with parents for more freedom to go out with friends. Parents are worried about the company he/she keeps.
- 8) Has developed intimacy with a member of the opposite sex and has been behaving in an overindulgent and indecent manner.

My 20 years of work with teenagers and the youth has yielded large amounts of data on this age group and a great deal of insight into the context, etiology, incidence, course and treatment outcomes of teenage problems. One of the observations regarding the family environment of disturbed teenagers was that there was a positive correlation between teenage disturbance and the following features of the family:

Parental criticism of the child

History of severe punishment

Inconsistency in administering reward or punishment

Too much pressure from parents over studies

Restriction of "normally expected" freedom of activity

Parents' perceived misunderstanding of the teenager

Parents habit of blaming the teenager continuously

Poor communication within the family

Lack of autonomy and freedom to function independently

Parental conflict within home

Parent's habit of getting angry with the child frequently

Parents' favouring a sibling, while neglecting the teenager

Parents' habit of criticizing the teenager in front of guests or strangers
Teenagers' lack of participation in family matters

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND THE SCHOOL SOCIAL DYNAMICS

In order to modify teenagers' social behavior, social skills and their attitudes to peers it is important for the counselor / trainer to understand the social dynamics of teenage classes. There are two different pathways through which teenagers satisfy their self-esteem needs and their need for being noticed and recognized.

The first pathway is the pursuit of academic excellence. This is naturally available to a selected few who are highly intelligent and have the right study habits from early childhood so that they keep receiving positive feedback for their study related achievements including better grades, praise for solving difficult problems, regularity in submitting their assignments, making impressive presentations, winning quizzes and study related competitions, receiving awards and certificates of excellence.

The second pathway is that of "acting smart" by demonstrating more social skills and aggressive behavior. This pathway is the alternative adapted by some teenagers for whom the academic pathway is inaccessible. More likely members of this category are students who are (1) more intelligent, but less hardworking and (2) less intelligent and the less hardworking. Both these groups are from the beginning more or less at the receiving end of teachers' criticism, punishment and threats of failing grades. Some of these students may be more active, creative and talented in sports or other non-academic areas. Some of them might have better communication skills and skills in solving problems by manipulating

people or exerting their power over them. Sometimes due to their past history of fighting and arguing with parents or bullying their classmates or younger siblings, they might have the skills to stand up for their rights or win over friends by their defensive or offensive behavior.

Fame Point System: In some schools there is a system of awarding fame points to class members based their "smartness". The typical nerds are least likely to get a high fame point ranking. The number one on Fame point ranking is typically well built, capable of exerting power over the class mates and over the juniors, someone who would hardly ever take a complaint to the teacher or supervisor, but rather confront the trouble-maker by assertively or aggressively subduing him/ her and establishing his position in the pecking order. There are two types of fame Points: Classroom Fame Point and Ground fame Point. Classroom fame point is high for those who show off their personality, aggressive stand, ability to command and dominate the fellow classmates. Ground fame point improves if one is good at more sports items or games or is able to impress on other members of the school community by one' skills and leadership qualities.

The Concept of "Teenager Dynamic" program

Concepts like optimization, objective function and constraints are derived from linear programming and dynamic programming models widely used in operations research and project management. The teenager's experience of "being in the world" is complex like any real-life problem situation in the community. Thirteen or more years of parenting and the psychological impact thereof in any particular teenager is "the given" ground reality of his /her life. The past cannot be changed, and to some

extent the present has its own constraints such as the parenting environment and numerous limitations of the community. The objective function was to optimize the teenager's personal growth including career-development and self-actualization, while treating the various limitations of the given ground reality as constraints within which this optimization should be achieved. This implies that irrespective of the teenager's past experience, developmental history or present family (or community) environment, a certain amount of optimization is possible. This is the case with each and every teenager. At the same time there are certain commonalities in the life of teenagers in general, no matter what the specific developmental or environmental constraints are. If we can identify these common elements and design specific interventions targeting each of these elements, we can achieve an overall improvement in the level of functioning of each participating teenager. And if the improvement in the level of functioning is significant enough, we can expect a qualitative change that is experienced as "transformational" by the teenager and observed as dramatic by the significant others.

Program Contents

Teenager Dynamic program was designed by the author in 1994 as an extension of the psychological service in Dubai. The objective was to bring about transformational change in the teenage participants within the given time-frame of 4 days and to measure the change by using subjective measures like self-rating scales as well as objective measures like parents' and teachers' ratings. The intervention per se ("Teenager Dynamic"® Program) consisted of 24 hours of group interaction typically spread over 4 days (6 hours per day). The author was the trainer / therapist during all the sessions of the program. The program included

assessment of the teenager's I.Q. attitudes, behavior patterns, study skills, family environment etc. The program contents included the following modules:

1. Introduction to teenage life and experience.
2. A behavioural model of success as a series of goal-directed action.
3. Dynamics of self-motivation
4. Goal setting and decision skills
5. Communication skills
6. Freedom and responsibility
7. Emotional Intelligence and strategies for managing emotions
8. Program evaluation
9. Parents' workshop
10. Concluding session

Several therapeutic techniques adapted from Narrative Therapy, Poetry Therapy, Dialectical Cognitive Therapy, Cognitive Behaviour Modification, Gestalt Therapy, Neuro-Linguistic Programming etc. were applied during these sessions. The power of group dynamics was utilized by carefully designed activities and demonstration. The interactive mode is instrumental in eliciting active participation and a sense of camaraderie within the group.

Objectives of the present Evaluation

The objective of the present study was to evaluate whether the specific intervention (experimental variable) was capable of producing the stated objectives of the program, viz., (1) the REMEDIAL FUNCTION and (2) the POSITIVE GROWTH FUNCTION. The entire program was taken as the experimental variable. The hypothesis to be tested was whether this

SPECIFIC INTERVENTION (viz. "Teenager Dynamic"® Program) has been effective in producing the stated objectives (PERSONAL GROWTH and BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES). The null hypothesis to be rejected was "the observed change will be the same in those who participated in the program as well as in those who did not participate in the program". If the observed change is significantly high, this null hypothesis may be rejected and the effectiveness of the program may be established. A participating teenager's willingness to recommend the program to his/her close friends was taken as a reliable measure of their acceptance of the program and perception of positive value in the program.

Evaluation Data Sheet

The main instrument that was used for this study is the Program Evaluation Form which was filled out by all participants at the end of the program as a part of the procedure. Parents' Feedback Form was also used for validation purposes.

The Program Evaluation Form consisted of three sections:

- (1) Personal Data (Name, age, ID Number, Batch Number and date of evaluation)
- (2) Open-ended Feedback Section where the participants were asked to write in their impressions in 5-10 lines.
- (3) A three-point rating scale on which the participants were asked to rate their progress during the program on the following 9 areas: self-confidence, self-motivation, attention and concentration skills, memorizing skills, ability to make friends, assertive communication, making a speech without fear, understanding of study methods, and ability to deal with emotions

Procedure

The actual program evaluation was done on a sample of 360 participants taken from population of over 2000 candidates who attended the program from 1994 till 2007. Every teenager who participated in the 106 Batches of Teenager Dynamic" ® program had filled out the same form. However for the present evaluation we selected a random sample of 360 participants for Acceptance rating and a random sample of 50 participants for PERSONAL GROWTH rating. Acceptance was measured by computing the number of cases and percentage of participants who showed their acceptance and satisfaction for the entire program by expressing their willingness to recommend the program to their best friends. The assumption was that if they were not satisfied and if they did not accept the program as personally valuable, they would not recommend it to their best friends. Personal Growth was measured by using the three-point self-rating scale. Each of the nine personal growth functions were evaluated in terms of three categories ("Much Improvement" A Little Improvement" and "No Improvement at all"). These evaluation forms were analyzed in order to derive the quantitative data.

Results

Following were the results obtained:

ACCEPTANCE RATING N = 360 (Liked the program and are willing to recommend to your best friends?)

YES f= 353 NO f= 7

% = 98 % = 2

OVERALL RATING OF THE PROGRAM N = 50

EXCELLENT	GOOD	OK	NOT EFFECTIVE
35	15	0	0
70%	30%	0%	0%

PERSONAL GROWTH RATING N = 50

	Much Improvement	A Little Improvement	No Improvement
Self- Confidence	43 (86%	7 (14%)	0 0%
Self Motivation	34 (68%)	16 (32%)	0 0%
Concentration	30 (60%)	20 (40 %)	0 0%
Memory Skills	30 (60%)	18 (36 %)	2 4%
Socializing Skills	38 (76%	12 (24%)	0 0%
Assertive Skills	33 (66%)	16 (32%)	1 2%
Group/Public			
Communication	35 (70%)	14 (28%)	1 (2%)
Study Skills	27 (54%)	23 (46%)	0 (0%)
Skills in managing			
Emotions	27 54%	22 (44%	2 (4%)

AVERAGE FOR ALL

PERSONAL GROWTH 33 (66%) 16.4 (32.8%) 0.6 (1.2%)

FACTORS :

The obtained results indicated that ("Teenager Dynamic"® program) has made significant changes in the participants as measured by subjective self-rating.

Discussion

In spite of the very limited scope of this program evaluation model applied for the present investigation, the results clearly supports the hypothesis that the program is capable of producing transformational change. Of the 50 participants in the sample, 1.2% had felt that the

program produced “No Improvement” in Overall Personal Growth, whereas 66% found “Much Improvement” during the program and 33.8% found some improvement. In terms of Self-Confidence 86% of participants reported “Much Improvement” during the program. The program was rated “Excellent” by 70% of the participants and “Good” by 30% of the participants. None of the participants rated it as “Just OK” or as “Not effective” .

The ACCEPTANCE rating was much higher. Of a total of 360 participants 353 or 98% expressed their eagerness to recommend the program to their best friends.

Only 7 cases or 2% of the sample showed their unwillingness to recommend the program to their friends. We looked into these cases of 7 candidates and read their comments in the open ended part of the questionnaire. The seven comments were as follows: (1) I feel very interested.... I feel I am in a second home and other teenagers are my friends” (2) “It was an amazing experience... I have received answers to most of my questions that has gathered up in my teenager life”. (3) It is a helpful program; you can be just free letting your personal things out....” (4) It was a very good idea to join “Teenager Dynamic” program; I have really got the will to action and I have really improved my study habits” (5) “It was good and very useful...I could motivate myself to do the things exactly the way I wanted to. I can achieve the goals” (6) I feel this program is really good to help me develop my personality and character” (7) Teenager Dynamic is a great program... I feel happy that I joined the program. Such comments from even those who did not want to recommend the program to their friends shows that the motive for not recommending the program is unlikely to be the program effectiveness.

Therefore we concluded that probable reasons for not recommending the program was their concerns about their privacy and the fear that their friends might think that the program is for disturbed teenagers.

Conclusion

Self-rating method has its limitations as it measures only the subjective aspect of “change” or personal evaluation of one's own inner transformation. In order to establish “objectivity” of the change, the present data needs to be further validated by ratings by observers like parents and teachers and independent observers like a research investigator. Although we have accumulated a great deal of such feedback from parents and teachers these have not been gathered or analyzed in a structured, systematic manner. By using a structured questionnaire, observations of parents and the significant others can be collected in order to validate participants' self-rating and to measure sustainability of “change” over a period six months to one year.

The issue of attribution is a problem when it comes to long-term change. While it is relatively easy to establish causal link between the Program and the observed behavioral change immediately after the program, when it comes to long term effects, other interim factors may come in as “perceived” causes of “change”. From our experience over the past 20 years this lack of clarity among parents about the contents of the program makes such independent long-term evaluation rather difficult. However the fact that the program continued for the past 20 years primarily depending on referral from participants as well as recommendation from parents and professionals like doctors, teachers, pastors, principals etc. who have witnessed the change is an indirect proof of program effectiveness, although these factors are not

systematically quantified. It is important to note that a large number of candidates made comments like the following in the open ended part of the program evaluation sheet: *"I will always remember this program because it was a great changing point in my life"*

The limitation of the present study is that it is based on data collected as a part of the routine evaluation and feedback procedure within the program. Data collection was done for quality improvement rather than for scientific / experimental research. Still the information derived from this preliminary study can support further initiatives for detailed research incorporating data from batches 107 to 141 (2007 – 2014).

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