

Developing Healthy Relationships program

Mary Brown

The Developing Healthy Relationships program is run out of Centacare Catholic Family Services, Melbourne. It is a program for students in Years 11 and 12. These years - especially Year 12 - are highly stressful for most students. Even though some stress is needed for healthy living, the emphasis that is put on VCE results by many parents, teachers and students themselves can cause distress which can be self defeating. Not being able to maintain a happy balance in life is also a major stress of this level. The students will often say that keeping teachers and parents happy as well as maintaining friendships and relationships, holding down a job and dealing with bosses all make up a pressure cooker that the students live in for a good while.

As we know one of the most important de stressors is having good supportive relationships around us. Many of the students find their mums of great help in stressful times. One of the main relationships that they want to build and maintain is the relationship with their parents. They would also like to be able to approach teachers and have more concern and regard from them.

Of late schools are asking for workshops that deal with 'stress'. The following is a collation of the findings from 17 and 18 year old students re stress in their lives. Most young people that we have asked said that they have a stress level of average 6 – 7 out of 10 where 10 is totally stressed out. Here are some of the answers that young people gave us:-

What stresses you out:

Schoolwork, Homework, sport, money, family, siblings, parents, job stress, exams, job interviews, deadlines, friends, relationships, peer pressure and alcohol, PMS, what universities? What's the future path? Teachers, high expectations, lack of motivation, miscommunications, no-one to empathise with you, bottle things up, lack of balance, death and illness, body image, lack of time, driving on their own after getting their license.

What helps the stress:

Talking to someone they trust eg, parents mostly talking to their mum, school counselor, siblings, teachers, exercise, singing, music, time with friends, prioritizing and positive self talk.

It is critical that as adults we make time to listen to our young people especially when they are stressed and not putting their best foot forward. I'm sure that our parents would have some interesting memories about our teenage years that would be hard and embarrassing for us to hear.

The Developing Healthy Relationships program

The VCE – Developing Healthy relationships program is situated within the Marriage and Relationship Education Unit (MRE). The Program has been offered to Years 11 and 12 school students since 2004. The team is made up of three educators and Glenn Manton. Glenn - who has been with us since March 2005 – is a former football star and regular media personality and is involved with supporting disadvantaged youth.

The Program is based around personal stories, a modification of Gottman's Relationship House, Markman's danger signs and activities and role plays that are all aimed at building healthy relationships and connectedness with self, family, friends and other important people in their lives.

The essential ingredient in the development of each school's program is a meeting with a representative body of the students a couple of weeks beforehand. At this meeting the students are asked to share what are the important relationship issues that they have at the moment. These can directly or indirectly be worked in at the session. Although each group of young people has their own particular character there are a few common themes which include relationships with family and the ability to balance relationships and school life.

The feedback from the schools has been overwhelmingly positive. This is in great part due to the preparation that is given to each program for each particular school, the content, and the amount of fun had by all in its delivery – Glenn usually provides the humour with the educators being the straight guys.

An exciting part for me is discovering that the young people already know what healthy and unhealthy relationships are. We help to facilitate them taking time to look at them and making healthy choices because we all deserve great relationships!

Mary Brown has worked for Centacare Catholic Family Services Marriage and Relationship Education Unit for 20 years. The Unit runs education programs for engaged couples and married couples. She is coordinator of the 'Developing Healthy Relationships Program' offered to Victorian VCE Students (Years 11 and 12). She is also coordinator of the FOCCUS Australia Office for The Catholic Society for Marriage Education. Ph: (03) 9287 5512.

