

Reconnecting Disconnected Young Men With ADHD

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Why this presentation?

- Across the board, boys and young men are falling significantly behind their similar-age female peers- academically, in employment, and financially. This has received far less attention than the struggle of girls and young women.
- The longitudinal research data on ADHD shows a myriad of poorer life course outcomes in general (Pittsburgh ADHD Longitudinal Study, Dr. Brooke Molina and associates at University of Pittsburgh).
- Are we headed towards a “failure to launch” spike amongst neurodiverse young adults?

About me

- Licensed Clinical Social Worker specializing in ADHD, former School Clinician, father to a son with ADHD & learning differences.
- Worked primarily at special ed private schools for students with behavior challenges.
- Founder of ADHD Dude & Trip Camp.
- ADHD Dude YouTube channel and The ADHD Parenting Podcast
- Create content/webinars for ADDitude Magazine.
- Main focus is Parent Training through the ADHD Dude Membership Site
- Based in Philadelphia, where in-person psychoed groups are offered.



To download a copy of the presentation slides



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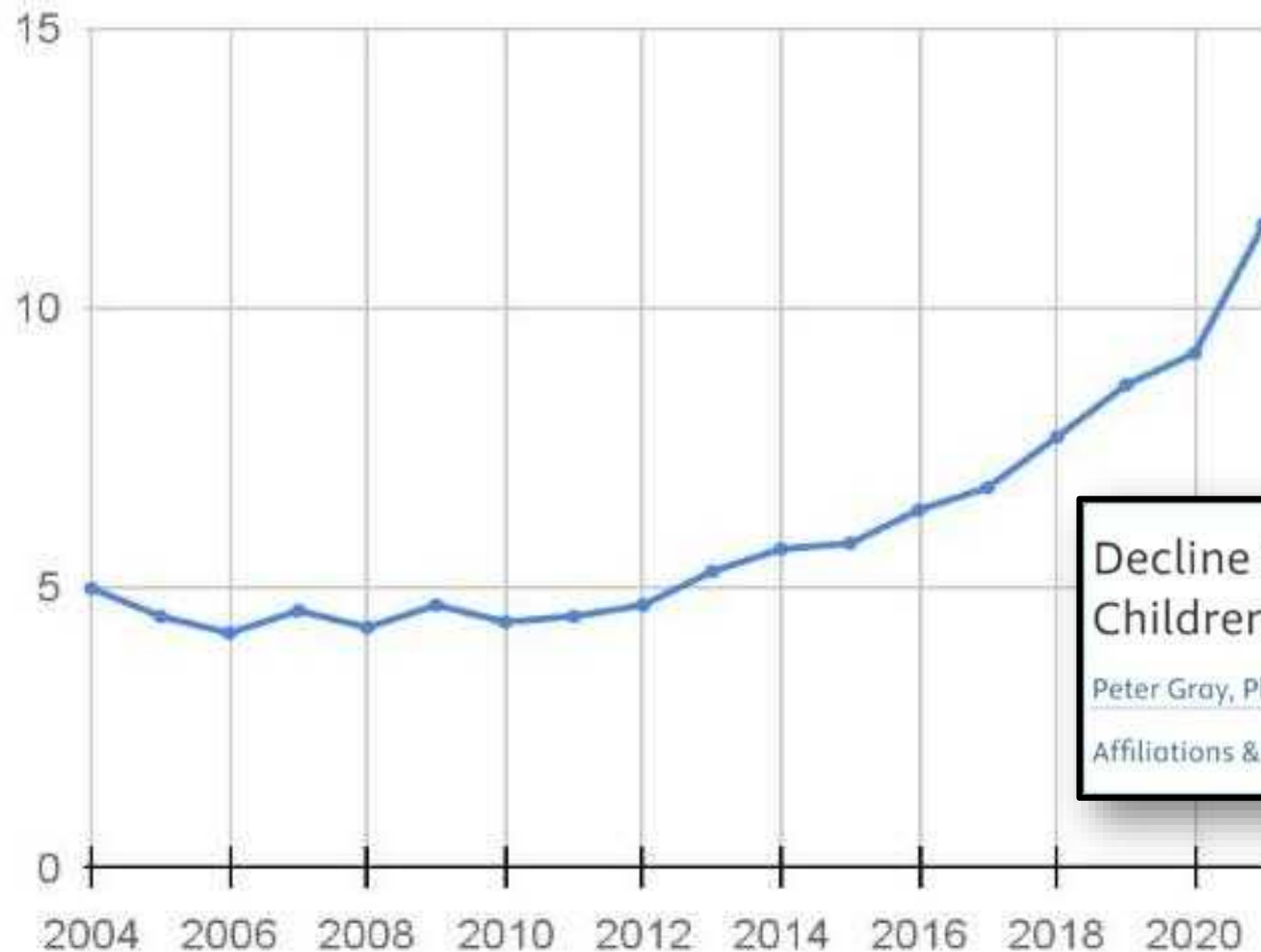


ADHD Parenting Podcast

What about girls, young women and gender non-confirming kids and young adults?

- Everything in this presentation would be applicable.
- Majority of my experience has been working with boys and young men.
- Cross-culturally, this is viewed as a primarily male problem.

% of US Males with Major Depression



The following graphics are from: *What is happening to boys? A collaborative review*

An ongoing open-source literature review posted and curated by Jonathan Haidt, Richard Reeves, and Zach Rausch.

Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being: Summary of the Evidence

Peter Gray, PhD ¹ · David F. Lancy, PhD ² · David F. Bjorklund, PhD ³

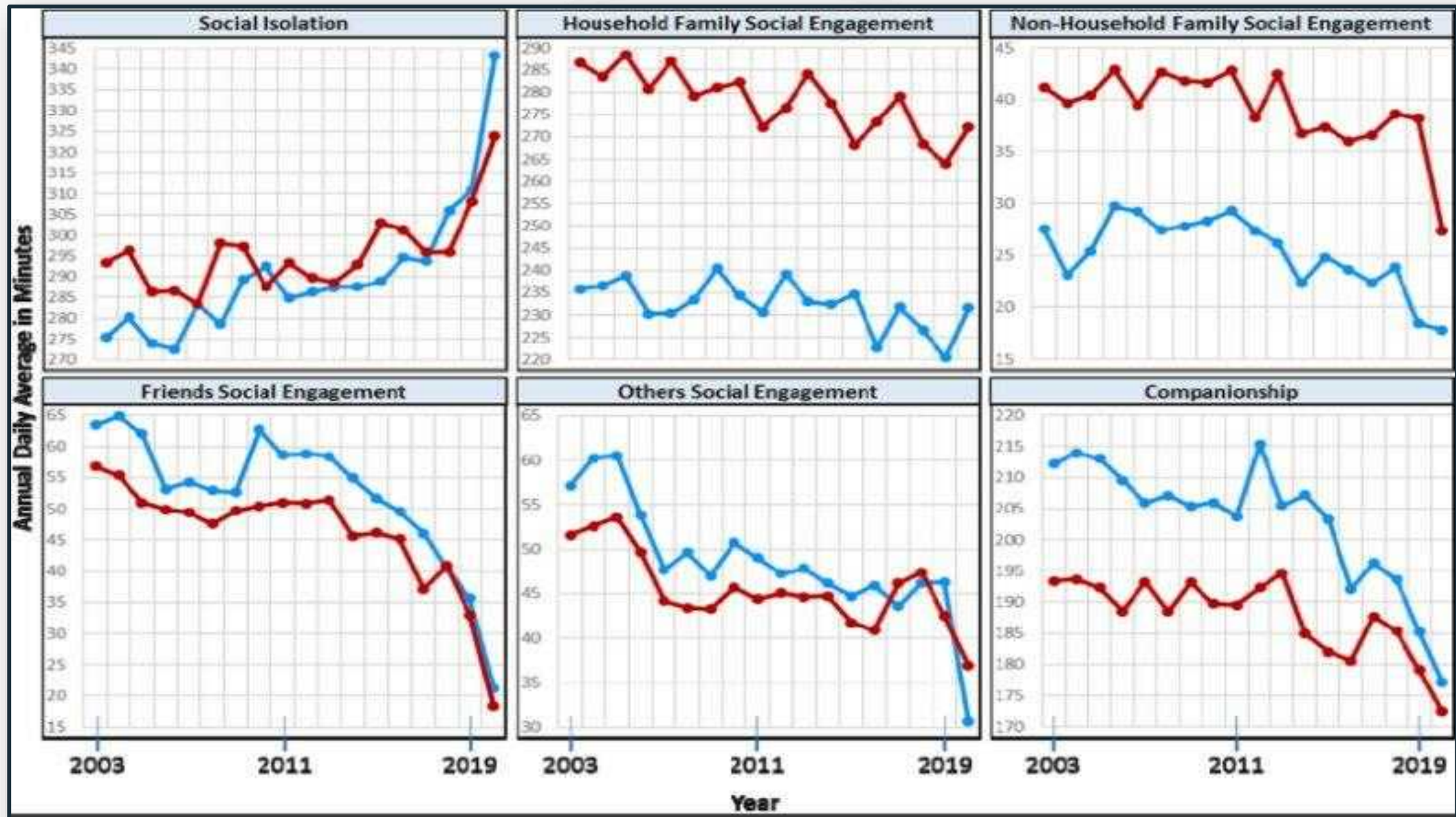
Affiliations & Notes ▾ Article Info ▾

The male loneliness epidemic

1.6.4 [Brott \(2019\)](#). The epidemic — and consequences — of male loneliness. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

EXCERPT: In that study, **44% of males 18 and older said they feel lonely all the time — far higher than the percentage of women who gave the same answer.** And that doesn't even take into account men's well-documented habit of underreporting anything that might make us feel — or give someone else the impression that we might be — weak or defective.

In the same study, **men were 50% more likely than women (18% vs 12%) to say they don't have any close friends, and 33% more likely (32% vs 24%) to say they don't have a best friend.**



Raj, 15 (ADHD and higher-verbal ASD)

- Started school refusal in 9th grade, school district had him attend cyber school.
- Does not leave the house unless it's to see superhero movies with father.
- Much pressure is put on Raj about his future, etc.



Luke, 20 (combined type presentation)

- Since graduating from high school, Luke has occasionally worked for his uncle when he feels like it and has not done anything else.
- Parents do not ask anything of Luke because a therapist they met with told them that “he will find his way when he’s ready and to just love him for who he is.”
- Has been unmedicated since graduating high school.
- Sleeps most of the day and is up at night gaming and smoking marijuana, purchased with money parents give him.
- Has said no to the parent’s efforts to help him.



Carter, 12 (combined type presentation)

- Had some academic and social struggles that were typical for a 6th grader with ADHD transitioning into middle school.
- Parent 1 started watching a “Pathological Demand Avoidance” social media influencer and then self-diagnosed Carter with PDA, pulled him out of school (which he did not want) to home-school him.
- Parent 1 began “low demand parenting” (Unlimited screen time, no demands or expectations; everything is framed as a choice.)
- Parent 2 reached out to me after a month of this and reported Carter was presenting with significant anxiety and could not get him to leave the house.



Elan, 17 (Inattentive ADHD presentation)

- Presented with social anxiety since age 13, never addressed.
- No expectations, demands, or structure at home.
- Will be up in the middle of the night on school nights gaming. On weekends up all-night gaming, sleeping until 2:00 PM.
- The parent brings food to his room, so he doesn't have to be inconvenienced by going downstairs.
- Aside from school and going to expensive restaurants with grandparents, Elan is constantly in his room, gaming.



Are boys and young men with ADHD at higher-risk for social isolation?

The loneliness experienced in ADHD may be more prolonged perhaps due to both their social functioning difficulties which often persists into adolescence and adulthood ([S. S. Lee et al., 2011](#); [Wehmeier et al., 2010](#)) and feeling different due to the hardships faced due to their ADHD ([Björk et al., 2017](#)).

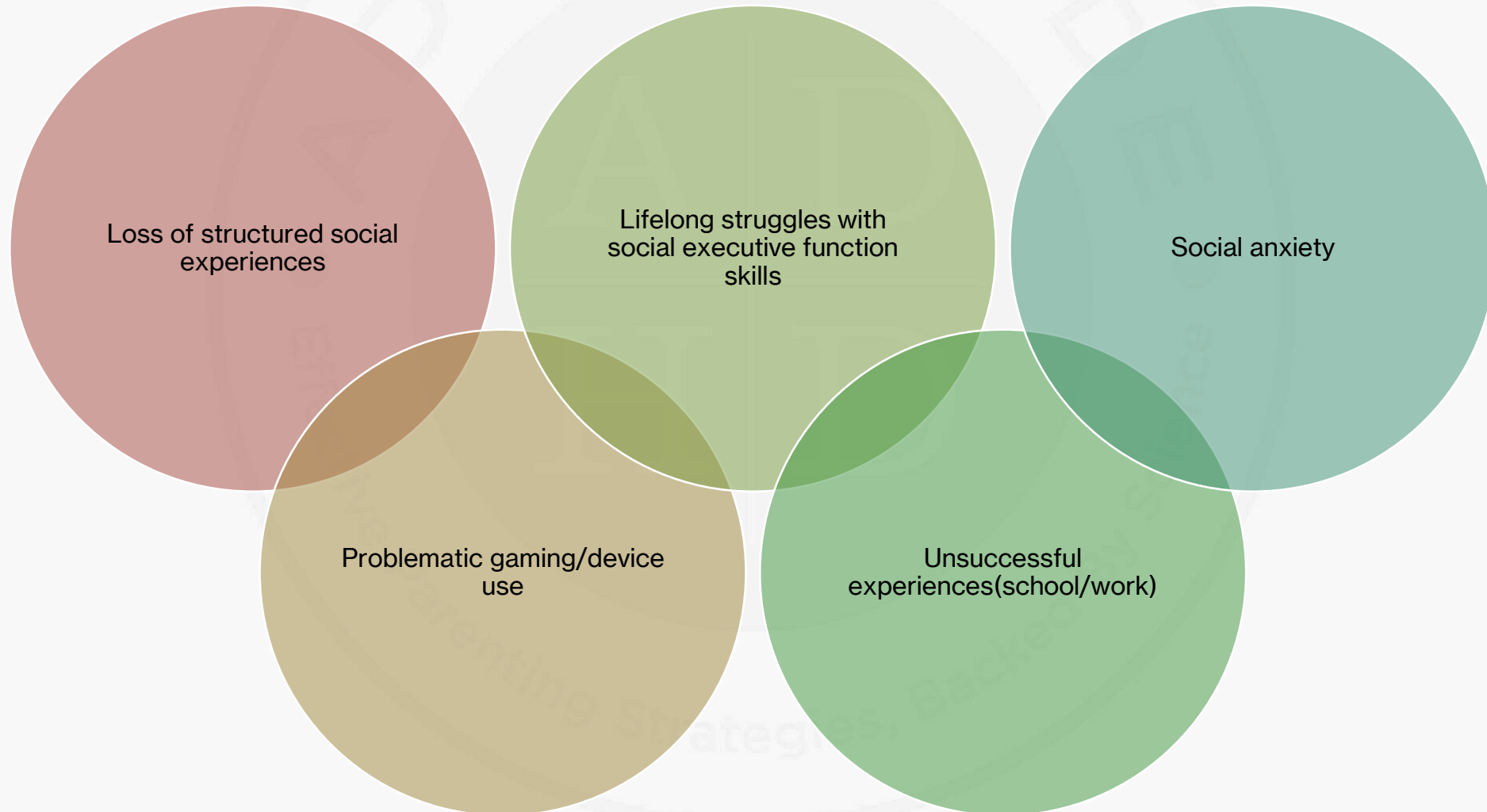
Jong, A., Odoi, C. M., Lau, J., & J.Hollocks, M. (2024). Loneliness in Young People with ADHD: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Attention Disorders*.

Are boys and young men with ADHD at higher-risk for social isolation?

While the meta-analysis found overall increased loneliness levels in young people with ADHD compared to their peers without ADHD, there were some studies included that found no difference or decreased levels of loneliness in the ADHD group. This is interesting in light of some theories positing that people with ADHD may have lower loneliness levels due to a self-perceptual bias which protects them from feeling lonely, and thus masking associations between ADHD and loneliness ([Hoza et al., 2005](#); [Martin et al., 2019](#)).

Jong, A., Odoi, C. M., Lau, J., & J.Hollocks, M. (2024). Loneliness in Young People with ADHD: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Attention Disorders*.

What are the catalysts to disconnection/avoidance in boys and young men with ADHD?



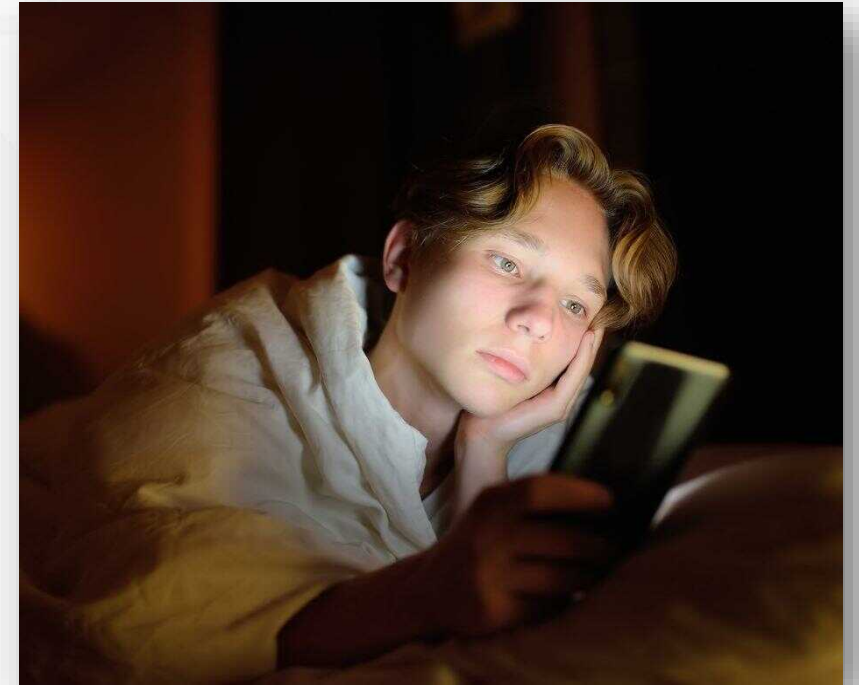
What doesn't help shift from disconnection to reconnection

- Giving ultimatums
- Waiting it out
- Social skills groups
- 1:1 coaching or therapy with the child/young adult



Psychoeducation for parents around social disconnection

- Our screen-obsessed culture promotes avoidance and disconnection.
- Does the child feel they have disappointed parents, and does rigid thinking contribute to this belief?
- Has the child internalized messages about success? (“If I’m not a famous YouTube, then I’m a loser”).
- **Disconnection is not a behavioral problem; it’s a shame regulation problem.**

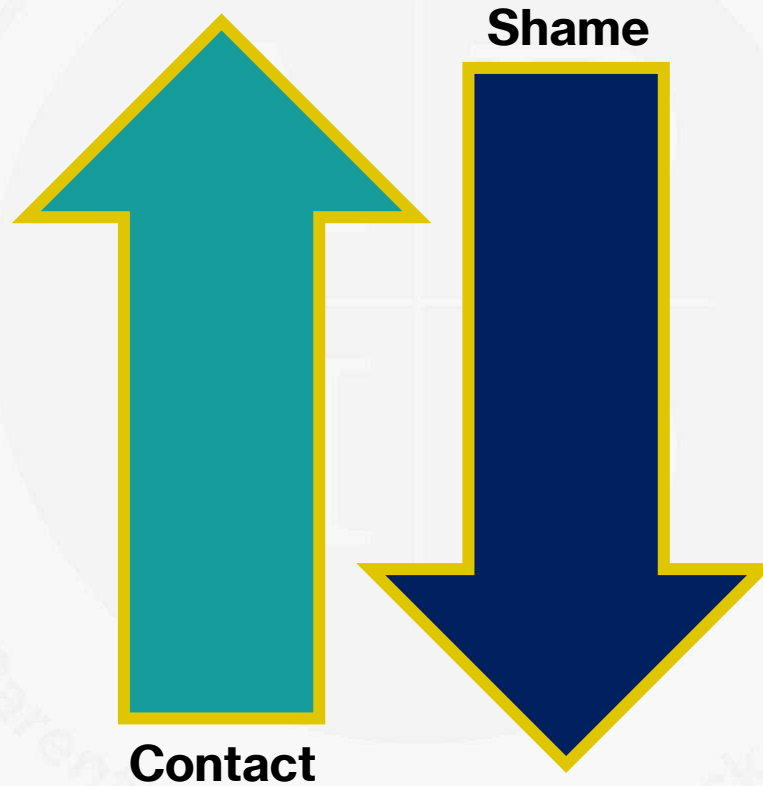


Self-imposed disconnection is the result of feeling inferior and shame dysregulation (inability to contain shame and feelings of inadequacy)

Connection is the “antidote” to shame done through gradual exposure to connecting experiences (principle of accumulation)

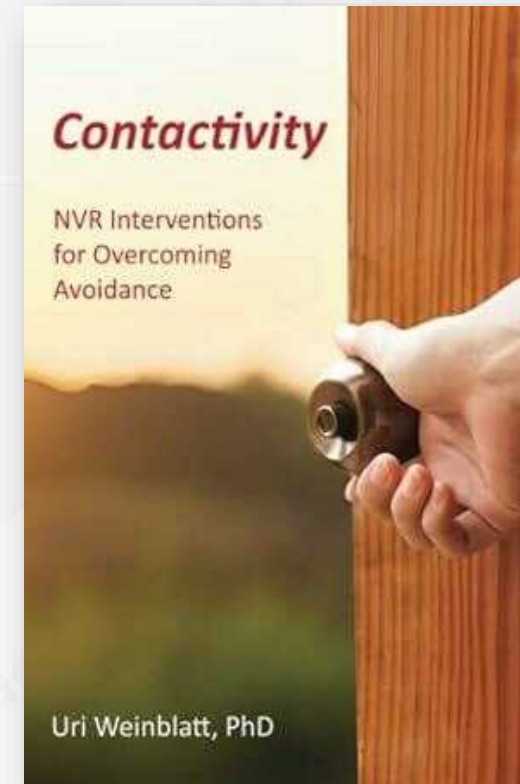


When contact increases, shame decreases



***Contactivity* approach, created by Dr. Uri Weinblatt to reduce social isolation and avoidance, is based on Nonviolent Resistance, an evidence-based approach.**

- Avoidance is opposed through contact.
- The solution to avoidance is reconnecting to self, others, group
- Parents assert their presence by projecting optimism, patience, and making contact tolerable attractive.



The principals of *Contactivity* by Dr. Uri Weinblatt

- Avoidance is primarily the result of feeling inferior and dysregulated shame
- Increase contact with the child & enhance activity in his life
- Connecting needs to proceed functioning
- Technology creates problems but can also be part of the solution
- Connecting conversations lead to contact; problem-solving conversations lead to loss of contact
- Supporting is not enabling
- Change occurs according to the *principle of accumulation* (the more tolerable connecting experiences facilitate a shift away from disconnection)

Connecting precedes functioning

- More severe the avoidance the more important is building and maintaining contact
- Fostering and maintaining contact takes precedence over school, socializing outside the house, etc.
- Connecting helps to protect against the feelings of inferiority/shame that led to withdrawal/isolation.



Addressing tech use

- Acknowledge that being a gamer is likely part of the individual's identity that needs to be respected.
- Help to understand how skills used during gaming (problem-solving, communication, socializing) are useful skills that he has developed, and are used in the non-virtual world.
- We can ask if they know anyone who seemed to have a problem with tech and discuss it as a means of avoidance, numb unpleasant feelings, etc, just as they would use a substance.



“Supporting is not enabling”: Addressing Parental Accommodation

Parental Accommodation: When parents members change their behavior to avoid or alleviate their child’s temporary distress.

- Lack of boundaries within the relationship.
- Perpetuates the child’s avoidance tendencies and unproductive, immature, inconsiderate behaviors.
- **Parental Accommodation is widespread in families of kids with neurodevelopmental differences and often has been present since early childhood.**

Examples of Parental Accommodation

- Elan's parent brings food to his room, so he doesn't have to leave.
- Luke's parents taking therapist's advice to treat him as fragile.
- Raj's school district sending him to cyber school (*school accommodation*).
- Carter's parent using "low-demand parenting" approach.

Reducing parental accommodation around isolation

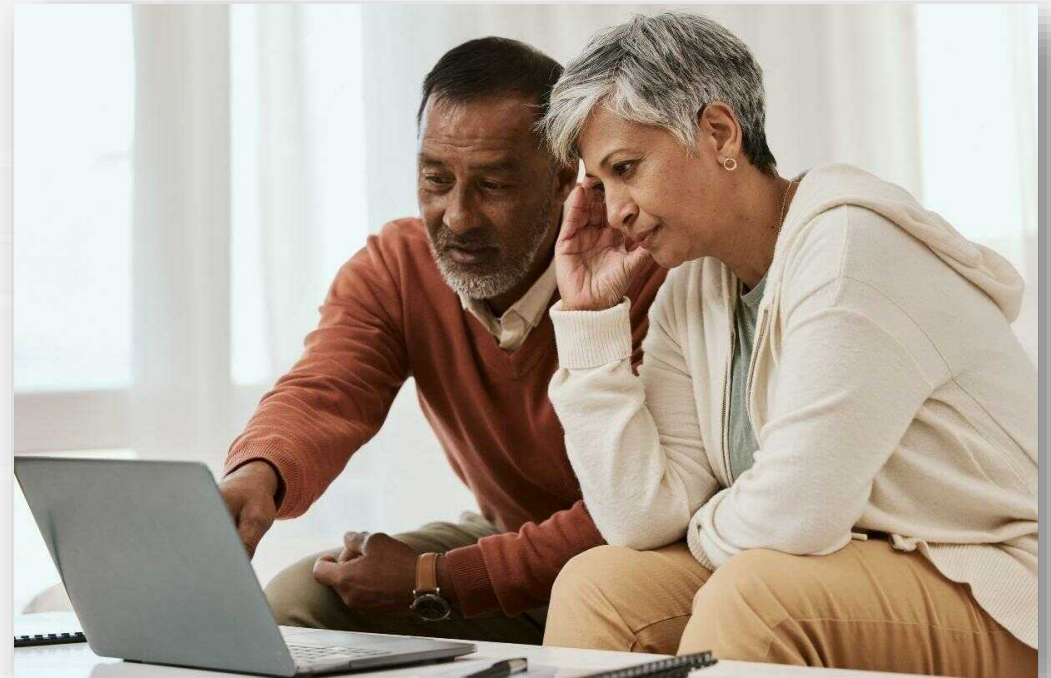
Stop engaging in behaviors that contribute to the child isolating himself.

Examples:

- Elan's parent was told to stop bringing food to his room, wake him up in the morning and offer him breakfast if he comes downstairs.
- Luke's parents were told to stop giving him money and to shut the internet off at midnight.
- Raj's parents told to tell the school district he needs to transition back into brick & mortar school.
- Carter's parent was not receptive to my approach or hearing that "low-demand parenting" contradicts research data.

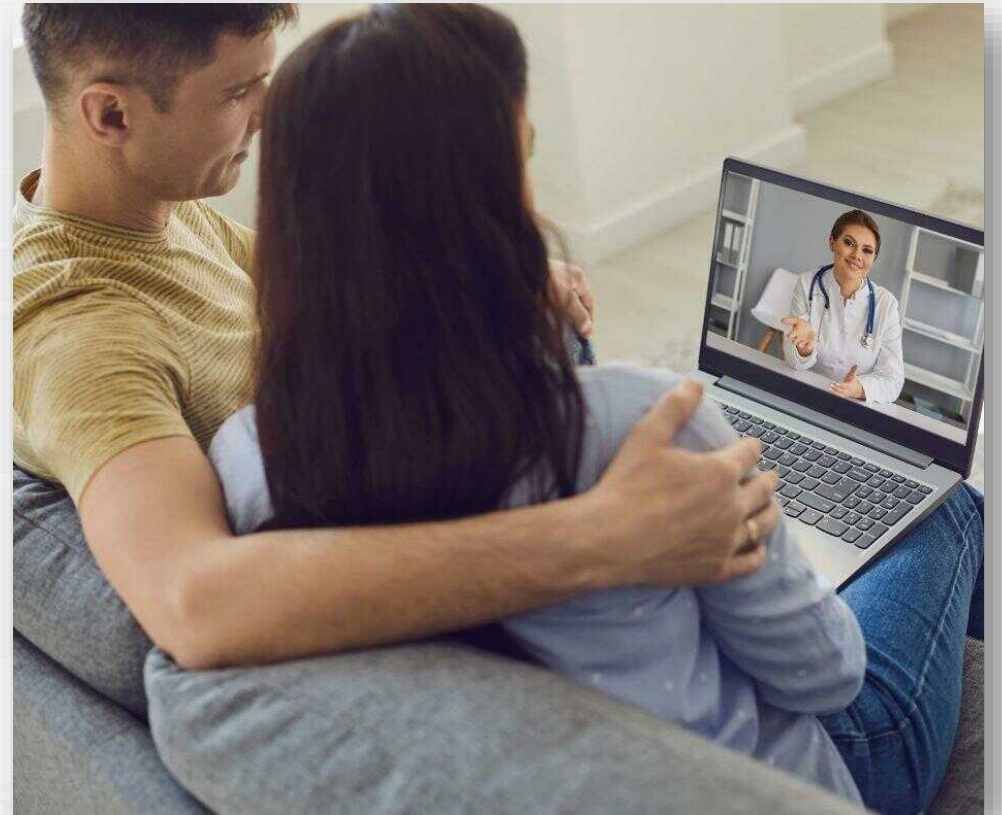
Reducing parental accommodation: Working with parents, not the child

- Understanding how to have connecting conversations
- Parents learn how to resist pessimism/despair not through helping their son recognize his abilities within himself and pushing back against pessimistic statements.
- Enlisting supporters



Guiding parents in gradually building connection

- Tolerable connecting experiences increasingly (principle of accumulation)
- Develop actionable steps the parents/family members can do to create tolerable connecting experiences.
- Enlisting supporters (grandparents, family members, friends, etc.) for connecting experiences.



Enlist supporters who the individual respects to help accumulate contact

- Supporters are people who the avoider respects and has a relationship with. These are not professional, rather family members, friends, etc.
- Through supporters reaching out and stopping over, the avoider accumulates connecting experiences.
- The less connecting experiences, the more likely the avoider is to fall into greater shame and despair.



Principal of Accumulation

- Small acts such as stopping at doorway to talk, waking up in the morning and offering breakfast, not fighting when it's time to shut off the computer, having meals with family, having supporters stop over, going to school (even briefly) are all successes in fostering connection.

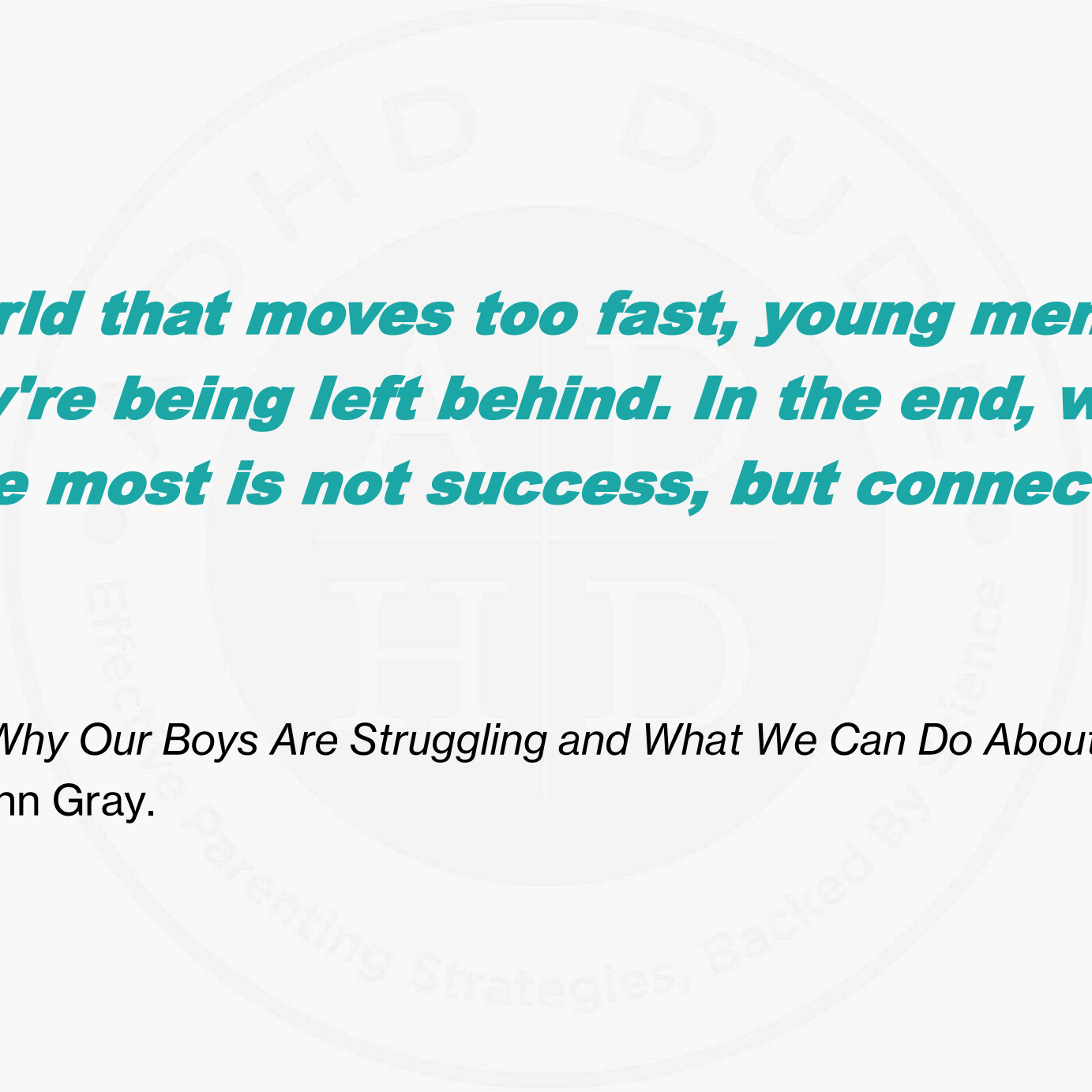


Foundation of the “Connecting Sit-In”

- When discussing social disconnection, “we” is framed as something the family is experiencing together rather than the child being the “identified patient”.
- One parent sits next to the child/young adult for the role of “empathy assistant,” the other parent sits across from them as the “conversation leader”.
- Framing things as multiple-choice questions tend to work well with boys/young men.
- Frame disconnection/social isolation as not a personal failure but a typical experience for many young people.
- Stay away from “why” and feelings questions. (*Playing armchair therapist*)
- No problem-solving conversations; this leads to disconnection.

Reconnection can be a very slow process, with setbacks

- Reducing parental accommodation can be challenging for parents, particularly those whose child has a history of aggression, making suicidal threats, etc.
- Learning to regulate shame has to be done gradually so the child isn't overwhelmed, which could cause a setback.
- It is essential for parents not to pull back when there's a setback.



"In a world that moves too fast, young men can feel like they're being left behind. In the end, what they crave most is not success, but connection."

The Boys Crisis: Why Our Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It by Dr. Warren Farrell and Dr. John Gray.

Thank You!



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