Broadway's 'Dear Evan Hansen' Captures More Than Teen Angst And Tony Awards

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — November 1, 2017

This time last week I hadn’t even heard of the Broadway musical sensation Dear Evan Hansen. Because aunts are the best (yes, it is a medical fact), I asked my niece what she wanted to see or do that could be a special experience for us to celebrate her birthday. She mentioned the show. I researched the tickets. And, boom!, it was a done deal.

To my surprise, given such theatrical performances aren’t traditionally my thing, I loved it. It was modern and effective in capturing such depth of humanity and complexity of the human spirit, including but not limited to the following: mental anguish, the power of denial, suffering, depression, adolescence, familial strife, pain, anxiety, developmental stages, maturation, addiction, dysfunction, loneliness, self-medicating, desire for connection and bullying.

When I re-read that last sentence, it sounds like a real downer. Trust me, from someone who prefers movies and theater to be uplifting with rainbows and purple lollipops, it actually wasn’t. I am still surprised with the chosen recurrent themes of longing and despair that it was inspiring while simultaneously harnessing very important, accurate depictions of such overall health issues ranging from normal to pathological development and the transgenerational impact of dysfunction.

The messages resonate no matter where you fall along the life cycle.
When I mentioned it in conversation to a colleague who is a parent to adolescents, he responded, “I live teen angst every day, why would I want to see it on stage?” I would posit because it gives insight into the universal nature of the struggle and the challenges many families face. It is unifying in uncovering the isolation many feel. And exposes further the detachment social media onslaughts impose.

When we understand the genuine causes of disconnection and suffering, even the intermittently adversarial relationship of the teen-parent dyad can’t compete with our innate desire to heal what is damaged or broken.

Frederick Douglass famously declared “it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” The responsibility of perpetuating a brighter tomorrow for all involves everyone pitching in - not just families. We are all complicit in our reactions and behaviors. They are symbiotic. We all play a role.

The good news is when adversity meets well-timed intervention the future course can be very bright. Healthier children do progress our society. If we care to create a better world and minimize disease, then we at all levels as a whole can play a responsible part from outright assuaging suffering to modeling optimal behaviors and being a mentor.

Our culture encourages escapism and quick fixes. Numbing out albeit by hefty addictive substances like opioids or via soft addictions like non-stop over scheduling and endless social media or cell phone checking are means to fill an unidentified void.

Band-aiding ruptured arteries is the mainstay of most current policy and practice, unfortunately. Enhancing opioid prescription regulations treats a symptom, not the disease. Harm reduction has merit, but is enhanced by a multi-pronged approach. It is only when you face and understand the cause of your anxiety or suffering that healing and truly living begin.

Then, the need for the anesthetic subsides.

Understanding the complexities of a disease state—especially one as expansive as addiction, for example— involves exploring the individual's health and physical examination, environment, occupation, education, community, socioeconomic influences, genetic predisposition, personal habits, social interactions, living environment, family history, life and childhood history, phenomenology or biopsychosocial spheres.

The characters’ struggles in this musical provide realistic portrayals. Their responses to life stressors span the spectrum from healthy to pathological.

Social dyads albeit parent-child can react synergistically or negatively. They are intertwined relationships that have the opportunity to be mutually beneficial. Encountering stress is an unavoidable aspect of life. To be on the side of coping with greater ease, is the purposeful goal.

The family dynamic plays a critical role in a child’s development. Children absorb the stresses of their environment. This understanding is not about blaming or displacing personal responsibility. It is about championing facing the cause to empower a new narrative and healing. Ultimately, if a child carries these unresolved issues into adulthood, then the burden becomes theirs alone to
The science is clear and extensive on this and can be reviewed in my pieces “To Avoid Adult Dysfunction Start ‘In Utero’ [2]” or “Is Anthony Weiner a Sex Addict?” is the wrong question [3].”

Nevertheless, the cycle in families of the adverse effects of toxic extreme stress (e.g. extreme poverty, abuse, vitriolic divorce) and managing adequately those issues as they arise is vital to a child’s acquiring resilience and effective coping strategies to avoid the need to self-medicate in adulthood. Addiction is often accompanied by co-morbidities.

This is a notion necessitating nuance. Every child who experiences this will not necessarily become an addict, just as every addict doesn’t always have this background. But, many do.

Children feed off of their parents’ reactions. When the parent is calm, the child calms. When young children sense anxiety, they mimic it and act out. This play underscores the interwoven extensions of influence amidst families and peer groups.

A parent’s suffering is a child’s suffering. Our efforts must address the symbiotic relationships that perpetuate the current and intergenerational struggles of families.

Let’s shift the narrative to how to empower families amidst apparent crises. I have written extensively here about the impact of toxic stress [2] on physical and mental well-being. The science supports the profound impact of childhood trauma in the later development of adult disease. It is widely known and accepted that the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE) [4] “found a strong graded relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults.”

From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A science-based approach to building a more promising future for young children and families [5] by the Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child is a compelling read. In it, the authors underscore how development is a highly interactive process where life outcomes are not exclusively set by genes. They elucidate the biological adverse effects which significant stress imposes on young children and families.

In part, a lack of resilience and effective coping skills can put one at greater risk of health issues and substance abuse in adulthood. Especially if not appropriately managing unrelenting chronic stress.

Extensive research on early childhood adversity reveals an elevated risk of cardiovascular disease, asthma, cancer, and depression in adulthood. Though the impact can be great, it does seem that well-timed intervention and expanding efforts to improve society, policy, families and awareness can facilitate an improved future.

I applaud the creators of this Broadway piece for compelling an overdue societal conversation.

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