

Episode 41: Boys and Mental Health

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

Leigh Hatcher: Hello, and welcome to the Brave Hearts, Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Thanks for joining me as we seek to help the boys of today grow into the fine young men of tomorrow. Each week, I'm interviewing an educator from The Scots College in Sydney to explore how best to shape a boy for a lifetime ahead.

What's a boy need now that will see him grow into a man of courage, character, and compassion? What does a parent need to know to be alongside him and involved practically in that inspiring journey? So, let's ring the bell and meet our guest for this week's podcast.

With me today is Dr Tom Cerni. Tom is Head of Counselling Services at The Scots College, and his topic is, 'Boys and Mental Health'. Tom, welcome.

Dr Tom Cerni: Thank you, Leigh, it's always a pleasure to be here and to join you in this podcast.

Leigh Hatcher: Thank you, great and current issue too. We hear so much, Tom, about the issue of mental health today. Do you think a boy's mental health is more of an issue today for them, or are we just feeling freer to talk about it, do you think?

Dr Tom Cerni: I think it's probably a combination of both. I think young people are certainly much more aware of what's in their environment and certainly, a lot more socially connected, and I like to think that the stigma of talking about mental health is lowering slowly and slowly, and it's encouraging just to see that level of engagement and insight. We just recently did a mental health forum of year five and six where we had the opportunity to present some issues around mental health, and that was very well received by the students, parents, and staff.

Leigh Hatcher: So it's a good thing that we're feeling freer to talk about it, have this out in the open.

Dr Tom Cerni: Yeah, very much so. I think it's very, very healthy to have these open conversations. It's interesting, when we have a common cold, or something might be wrong with us,



we're generally don't think twice about going to a GP to have that checked out, but when it comes to our mental health, people are generally a little bit more reserved, and therefore it's very, very helpful, certainly from my perspective, to have that open conversation about what's going on for people.

Leigh Hatcher: Indeed. In a boy's life, Tom, are there particular ages or phases when his mental health may emerge as a larger issue than at other times?

Dr Tom Cerni: Yes, I think you can have different presentations throughout a young person's journey or their time at school, but when they get to probably about 16 or 17 years of age, that's when you probably start to detect some of the more serious issues that may arise in mental health. But, it's very important that we take all the necessary steps in terms of prevention from that happening at that stage towards the end of schooling.

Leigh Hatcher: Tell me, how much is a boy's life and his mental health not only determined by his own particular psychological makeup, but also by the environment in which he finds himself? Which, I suppose, includes the individuals he finds himself alongside as well.

Dr Tom Cerni: That really very much speaks about the nature/nurture debate, and certainly there may be some predispositions in certain conditions that may be familiarly connected, such as perhaps the presence of depression, but increasingly the environment plays a very important part in terms of shaping the mental health of a young person, and can certainly significantly impact on the development of the young person, and that's why it's very important to actually address any issues that may emerge earlier on so they don't manifest into something more serious at a later stage.

Leigh Hatcher: Give me a practical picture of what you're talking about with the environment there.

Dr Tom Cerni: In the environment, for example, a common thing that may occur is bullying or isolation. So, in an environment where an issue like that is experienced at a young age, it's very important that it is addressed at the beginning rather than allowing it to not be addressed, or ignoring it in some way, or suppressing it, and therefore it may emerge at a later time as well. Anxiety is another common presentation as well, whether it be ... There's different types of anxiety, there's performance anxiety, social anxiety, and so on. It's very important that those areas are detected earlier on to ensure good coping strategies are developed, and that young person is able to manage and cope more effectively.

Leigh Hatcher: Again, can you give us a few practical ideas or signs that a parent could be on the lookout for, if a boy is taking on some of those kinds of anxieties, for instance? What are they looking for?

Dr Tom Cerni: I think for parents, they have to be a little bit mindful of, for example, if there's a change in a young person's routine. I mean, that can be a bit of an indication. If they're withdrawn socially, if they display low affect or engagement, they're some of the



things that maybe can be initial indicators as to what's going on. To ask your son, is there anything that may be bothering you there, and also to connect with the school to ensure that there's good follow up.

Leigh Hatcher: That connectedness, as in so many cases now in our interviews, has to begin really early in a boy's life, for that connection between their parents to have that courage and confidence to be out there.

Dr Tom Cerni: Exactly. Yeah, the earlier you can start developing that level of connection, which is founded on trust and good communication, you're actually normalising the process. So, as they go through adolescence, they are quite open to the idea of being connected in a good way with a school, a significant other such as a teacher or members of the family. So it's all part of healthy social development for a young boy.

Leigh Hatcher: Yes. We hear a lot in our world about work/life balance, certainly in the adult world. Today, that can equally apply to boys, I think. So, what are some of the practical tips for a boy for his parent to kind of help him along to achieve a work/life balance for the benefit of his mental health?

Dr Tom Cerni: The balance itself really, to me, I often speak about a chair, and then the four legs of the chair, and I define each of the legs as being physical health, social health, emotional health and spiritual health. Just to elaborate on that very briefly, our physical health, maintaining and engaging in regular exercise. Many schools have fantastic programmes, including Scots, and so the boys get that. They can also do exercise outside the school as well, and that's also part of the social development for the young person.

Leigh Hatcher: What's social exercise? Give me an example.

Dr Tom Cerni: Social exercise is engaging with other young people in an activity, it may be a sporting activity outside the school, such as, I know there are a number of boys here who are involved in rugby and soccer, and in clubs as well. Also, I think, just engaging yourself with positive people in those settings.

Leigh Hatcher: That'll happen offline, I'm sure it'll happen online, but it'll also need to happen offline as well.

Dr Tom Cerni: Very much so. Because, in that process, you're developing very, very important interpersonal skills, and increasingly so, we're finding that in the workplace these are very important skills to have.

Leigh Hatcher: You mentioned emotional health?

Dr Tom Cerni: Yes, emotional health, that is to monitor and regulate your mood and emotions. In adolescents, it can be a challenge at times, because the brain hasn't quite developed its capacity to be able to regulate mood and emotions, so it's really important that



they are aware at least, and have the opportunity to be able to express their thoughts and feelings to someone else rather than internalising it and therefore exhibiting it in, sometimes in forms of anger or frustration. So, having a good contact point, it certainly can be a parent or someone perhaps in a more professional capacity, such as a counsellor in a school setting.

I think it's very important for young people to be able to express their thoughts and feelings to someone that they trust, and that can certainly include mom or dad, a parent, or perhaps someone in a more professional capacity such as a school counsellor in a setting rather than bottling those feelings and emotions, and sometimes they're expressed as forms of anger or indeed leading to poor decisions as well.

Leigh Hatcher: Yes, too right. I remember your last point was spiritual health. Now, is that about religion or church or what?

Dr Tom Cerni: What I refer to in terms of spiritual health is the ability or the opportunity to develop beliefs and values of a young person. So, in a school such as Scots, there are many, many opportunities where boys can develop their beliefs and values through Christian studies or attending chapel as well. So, spiritual health is equally important as the other three. What I always say to young people as well is that you may take one of those out, the chair will still resemble a chair, but you have to be leaning on the other three areas. But, if you take two of those areas out, the chair no longer resembles a chair. I like to very much encourage young people, and certainly the parents who are listening to this podcast, to ensure that your son is investing in all four areas equally.

Leigh Hatcher: Great wisdom. I'll recount them again, physical health, social health, emotional health, and spiritual health. One interesting word you use in the consideration of these issues is "flow". Talk to me about what you mean by that, Tom.

Dr Tom Cerni: To be in flow, flow is a state of being. It's where the young person finds themselves, any person finds themselves, an optimal balance between high challenge and high skill. So, the challenge is high enough for them but it's not too much, and they have the adequate amount of skill. It's also a state or a zone where you lose track of time, you're so involved in the activity that you just love it and you feel a real sense of accomplishment out of that.

Mind you, the other way around is when you experience a situation where it's low challenge or low skill, I mean they can sometimes even lead to apathy. You want to be in a zone of high skill and high challenge and look for those opportunities to create that. If you are a little bit low on challenge, well you may need to increase that, or if your skill level isn't quite there, well then please take some steps to ensure your skill level is matching the challenge that's in front of the young person.



- Leigh Hatcher: What about the issue of performance and pressure? Both of those can be good, be it on the stage or on the football field. But also, they've got its risks for mental health and stress.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Yes indeed. There is a really fine balance between pressure and performance. On the one axis, you've got pressure, on the other side, you've got performance. What you want to try and do is to optimise, find that central point where it is just the right amount of pressure that young person is experiencing, and the performance is equal to that.
- Pressure and performance are important variables, so on one side we've got pressure, and then we have performance on the other. We want to try and achieve that optimal level between enough pressure and stress and anxiety that may occur. So, we don't want to have too much anxiety, and we don't want to have too much stress in any one situation because that ultimately will impact on performance.
- It's a bit like eating food. You don't want to have too much spice in your food, you want to just have the right amount, and you'll certainly enjoy it a lot more.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yes. You said an important part of a boy maintaining his mental health is his ability to make good decisions, which I find interesting.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Yes, making decisions is really ... I all too often hear, "Just go ahead and make a good decision." It's really important to be able to break that down into some really basic steps. I like to suggest that you try and frame the problem, you know, what is it that you have to make a decision about? Collect the relevant information, which means talking to others. It may be your parents, your teacher, maybe even a close friend as well. Then, have time to reflect. I think this third point is really underestimated, just step back, reflect, buy yourself a little bit of time, then review, and then make the decision. Please don't feel you need to be under pressure to make the decision there and then. Just give yourself some time to reflect, collect the relevant information, review, and then decide.
- Leigh Hatcher: Because often they will be under time pressure for decisions.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Exactly. Sometimes in a peer group type setting, you want to make that decision straightaway, it's important just to ...
- Leigh Hatcher: Take stock.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Take a step back, take a few deep breaths, and think about the process a little bit before you make a decision because sometimes making the wrong decision often leads to you having to make an apology and making amends. So, if you just take that time at the beginning, then you're more likely to move towards making a good decision.



- Leigh Hatcher: Do we need to, in some way, also train or equip our boys with the knowledge of the power of what psychologists call “self talk”? What boys are saying to themselves about themselves in their own thoughts.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Yeah, sometimes thoughts can be very real, and it’s very important to have the opportunity to be able to express your thoughts rather than allow them to continue to swim around in a person’s mind. If you allow that to happen, over a period of time they can start to take a reality of their own, which can lead to poor decisions, which may not be the case. Expressing thoughts is very important, and also understanding the very important link between thoughts, moods, physical reactions, and ultimately the behaviour which those thoughts may actually lead to.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yeah. Don’t be afraid of seeking out, as a parent, professional help for your boy in some circumstances.
- Dr Tom Cerni: Yes, it’s really important to certainly ... For parents, they need to be really attuned to what your son is saying, and good parenting too reflects when a parent is able to detect the slightest difference in terms of what their son is saying to them. Those very subtle little messages and we have to be attuned to them because some of those very subtle messages can be signals or indicators that they need help. They’re crying out, but they may not have the vocabulary or the language to be able to say that.
- So, just noticing what the comments are, what the thoughts are, and for the young person as well to acknowledge that if those thoughts are persistent, they’re repetitive, and they’re starting to impact their behaviour, their decisions, their engagement at school, well perhaps it is time to actually talk to someone in a professional capacity about what their thoughts are.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yes. Let me wrap up with two areas. The first area is the school, whatever the school, way beyond The Scots College, it can play an important part in this whole issue of a boy’s mental health, Tom.
- Dr Tom Cerni: I’d like to say it’s really important that, in any school, that a young person moves away from just surviving, moving from one day to the next or one subject to the next and one experience to the next, to the area of flourishing. To do that, they really need to stay well-connected to their school. So, flourishing, sense of growth, development, it is so encouraging when you see that happening in front of you, and I think it’s every parent’s wish and desire to see their son flourish in a school that’s well supported and got such great connections at the school as well.
- Leigh Hatcher: So can you offer parents at home something of a checklist? What are some of the things they should be on the lookout for with a boy’s mental health, how they can best equip him to flourish?
- Dr Tom Cerni: First of all, it’s really important that parents are aware if there are any changes in routine, if the young person kind of withdraws socially, there’s low affect or



engagement, those are the little warning signs that the parents need to be mindful of, and to really turn those around to ensure that they're addressed and that they're moved towards flourishing, where they can get the most out of their experiences in a school setting and certainly in a home setting as well.

Parenting is a wonderful task, it is an art form.

Leigh Hatcher: And a pressure in itself sometimes, yes, and a joy.

Dr Tom Cerni: Yes, and then parents are learning as well, there's no manual for parenting, so parents are learning as are their children as well.

Leigh Hatcher: Tom, if you ever find one, just give us a buzz, will you? Thank you so much indeed for joining us, great conversation.

Dr Tom Cerni: Thank you Leigh, pleasure.

Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive really useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free and offered to every parent who wants the best for their boy in their journey to manhood. In your internet search engine, enter "The Scots College enewsletter" to subscribe.

I'm Leigh Hatcher, hope you'll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts, Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men.

Tom, before you go, one more task. Hover that finger over that bell, and will you please ring us out?



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