

*Cultivating a sense of purpose  
in youth*

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Translational Research (BCTR)



# Please do this..

Take out a few sheets of loose paper and a pen. Write the answers to each question down. Write the first thing that pops into your head. Write without editing. It's important to **write** out your answers rather than just thinking about them. Write quickly. Give yourself less than 60 seconds a question. Preferably less than 30 seconds. Be honest. Nobody will read it. It's important to write without editing. Enjoy the moment and smile as you write.

1. What makes you smile? (Activities, people, events, hobbies, projects, etc.)
2. What activities make you lose track of time?
3. What makes you feel great about yourself?
4. Who inspires you most? (Anyone you know or do not know. Family, friends, authors, artists, leaders, etc.) Which qualities inspire you, in each person?
5. What are you naturally good at? (Skills, abilities, gifts etc.)
6. What are you good at giving or doing for others?
7. What are some challenges, difficulties and hardships you've overcome or are in the process of overcoming? How did you do it?
9. Imagine you are now 90 years old, sitting on a rocking chair outside your porch; you can feel the spring breeze gently brushing against your face. Looking back at your life, what matters to you most? List them out.

# On purpose

*...happiness cannot be pursued: it must ensue. One must have a reason to be happy. Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically.*

*Victor Frankl*

*Tell me, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

*Mary Oliver*

*Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming "Wow! What a Ride!"*

*Hunter S. Thompson*

# Yeah, but what do we mean when we talk about “purpose?”

Purpose in life refers to a “feeling that there is meaning in one’s present and past life.” (*Ryff & Singer, 1998*)

Purpose is “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.” *Damon, Menon, Bronk (2003)*



# Meaning: the close cousin of purpose

Meaning refers to “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or over-arching aim in life.” (Steger et al., 2009)



# Having a sense of purpose is good

People with sense of purpose tend to (Bronk et. al 2005; Damon, 2008)

- Live longer and healthier
- Be open to experience
- Be interested in how their actions affect others
- Be more pro-socially oriented and engaged
- Be aware of long-term implications of their actions
- Also value humility, gratitude and integrity
- Be academically engaged
- Demonstrate other qualities of resilience

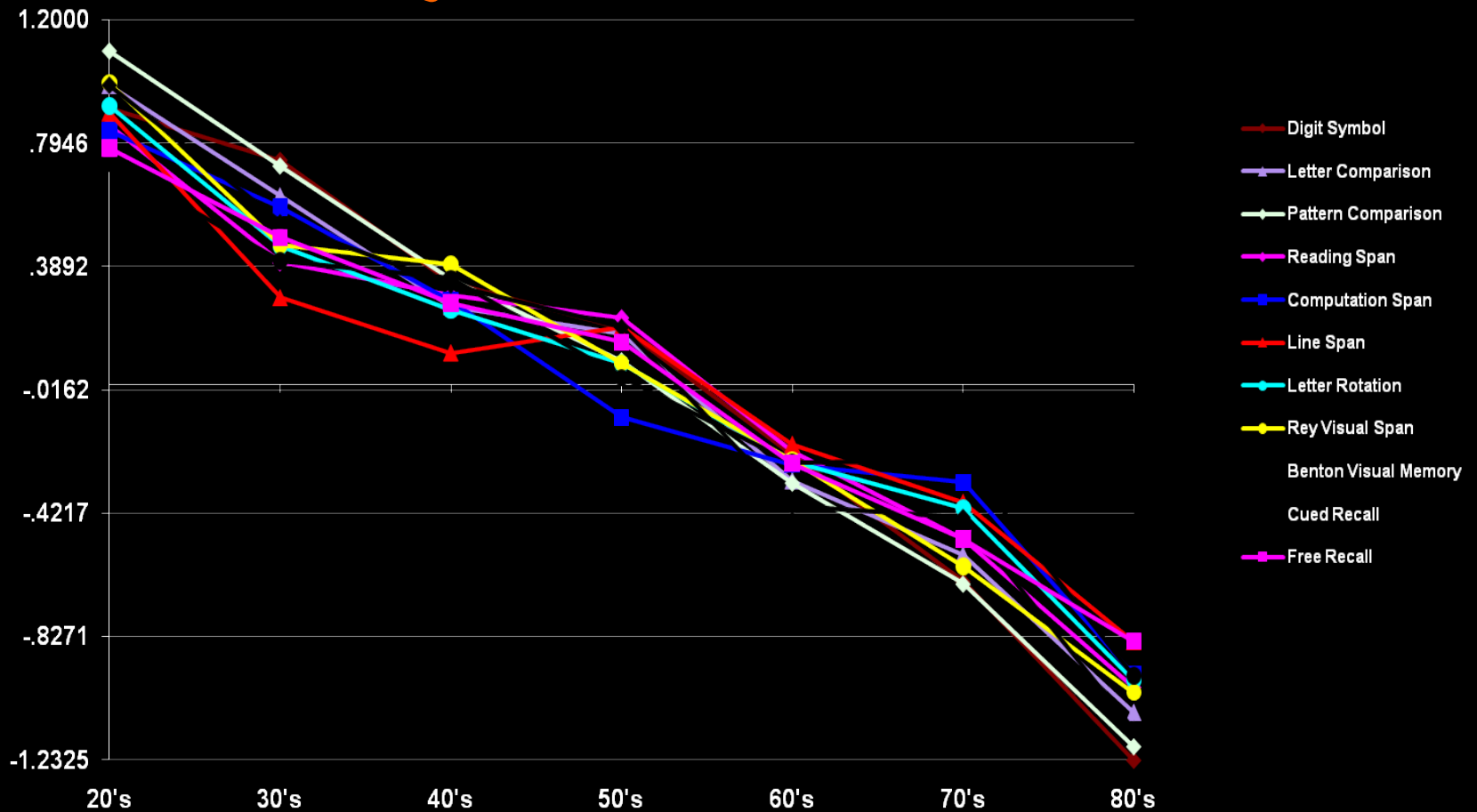


## But less common in teens than in adults

- About 20% of teens report having a sense of purpose in life
- About 20% report being totally adrift
- The rest somewhere in between
- However, searching for purpose is part of being a teen, so this is okay

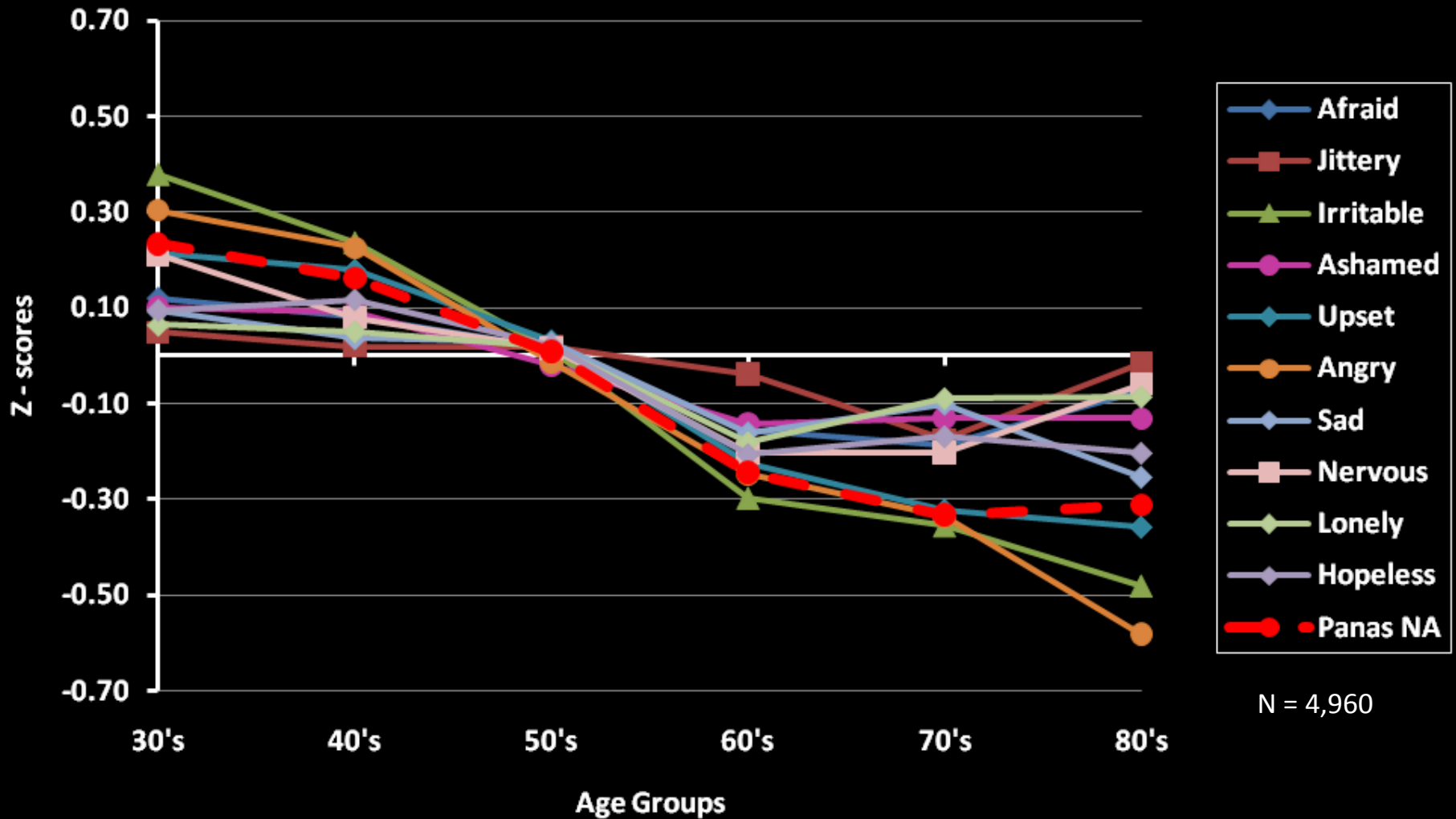
*Damon, W. (2008). The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*

This is because the Goddesses and Gods decided  
not to give young people everything  
just most things..



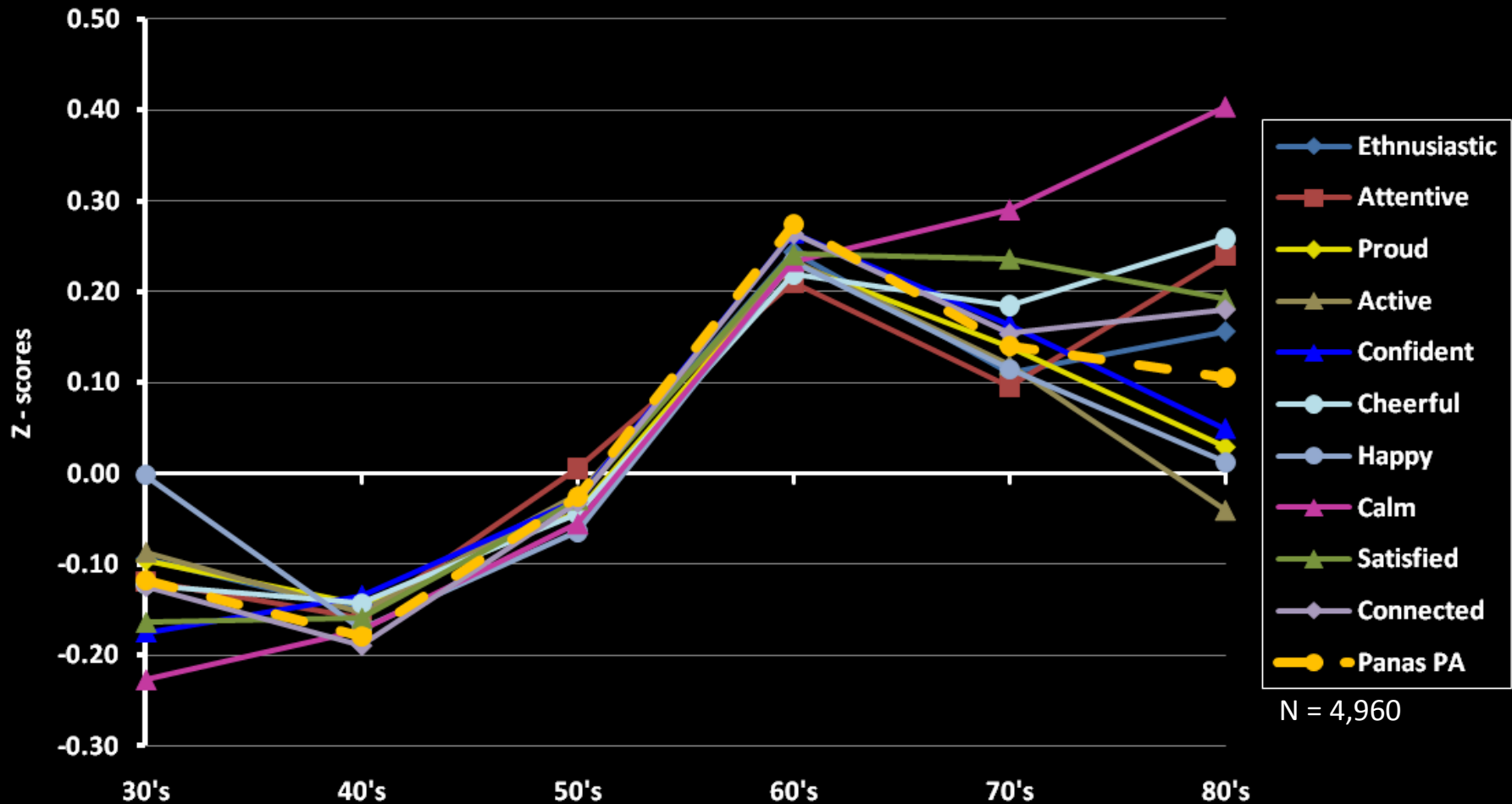


They saved something for us older folks..



N = 4,960

So, we move slower but are quicker to smile



N = 4,960

MIDUS II

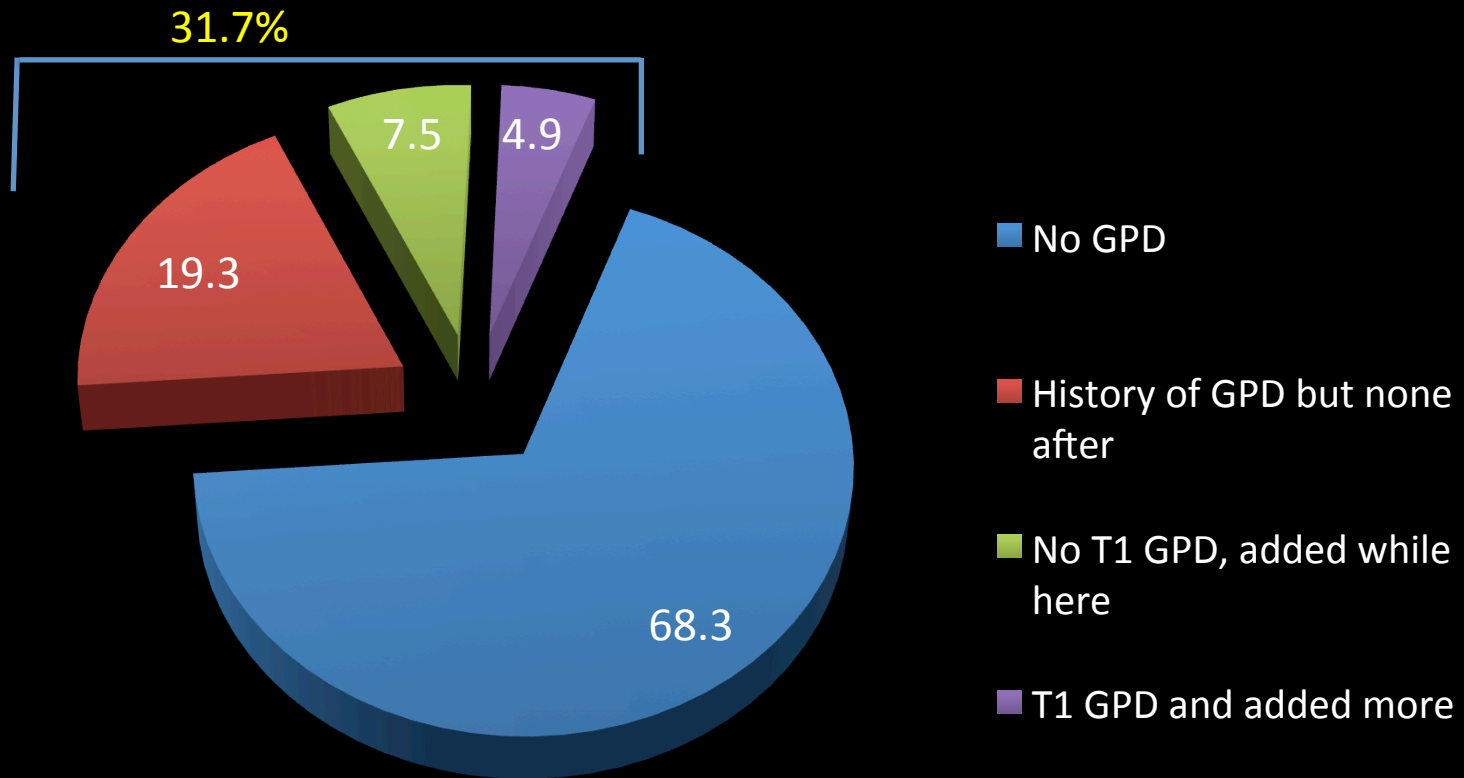
*The challenge*

# It's never been so hard to grow up with a clear sense of purpose

- ◆ Rates of mental health challenges are high and increasing (Twenge, 2010; Kessler et. al., 2004; Guthmnan et., 2010; Gallagher et. al., 2003).
- ◆ Much of this is due to:
  - ◆ Decreased social connectedness
  - ◆ Increased perception of environmental threat
  - ◆ Increased emphasis on extrinsic rather than intrinsic rewards
- ◆ Average child in the 80's reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 50'
- ◆ Four in ten students say that they have been unable to function in the past 12 months do to stress, depression, and/or anxiety (NCHA, 2010; Blanco, 2008).

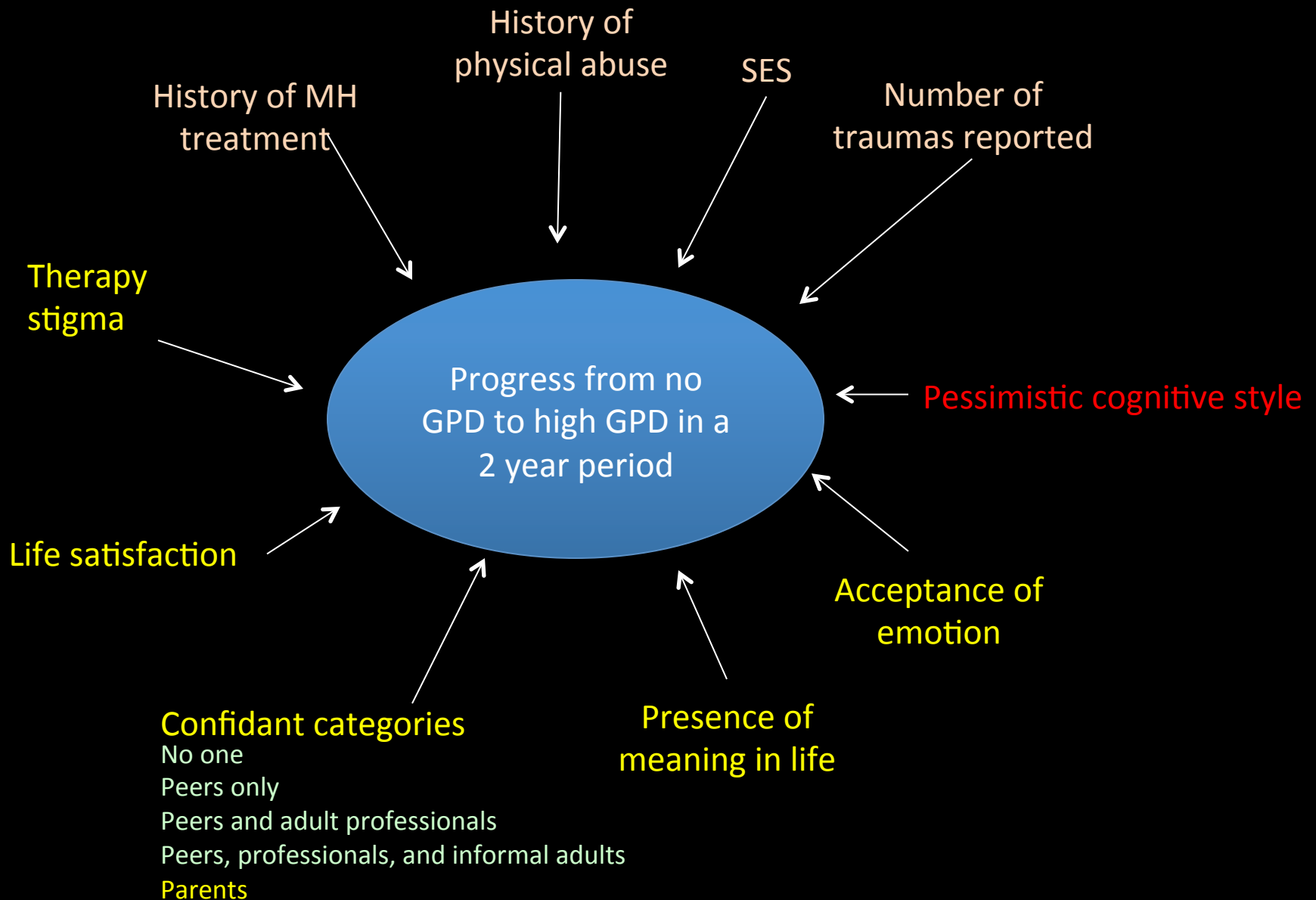


# Accumulation of NSSI, suicide, and psychological distress (GPD) over a 2 year period (for students <20 at T1)



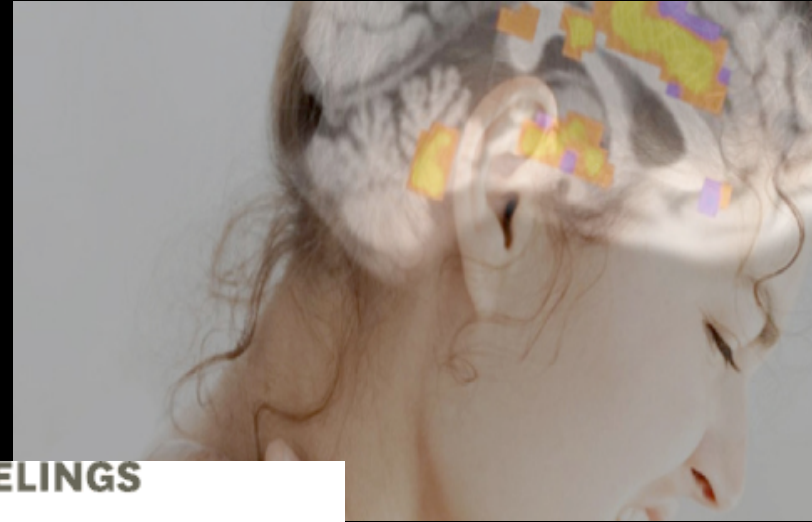
*In sum: **31.7%** of all students reported suicidality, self-injury, or clinical levels of depression / anxiety before completing college; **12.4%** of students reported adding some form of psychological distress while in college*

# What predicts who is at risk for later psychological distress (as measure by NSSI, suicidality, and global psychological distress)?



# Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me - NOT..

Emotional pain and physical pain are similar not only in that they are both distressing—they share a common somatosensory representation as well.

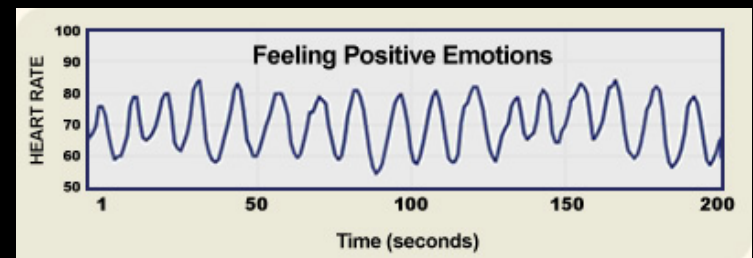
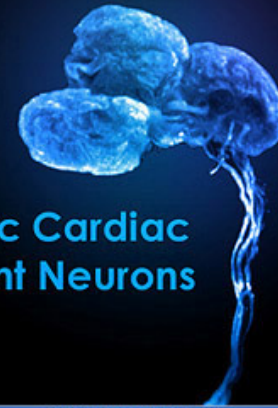


Kross E et al. PNAS 2011;108:6270-6275

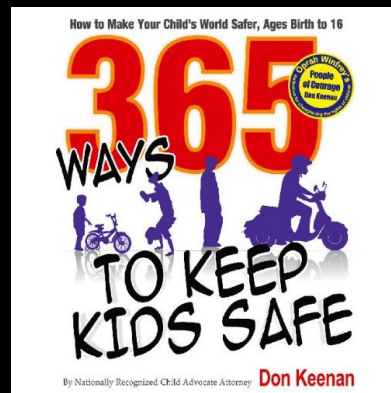
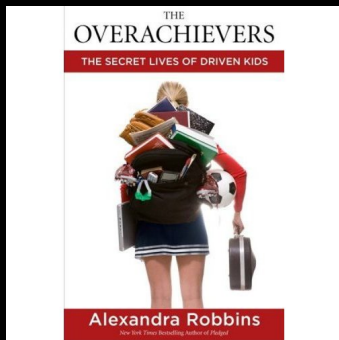
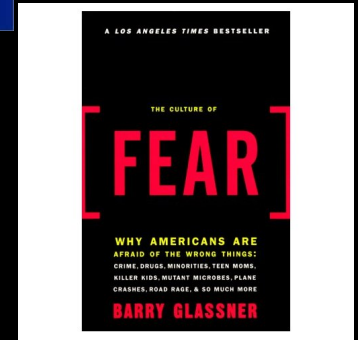
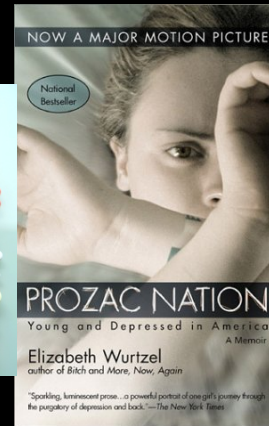
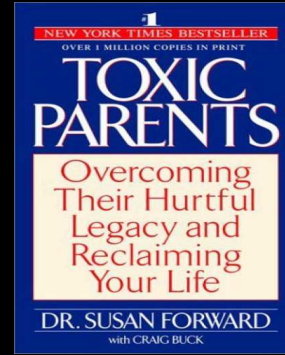
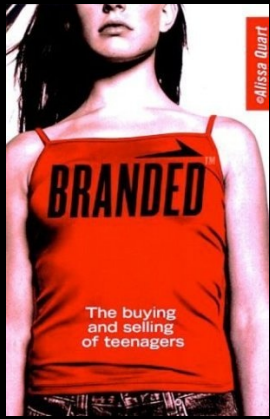
# Emotion and wellbeing: The link between heart and mind



- Heart speak: The heart and brain ‘talk’ to one another and together they set the rhythms for the entire nervous system and body. In fact, the heart sends more signals to the brain than the brain sends to the heart.
- Feelings like frustration, anger and anxiety cause the neural activity in the two branches of the autonomic nervous system to get out of sync – this can disrupt our ability to think clearly.
- Social pain linked to the autonomic nervous system, which regulates involuntary bodily functions such as heart beat and respiration rates, causes a “broken heart” (Gunther Moor, et al. 2010)







*So, what do we do?*

# Understanding what's important by looking backward

Take aways from the Harvard's men study

# Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives

*“What am I? What do you look at? Nothing. A piece of dirt”*

Arthur, Age 65

*“What I done here is a success story. I have no education whatsoever. I have no grammar school. No high school. No nothing. In plain English I done all the dirt jobs, because I had no education...My life now is beautiful. Raised five kids. Worked everyday of my life. Whenever I lost one job, I got another. No, I think I done pretty darn good.”*

Michael, Age 63

# Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives

## Does not explain criminal offending over the lifecourse:

- Individual cognitive differences (e.g. verbal IQ)
- Childhood characteristics (e.g. early onset of misbehavior)
- Adolescent characteristics (chronicity of offending)

## Does help to explain criminal offending over the lifecourse:

- Life situations and structure often a result of unanticipated events or serial investments in “side bets”
- Structure & routine
- Connection to others
- Integration (vs. marginality)
- Agency & voice

# Sense of life purpose: The train study (Burrow, 2013)

## Study 1

- $N = 110$  undergraduates (70% female)
  - 5% Black, 13% Latino, 15% Asian, 67% White
- Baseline Phase:
  - Demographics: race, gender, train use
  - Neuroticism: (IPIP, BFFM; Goldberg et al., 2006)
  - Purpose in Life: (MiLQ; Steger, 2006)
    - “My life has a clear sense of purpose”
    - “I have discovered a satisfying life purpose”
- Train Phase:
  - Rode metro-train for 14 consecutive stops
  - At each stop, indicated NA: “distressed”, “nervous”, “alone”
    - \*Marked “X” on sliding scale anchored with:  
*Not at all – Extremely*



# Study 1 findings

Implicit and positive relationship between ethnic diversity self-reported negative affect.

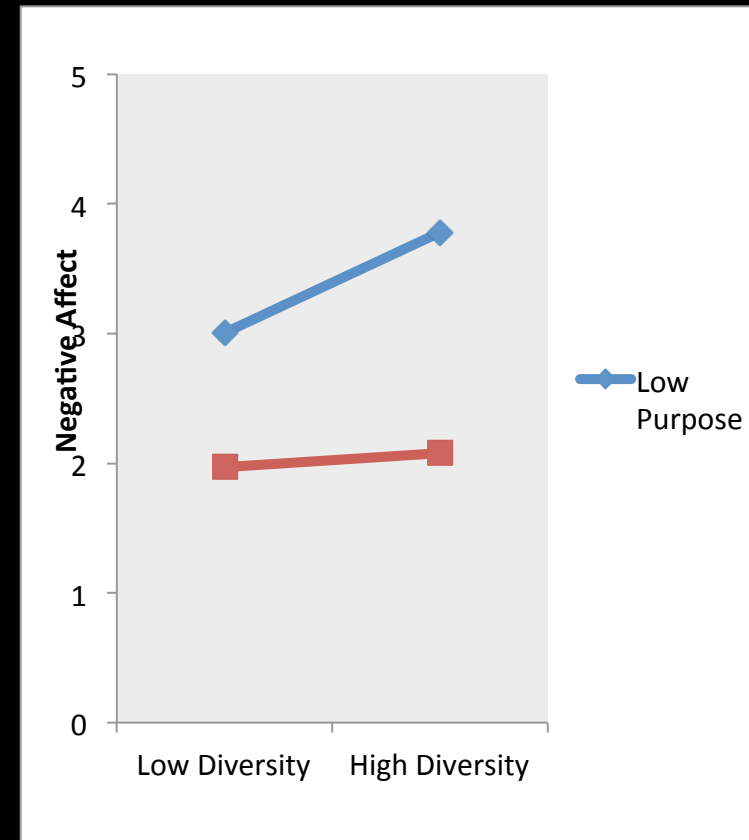
Purpose in life may be an asset for weakening this association.

May motivate forward-thinking,  
seeing broader connections

May be simply be component of an  
adaptive personal profile

Purpose as an *intervention* in the  
stress process

Considering one's purpose as an  
activated state





# Study 2: Findings

- *N* = 116 undergraduates (58% female)
  - 8% Black, 15% Latino, 18% Asian, 60% White
- *Methods*
  - *Train Phase* – replication of Study 1
  - *Baseline Phase*
    - Demographics
    - Resilience
    - 10 minute writing task.

## Purpose Prime

1. Define what it means to have a sense of purpose in life.
2. What is your purpose in life?
3. Where does your sense of purpose come from?



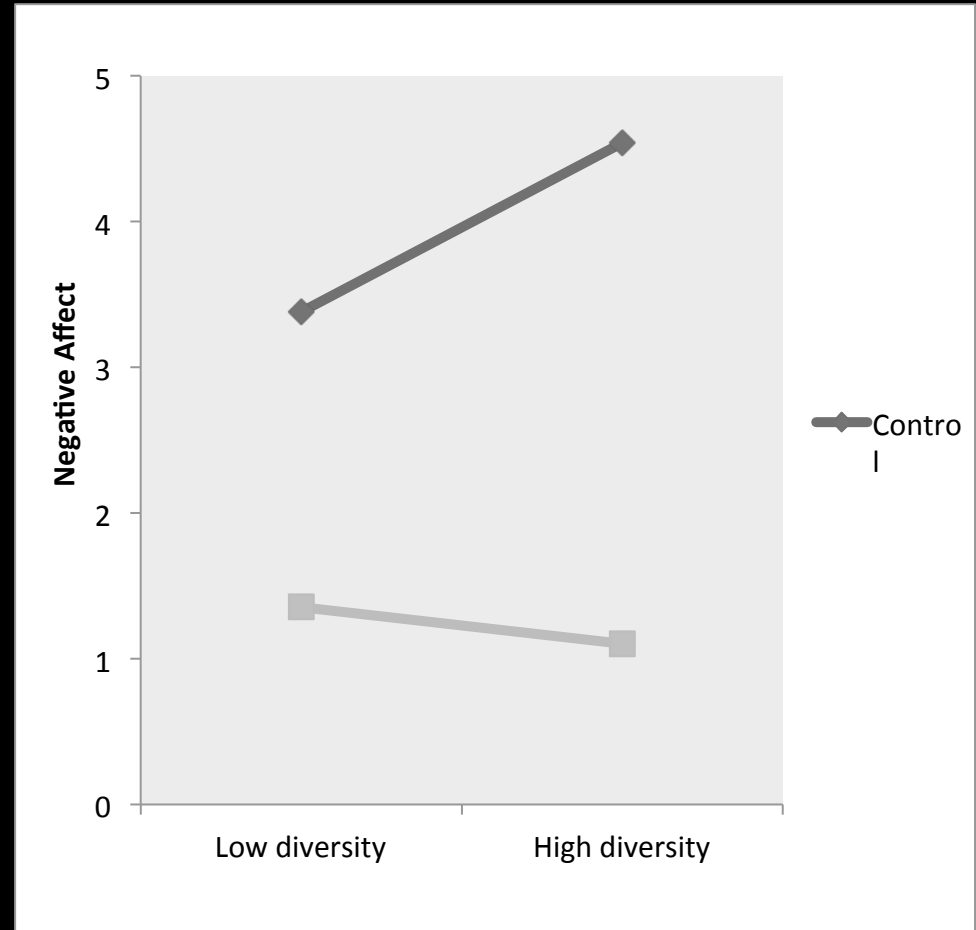
## Control Prime

1. List the most recent movie you have watched.
2. Which actors/actresses were in the movie?
3. Describe the plot of the movie.



# Study 2: Findings

Reflecting on purpose in life weakened association between negative feelings and discomfort with diversity



# Ideas for cultivating purpose

- Be comfortable with yourself and your self examination:
- Build a vocabulary and normalize
- Believe that every child has a purpose
- Treat all young people as having worth
- Become a 'treasure hunter
- Give young people opportunities to recognize and develop their own unique strengths as opposed to focusing on correcting their weaknesses.
- Invite self-reflection
- Help young people to see that they can have multiple roles in life (home and family, education and career, community and service, and hobbies and recreation) and that they can have a purpose in each of these roles.
- Help young people to break down their purpose into achievable goals and help them to take action and support them to keep going until they've achieved their goals.

# William Damon: A few reflections

- Teens are rarely asked / invited to reflect on purpose
  - While short-term goals (e.g., homework, grades, making the team) may be necessary for adapting to a present situation and young people can learn from them, they don't allow anyone to ask the important questions (What kind of person do I wish to become? What do I want to accomplish with my life? Why should I strive?) that create forward momentum in our lives and lead to lasting satisfaction.
- The advice we're giving kids is increasingly cynical and makes them cynical: they hear dire warnings that things are unachievable and won't net enough attention or profit, along with crafty advice about beating the competition. Kids need to hear how they can derive personal satisfaction from doing something that makes a difference in the world—even if they don't get public recognition and huge financial rewards.
- A parent cannot accomplish the task of identifying a purpose for a child, nor can a parent choose the child's personality or write a script for the child's life. But a parent can introduce options and help a child sort through choices.
- Parents and teachers seldom talk to kids about the things that they find meaningful in their own lives and careers—and how setbacks and activities that seemed discouraging at the time actually led to something satisfying in their lives.

# In summary

- Purpose is not an idea; it is an experience to strive for in each moment
- Engendering purpose in others is enhanced by doing it for yourself first
- Purpose is progressive; it tends to unfold and become more clear over time
- Purpose is about moments, not movements
  - Build language
  - Normalize
  - Look for reflection inspiring moments / opportunities
  - Believe up

Just for fun

<https://www.upworthy.com/scientists-discover-one-of-the-greatest-contributing-factors-to-happiness-youll-thank-me?c=upw8>

# Resources

## Raise awareness and emphasize value of emotion and self-knowing

Check out:

- ➔ Inventory of strengths: <http://www.viacharacter.org/VIASurvey/tabid/55/Default.aspx>
- ➔ Enneagram: <http://www.enneagraminstitute.com/>
- ➔ Multiple intelligence and types: <http://literacyworks.org/mi/assessment/findyourstrengths.html>

## Skill building activities to enhance

- Perspective taking (on own life and others)
- Role of thought and emotion in wellbeing and behavior
- Emotional intelligence and management
- Service to others (restorative justice is ideal here)

Check out:

- ➔ [http://my.extension.uiuc.edu/documents/257080502080208/Emotional\\_Intelligence\\_13-18.pdf](http://my.extension.uiuc.edu/documents/257080502080208/Emotional_Intelligence_13-18.pdf)
- ➔ [http://my.extension.uiuc.edu/documents/257080502080208/Emotional\\_Intelligence\\_8-10.pdf](http://my.extension.uiuc.edu/documents/257080502080208/Emotional_Intelligence_8-10.pdf)
- ➔ [http://www.lrd.usace.army.mil/\\_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item\\_id=3719&destination=ShowItem](http://www.lrd.usace.army.mil/_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item_id=3719&destination=ShowItem)
- ➔ <http://www.wingsforkids.org/experience/hot-wings>
- ➔ <http://us.reachout.com> great web site – how to cope with difficult times - with youth stories, facts, audio and video clips

# Resources (con't)

## Mindfulness and contemplation skills

- Moment meditations ( can be brief and focused on using any sense)
- Self-inquiry and reflection
- Positive and negative trigger logs

Check out:

- ➔ <http://www.gestaltreview.com/Portals/0/GR1201Hooker&Fodor.pdf>
- ➔ <http://joyfullyrejoycing.com/changing%20parenting/mindfulparentingzinn.html>
- ➔ <http://www.gesn.meq.gouv.qc.ca/Portfolio/eng/theory-R.htm>
- ➔ <http://us.reachout.com> great web site – how to cope with difficult times - with youth stories, facts, audio and video clips

## Creative outlets (multisensory)

- Youtube creation
- Vision boards
- Autobiography

Check out:

- ➔ <http://www.makeavisionboard.com/vision-board-gratitude-board-for-kids.html>

# Resources for supporting emotional development

- <http://us.reachout.com> great web site – how to cope with difficult times - with youth stories, facts, audio and video clips
- <http://lift.nylc.org> interactive service learning web site
- The Art of Loving Well. Teacher's Guide. A character education curriculum from England – using poetry, fairy tales etc to explore relationships  
<http://www.famyouth.org.uk/alw/aolwhome.php>
- Guide to healthy adolescent development: <http://www.jhsph.edu/bin/s/e/Interactive%20Guide.pdf>
- Marline Pearson. 2009. **Love Notes**. Making relationships work for young adults and young parents. Instructor's Manual
- Marline Pearson. 2007. Love U2: Relationship Smarts PLUS – manual for high school students.
- Both available at Dibble Institute [www.dibbleinstitute.org](http://www.dibbleinstitute.org) or [www.BuildingRelationshipSkills.org](http://www.BuildingRelationshipSkills.org) (this site include free samples and resources)



*Thank you!*