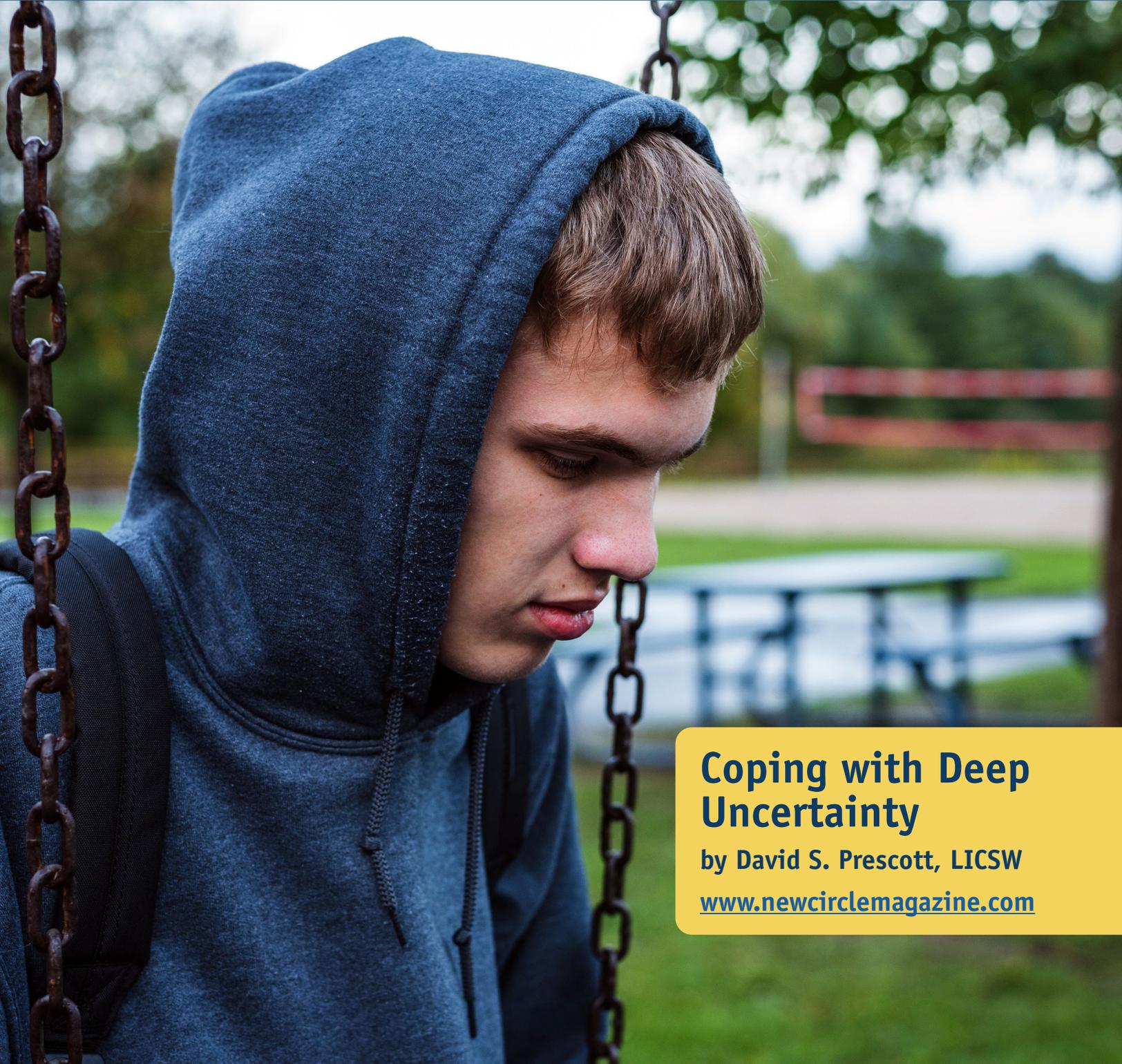


The New Circle™

Working with At-Risk Children and Teens



Coping with Deep Uncertainty

by David S. Prescott, LICSW
www.newcirclemagazine.com



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A friend recently said on a call, “Zoom tells me my connection is unstable; but the truth is that everything about me is unstable these days.” Putting up a humorous front, her situation is familiar to many of us. She is a university professor and mother of two high-energy boys, 11 and 13. As the pandemic has continued, she has watched as they have grieved the loss of their weekly activities in sports, music, and art, with no sign as to when they will truly return. She has volunteered to take the lead in developing alternative activities, only to find that the other parents are hesitant to go forward. “I just started by getting lots of extra masks and hand sanitizer,” she said.

Is there any area of our lives unaffected by uncertainty? As I write, tensions around election results are upstaging the uncertainties around health insurance, the pandemic, jobs and wages lost due to the pandemic, and what kinds of traumas may be occurring behind the closed doors of locked-down homes.

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While the at-risk children who we all serve have always faced uncertainty in their lives, the current era presents ever-increasing challenges. Help and support for at-risk youths and their families, already underfunded, diminishes even further as social workers, teachers, and counselors struggle to do their jobs in the face of increased economic hardships, the fast-rising rate of COVID infections nationwide, and the continuing need for social distancing.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

In the environments in which I work, I have become increasingly diligent about helping at-risk children and teens understand media reports. In Issue 3 of The New Circle, [Russ Pratt described the “Savvy Consumer” model](#) of helping educate and guide children and adolescents who will eventually find their way into pornography. My experience has been along similar lines, as shown in an event 19 years ago.

On September 11 2001, all the televisions in my residential program for adolescents were on as the twin towers fell in New York City. Forgetting their roles, the staff of the program were just as glued to the TV as the students. Uncertainty about the present and future was rampant everywhere, with one important distinction: the staff could understand that the barrage of imagery was a handful of events replayed over and over on a TV screen. To our young students who already had trouble understanding the world as anything but a traumatic place, the constantly repeated images were the new reality. Adults saw a life-altering event. The adolescents in our care concluded that their already dangerous world was now even more horror filled. To them, any promise of safety was to be viewed with the deepest skepticism; their survival was on the line.



Although nearly two decades ago, this 9/11 experience is instructive. Among the best and most effective interventions I have ever given was to turn the televisions off and meet with the students to tell them what we did and didn't know. Most of all, we explained calmly but directly what had happened without the overwhelming imagery. Along with the other administrators, I instructed the staff that their job from that moment forward was to remain focused on the needs of the kids while doing what they needed to do to take care of themselves. The take-home message from that day: when the going gets tough, adults need to be adults so that kids can be kids.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Sometimes the most helpful responses to uncertainty are also the most elementary, involving listening to and engaging with others. Of course, we can also be at our best when we are taking good care of ourselves as well. We may not be able to provide certainty, but we can provide at least a few minutes of safety in the chaos. Here are a few ideas for going forward.

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Get back to the basics. A recent book¹ reviews psychotherapy research from the past several decades to answer the question of what works in helping people to change. The authors examined nearly every model, technique, and approach ever published and remarked at the end that among the most effective vehicles to improve people's lives is the lowest-tech intervention of all—the human conversation. Simply making the time to have a conversation with kids is one of the most helpful approaches that there is. When things are uncertain, we can at least be someone who is good to talk to.

Listen with a goal of understanding. It is far easier to write about active listening than to practice it. The most helpful listening is when we listen deeply with a goal of understanding and work to convey that understanding. Many readers have had the experience of talking to someone who was only listening for their turn to respond. Similarly, we've probably all had the experience of watching someone stop listening, even though they were still looking at us. Staying focused on the goal of understanding can create a vital lifeline to kids. One way for professionals to approach understanding can be to remain curious and never assume that we completely understand where others are coming from.

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Praise children's and teen's efforts. A 2016 study² examined the skills involved in Motivational Interviewing, a person-centered counseling approach that explores and enhances people's motivations to make positive changes. The authors wanted to know which skills were most likely to result in language that would indicate positive changes ahead. Of the skills, which include how one asks questions and demonstrates an understanding of someone's experience, providing affirmations was both effective and carried the least risk of something going wrong. Ultimately, it is easy to forget that simply commenting on what

children and teens are doing right and have going for them can help them to get through hard times. If we don't provide these affirmations, who will? In times of uncertainty, one strength we can develop is to help children and adolescents to be certain about their strengths and positive attributes.

Practice engaged self-care. It is one thing to take time away from work, unplug, and care for ourselves. It is another to use the wisdom we gain for the betterment of our professional activities. For example, in Issue 3 of The New Circle, [Janet DiGiorgio-Miller offered ideas on how children and teens can build skills in mindfulness](#) to help them manage anxiety. We can do the same. Finding the linkage between our own self-care and care of others can help us to stay at our best. The better we are at managing our own uncertainties, the more we can offer help to the at-risk children we serve.

Future articles in *The New Circle* will spotlight what we can all do in these challenging times.

NOTES

- 1 Wampold, B.E., & Imel, Z.E. (2015). *The great psychotherapy debate: The evidence for what makes psychotherapy work* (2nd ed.). New York City, NY: Routledge.
- 2 Apodaca, T.R., Jackson, K.M., Borsari, B., Magill, M., Longabaugh, R., Mastroleo, N.R., & Barnett, N.P. (2016). Which individual therapist behaviors elicit client change talk and sustain talk in motivational interviewing? *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 61, 60-65.