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Is reflection the key to supporting the growing crisis of mental health across young men in Europe and America?

Men's mental health is becoming a worldwide crisis, with young men accounting for "four out of every five suicides," in Europe and North America (Payne, Swami and Stanistreet, 2008). Many are struggling to discuss their personal issues because of having to stick to societal norms which encourages them to bottle up their emotions (Sullivan, Camic and Brown, 2014). Studies have indicated that changes are needed because young men aren't using the services around them to seek help. Figures indicate "that only around 30% of people who use mental services are men" (Smith et al., 2013). We therefore need to encourage males to reflect on their experiences. Providing a talking point to discuss experiences could give them the confidence they need to open up about their mental health issues.

My SDA strings together my favourite memories onto one collage, with the flexibility of adding photos on every year. I'm proposing a new line of visual thinking for males to engage with, having previously struggled with discussing their own mental health issues. The aim of my SDA is to give young men the confidence to talk about their problems by reflecting on previous experiences. Studies have shown that men often prefer task based actions in a "healing environment" rather than having to speak to someone in a formal clinic (Ballinger et al., 2009). It is therefore my intention to take this practical approach to young men by encouraging them to use visual imagery to reflect on their own experiences rather than having to tell them to visit a mental health professional. Since we live in a world where social media is prevalent, young males are constantly seeking "higher likes and comments" (Dhir and Torsheim, 2016). To achieve this, gratification is sought out using images of experiences. My SDA caters to this medium through the use of photos but instead relies on the individuals to reflect on their personal wellbeing rather than seeking other peoples recognition.

By testing it on myself, I am setting an example and encouraging other young males to take the initiative of an active approach in their own wellbeing. Previous studies have shown that young men were able to relate to sportsmen who were open about their mental health problems because they normalized seeking help (Harding and Cox, 2015). Even though I am not a role model or a sportsman, as a young male I can relate to what other males are going through. For many males it's easy to recognise mental health as an issue but being proactive about personal problems is the difficult part. Therefore, using myself as an example may help other males to take that first step in using reflection to deal with their mental health.

A problem with my SDA is that everyone has their own method of dealing with mental health problems. Some people for example, might find that taking pictures triggers traumatic experiences (Creighton et al., 2018). Previous studies have also shown that mental health needs of gay men are different to those that are heterosexual (Bieschke et al., 2000). Creating a standardised solution for everyone is therefore very difficult. My SDA however allows individuals to adapt by reflecting on their experiences according to a medium which suits them best. For example, in my SDA I have included pictures of keyrings which I have collected from each country that I have visited. Similarly, those that are uncomfortable with taking pictures can collect keyrings, write a diary or video key moments. The main premise is that they take the time out to reflect giving them the confidence to communicate their emotions.




Reflection is key to wellbeing especially when piecing together images because this helps us to daydream and put ourselves into scenarios. Studies have shown that there is negative correlation between daydreaming and happiness because humans engage in thoughts unrelated to the task (Stawarczyk et al., 2012). However, one study has suggested that we need to take into account the context of the daydream rather than viewing it from a perspective that humans are purely being unproductive (Mar et al., 2012). For example, some people have daydreams of close friends and family which is linked closely to life satisfaction (ibid). Similarly, when selecting photos for my SDA I went into this daydream state which helped me to experience each individual moment through reflection. Young males can apply this to their own experiences by engaging in deeper thoughts on their previous memories. This allows younger males to set out a clearer path for personal goals since they are increasingly aware of previous achievements/downfalls.

Achieving this also means acknowledging the link between failure and wellbeing. Fear of failure has an influence over our ability to achieve personal goals. A study on this showed that despite participants engaging in positive daydreaming, when there is a high fear of failure individuals are less likely to achieve their goals because of the mindset that it is unattainable (Langens and Schmalz, 2002). This lack of confidence makes it increasingly difficult for young males to open up about their mental health. The Roman stoic Seneca (Griffin, 2013) backs this up by mentioning that using emotions to make decisions makes it increasingly difficult for humans to engage in wellbeing. My SDA reflection therefore caters for both positive and negative previous experiences. By including negative experiences young men are able to reflect on what they could have done better to overcome that particular fear of failure. For example, fear of heights took its toll on me when rock climbing at Lake District. Looking back, going first might have been the best option because there's no time to hesitate with my decision making.

By distinguishing between positive and negative experiences young males are able to assert their own control over personal wellbeing. Stoic philosophy refers to this as "the dichotomy of control," whereby individuals should consider factors within their control and outside of their control (DiGerolamo, 2019). Understanding our upbringing and childhood for example is something within our control. Being reflective at a young age has shown to help children grasp complex ideas such as wellbeing. For example, a study on Samoan children where they were given the freedom to select photos which best portrayed their life showed that they were able to identify wellbeing as a holistic concept by comparing themselves to a seesaw (Dunlop-Bennett et al., 2019). This helped them to understand that it's important to find the balance between positive and negative wellbeing whilst at the same time developing "social connections and relationships" (ibid, p.113). Even though there might be cultural differences, male European/American children can still learn from Samoan children that reflection plays a huge part in wellbeing at an early age.

Technology and social media on the other hand is slowly becoming a tool which is becoming out of our control. There is a case that social media apps such as Facebook and Instagram are an improved version of my SDA because technology caters better for younger audiences whilst being more accessible. Furthermore, a recent study found that reminiscing on previous Facebook photos has a positive impact on wellbeing (Good et al., 2013). The evidence points towards switching to social media instead of physically piecing together old photos like my SDA does. However, technology has a massive impact on psychological wellbeing in that "mobile phones diminish the quality of face to face interaction" (Przybylsk and Weinstein, 2013). Furthermore, the goals of technology and social media developers has drastically changed from usability and engagement to getting members to increase their personal usage (Peters et al., 2018). Studies of media consumption have concluded that "too much engagement can crowd-out healthy activities" (Reinecke and Oliver, 2016). With the addiction of social media, younger males have less control over their reflective thoughts and the lack of




interaction can make it increasingly difficult to boost their confidence in speaking about personal issues.

Agreed, that there has been vast research into the link between reflection and wellbeing. Moreover, children might struggle to understand the link between reflection and wellbeing. This is why I added a humour element to my SDA so young males will be able to engage into the idea of reflecting as a useful tool for mental health. Research into humour and previous experiences in males is very limited (Williams, 2009). One study showed that humour plays a role in fathers story telling of previous experiences (ibid). This helped them to connect with one another and therefore shows that humour can help young males to open up about their vulnerabilities. By including embarrassing photos of personal experiences to my SDA such as being stopped at Aberdeen airport by security, instantly made me want to share this memory with the people directly involved. Humour therefore plays an active role in connecting young males and enabling them to confide in one another on deeper issues of mental health.

My SDA encourages young males to be proactive in their approaches to dealing with mental health. By reflecting using photos from past experiences I want males to understand that there is a way out rather than having to bottle up their emotions. Adding humour to their collages will help them to take that step in reaching out to family and friends.

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