

An Effective Cure

By Abraham J. Twerski

This isn't another article about the problems with "kids at risk." It's an article on a "kids-at-risk" solution. Finally, there may be a solution to one of the greatest dangers facing parents.

Yes, you may breathe a sigh of relief, but only if you are willing to put forth the requisite effort to implement the solution.

In *Children in Crisis: Prevention, Detection and Intervention*,¹ a book I consider mandatory reading for every parent and educator, there is a simple but powerful statement: "Children go off the *derech* when, frustrated by their inability to find happiness, they turn to *pleasure* as a substitute." (These substitutes may be alcohol, drugs or other forms of instant-gratification.) Clearly, happiness is not the same as pleasure.

But why should children who come from good, Torah-observant homes—who are not subjected to abuse or material deprivation—be unhappy? What prevents these youngsters from finding happiness?

One of the axioms I use in my work treating alcoholism and drug addiction

The founder and medical director of Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, Rabbi Twerski, M.D., is one of the country's leading experts on drug and alcohol rehabilitation. He is the author of numerous books and his column is regularly featured in Jewish Action. His books include The Zeide Reb Motele (New York, 2002) and Light at the End of the Tunnel (New York, 2003).

is the following: "Sustained recovery is achieved only through attainment of *spirituality*." If spirituality is an effective cure for these conditions, it should be an effective preventative.

In what way could Torah-observant homes be derelict in spirituality? *Kashrut* and Shabbat are strictly observed, *tzedakah* is practiced, and children attend *yeshivot*. What's missing?

Ramban in Leviticus (19:2) states an important principle: "Observance of *halachah* does not yet constitute spirituality." A person can be meticulously observant of *halachah* and yet be the very antithesis of spirituality. Spirituality requires refinement of *middot* (character traits), and as Rabbi Chaim Vital says, developing one's *middot* is far more difficult than observing the *mitzvot* (*Sh'ar Hakedushah*).

Some of the more obvious *middot* are humility, forgiveness, honesty, consideration and kindness, judging every person favorably, controlling one's anger, being careful not to embarrass anyone and avoiding *lashon hara*.

Happiness requires spiritual growth. It is clear that we do not teach our children by lecturing but by modeling. Children are extremely observant and sensitive. When they see their parents making a sincere effort to improve their *middot*, there is an excellent chance that they will emulate them.

When parents exhibit anger, speak *lashon hara*, seek honor and acclaim, indulge in physical pleasures (even, as Ramban says, *kosher* pleasures) and are not adequately considerate and courteous to each other, they are modeling a lack of spirituality for their children.

One youngster complained that his father would not tolerate his letting his

hair grow long and wearing a diminutive *kipah*. "I don't know what right he has to complain about these things which are not really *aveirot*, when he constantly talks about other people, which is an *aveirah*—*lashon hara*."

But even spirituality is not enough if it is stagnant. Happiness requires *growth*. Spiritual growth requires a nightly inventory: "How were today's *middot* an improvement over yesterday's? If they were not, why is that? What must I do to refine my *middot* tomorrow?"

We must be able to say to ourselves, "Okay, today someone pushed my buttons, and I lost my cool. I must be careful to not let myself lose control again." Or, "I said something negative about someone today. That was a mistake. I must be careful not to speak disparagingly of others." Or, "I judged someone too harshly. I must remember to give everyone the benefit of the doubt."

If the show of anger was in the presence of children, we must be big enough to say, "I'm sorry about what happened yesterday. I lost my cool. I am going to try to keep my anger under control so that it doesn't happen again." Or, "Yesterday I said something negative about a person. That was a mistake, because it was *lashon hara*."

Security screening at airports is a time-consuming annoyance. We accept it in the hope that it will prevent terrorist attacks. Similarly, we must be ready to inconvenience ourselves to protect our children from the noxious influences that are so prevalent in our society.

This is equally true of educators, because they too serve as role models for children. If a teacher exhibits rage, for whatever reason, he sets a bad example. Rather than become defensive and say, "I was so provoked that I could not contain my anger," the teacher, like the parent, should own up to his mistake.

We cannot make our children happy, but we can show them how *we* try to achieve true happiness by pursuing spiritual growth. **JA**

Note

1. Norman Blumenthal, Shimon Russell, eds. (Nefesh, 2003). Available by calling Nefesh at 201-530-0010.