



Mind Matters

articles on mental health from experts in the field

Assuming Positive Intent

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If you've ever read any of my newspaper columns in the past, you probably know that my favorite therapeutic intervention for all types of young people and their families is Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS). Although the Collaborative Problem Solving approach was initially developed to address the out-of-control behaviors of children with Bipolar Disorder, it quickly became evident that many CPS concepts applied to everyone, child and adult alike.

Indeed, I am regularly reminded of one of the foundational tenets of the CPS model, and that reminder seems to enrich my interactions in every aspect of life. Simply stated, the concept acknowledges that every child (or person, in a more general sense) *wants* to do well in life. I go so far as to argue that no one ever wakes up in the morning with the goal of angering everyone they meet and failing at everything they try. Although it may seem like my assertion is extreme, its validity is reinforced in daily communications with a wide variety of people.

The ones who seem to have negative goals of ticking everyone off have probably given up on some level. Their positive intentions have become buried under layers of grungy sediment, built up from consistently negative experiences and interactions with people who assume the worst about them. I have found that, if we're willing to dig deep enough, every person starts out with positive intent. If we are truly invested in improved communication, enhanced problem-solving, and more effective human interactions, we must find the positive intent that lies within others and acknowledge it.

I know a young man who is gifted at convincing others (mostly adults in the education system) that he's a "bad kid." Even though he does an excellent job of proving otherwise, I guarantee that he started out with positive intentions. I like to picture him on his first day of school many years ago, nervous and excited at the same time. I wonder what messages he started receiving on that first day when he didn't quite "fit in" with his peers. Maybe he didn't play, work, or communicate like other kids his age. Perhaps he was extremely hyper or had a non-typical learning style.

I wonder how those messages were reinforced over the years by adults who were supposed to use their advanced life experience to help identify and resolve problems. I only know that, after a couple years of school, this particular young man was labelled as “retarded” and “unteachable” in official paperwork. I also know that these terms were used to describe him to his face (and, possibly, in front of his peers). It wasn’t until a few years later that someone discovered this young man had Dyslexia. But, the damage had been done, and to this day, the kid does everything in his power to prove he’s not teachable.

I figure, at this point, it’s a whole lot easier for him to pre-emptively fit the mold as a “bad kid” than to give things his absolute best efforts and fail. Failing and proving the negative voices in your life correct is extremely scary, whereas playing the “bad kid” role is at least something that’s familiar, if not comfortable. Sometimes I wonder how much digging it’s going to take to get down to this kid’s original positive intentions, but I remind myself that he never wanted to do poorly and make everyone angry. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence. I have seen and heard of many similar situations that could have been avoided if we looked harder for the positive intent in each child or person.

The challenge that I would like to extend to my fellow community members is to always try and find the positive intent within your fellow human beings. I have found that engaging in this practice (and it DOES take practice) helps avoid personalization and feelings of blame. At the same time, the basic principle of assuming positive intent in everyone, no matter how distorted or buried it might be, automatically improves communication and empathy.

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