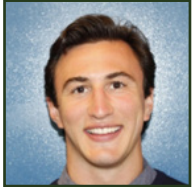


Treating Anxiety and Depression in Youth: Summer Camp as a Mental Health Support



Zachary A. Trotzky,¹ Ryan W. Trotzky,¹ Joseph D. LaLiberte,² and Christopher A. Thurber³

¹Senior Staff, YMCA Camp Belknap, Tuftonboro, NH, United States

²Department of Mathematics, Belmont Hill School, Belmont, MA, United States

³Department of Psychology, Philips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH, United States

The last twenty years have seen a notable rise in mental health concerns among children and adolescents. Current estimates suggest 1 in 5 children in the U.S. experience mental illness; however, half never receive appropriate treatment. Therefore, it is both logical and morally imperative to identify accessible, inclusive, socially immersive, physically healthy environments for young people to improve their mental health. Traditional overnight camps are one such environment because they provide community living, a peer group distinct from school and home, and a hiatus from technology. To assess the longitudinal mood trajectory of campers attending Camp Belknap, an all-boys overnight summer camp, surveys were prospectively administered to 464 campers ages 8 – 17 years ($M = 13.1$). Boys experienced increases, across their 2-week camp stay, in Positive Emotion ($p = .006$) and Self-Confidence ($p < .001$). Conversely, participants experienced a decrease in Negative Emotion, however, this change did not reach statistical significance ($p = .612$). These results are especially meaningful from a public health perspective, given that this camp, as with many of the estimated 7000 in the U.S., offer experiences that last just a few weeks, are less expensive than inpatient or outpatient treatment for anxiety and depression, do not carry any stigma associated with mental health care, and are accessible to a wide range of young people. As such, high quality summer camps should be considered a promising form of adjunctive, population-wide care for youth with mental health symptoms, regardless of etiology.

Biography:

Zach's research was inspired by his time at YMCA Camp Belknap, an all-boys overnight camp, which he attended for 13 straight years, most recently serving as Division Head and a member of the Senior Staff. Currently, Zach works at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City as part of the Hip Preservation Service and Pediatric Orthopedics Department. His research interests include the surgical treatment of rare hip disorders in children and young adults, youth mental health, and the connection between mental well-being and post-operative outcomes. Zach will be attending medical school this August.