This edtech company is bringing student mental health front and center

BY KELLY O'HALLORAN | JULY 27, 2018

PHOTO VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Nearly one in five adults in the U.S. live with a mental illness, according to a 2016 report by the National Institute of Mental Health. Worldwide, one in four people are affected by a mental illness in their lifetimes, according to a 2001 study conducted by the World Health Organization.

Despite these staggering numbers, WHO reports that two thirds of people with a known mental disorder never seek professional help.

Why?

WHO chalks it up to stigma, discrimination and a failure of governing bodies to research and understand mental illnesses.

According to Amy Looper, co-founder and COO of OneSeventeen Media, the taboo surrounding mental health is particularly strong in school settings. But with the rise of school shootings, educators have been forced to acknowledge that the state of their students' mental health plays a crucial role in school safety.

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"We started our company in 2008 in the social emotional learning sector, which is tied to mental health," said Looper. "The challenge was, in the field of education, nobody used the word 'mental health.' It was almost like it was a dirty word until the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting [in Parkland, FL], the Sante Fe shooting, the Sutherland Springs shooting. That was the tipping point."

Now, the state of mental health is front and center, marking the perfect time for Looper and her team to further the conversation and provide new solutions that help struggling kids speak up instead of acting out.

"We have always been, and always will be, a company focused on improving children's social emotional and mental well-being," said Looper.

To continue that work, OneSeventeen Media is raising funds on the crowdfunding campaign platform iFundWomen.

The start of the crowdfunding comes at the same time the company recently launched a new platform. Called ThinkingApp, its newest app supports students pre-K through second grade, and is a modified version for younger users of its existing platform ReThinkIt!, which supports third through 12th graders.

Both mobile apps are powered by machine learning algorithms and walk students through a series of questions allowing them to articulate their side of the story following an altercation or to share what's on their mind if a teacher notices a change in behavior.

From there, the platforms prescribe personalized content and mentoring according to the students' responses to help alleviate the way each child is feeling. Additionally, the solutions forward predictive insights and assign degrees of urgency to faculty and staff based on student responses.

"When a child is upset, our app can meet this child in his or her tech-based culture, and make them feel comfortable," said Looper. "It's helping kids get their thoughts together without bias."

And it's working.

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OneSeventeen Media recruited the researching efforts of a third-party team to see if students were more likely to share information through their apps, as opposed to, say, with a teacher, guidance counselor or principal.

"Research showed students were willing to share five times more information over our apps than what they would face to face," said Looper.

CEO and co-founder Beth Carls noted that their apps are not meant as a substitute to adult intervention. Instead, they are a resource to assist them.

"Our tool isn't replacing the counselor," said Carls. "It's supporting them so we can get to the heart of the matter quicker, and so counselors can hit the ground running when they meet with the student."

Now that the education sector is ready to discuss mental health, Carls and Looper said they are heavily focused on increasing market adoption by getting in front of as many educators as possible.

"We are all in on this. We're very excited to use technology for good," said Looper.
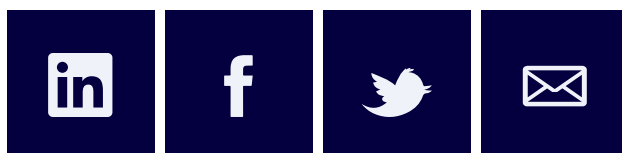
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