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Stutz

There is a teen mental health crisis in America. Every media outlet is ready to discuss it and debate its causes. Smartphones, social media, the pandemic and the increased stress around college admissions are all cited as factors. Amidst all the coverage and hand-wringing there is one aspect that is rarely addressed, simple, practical techniques to help people improve their mental health.

"Stutz", the 2022 documentary directed by Jonah Hill, attempts to do precisely that. The film covers the life and therapeutic methods of Phil Stutz, the therapist that Hill credits with changing his life. Filmed in black and white and shot almost entirely in a single, two chair set, the film is a series of conversations between Stutz and Hill. The simple set seems designed to create the intimate feeling of a single therapy "session" but Hill and Stutz ditch the illusion and acknowledge the filming was a lengthy collaborative process geared towards accessibility.

The film has a similar structure to "Man's Search for Meaning" Viktor Frankl's 1946 book which is both an autobiographical account of his time in a concentration camp and an outline of logotherapy, the school of psychotherapy he founded. Ironically, Frankl's book and "Stutz" had entirely opposite effects on me. Frankl's story of survival is gripping and powerful whereas his writings on logotherapy were dry and academic. In contrast, Stutz biography is impersonal and unremarkable. Hill's interview style really serves as a setup for Stutz to share carefully curated details of his personal life. The film didn't provide understanding of Stutz as a person or share anything beyond a typical promotional profile.

The description of Stutz's style of psychotherapy is an entirely different matter. He outlines the building blocks of his methods in simple segments punctuated by visual aid notecards. The "Tools", as they are called in the film, are a framework for viewing events in your life and shaping your response to them. The clarity, simplicity and utility of The Tools is why the film continues to resonate with me.

The starting point Stutz recommends for everyone is to understand that every life will include pain, uncertainty and constant work. These conditions aren't a function of our mistakes or bad luck and there is no choice or success that will immunize us from experiencing them. Stutz links this to a warning of becoming fixated on "The Snapshot", a mental image of perfection. The name is incredibly appropriate for a social media world. Every day many of us see idealized images of our friends and celebrities. Stutz reminds us that a snapshot is frozen and that just because the pain, uncertainty and constant work of life may not be visible in the frame it doesn't mean they cease to exist.

American culture is incredibly focused on appearance and teens and young women often face the most scrutiny. The idealized pictures of social media create an unrealistic standard and unhealthy body image issues. When healthy diet and exercise practices fail to create the same results as camera filters and photo editing, they become a depressing chore. Stutz instead preaches the link between physical and mental health. Negative emotions and depression often lead to poor diet choices, inactivity and difficulty sleeping. This feeds a negative cycle that worsens each of the issues individually and collectively. Stutz believes that prioritizing physical health represents the overwhelming portion of the early therapy benefits for many of his patients. Evaluating lifestyle choice on how they make you feel instead of how they make you look allows us to focus on ourselves rather than external standards.

For me, the last key image from The Tools is the String of Pearls. The concept is that each action we take, no matter how significant, adds another pearl to the string. The idea is to value progress, rather than just celebrate completion. It is easy to measure

your high school efforts on a single college admission decision. Appreciating the value of your work rather than any individual outcome is a difficult but important step.

Accessibility of care remains a major factor in America. Cost, stigma and a shortage of providers means many people who could benefit from counseling will never receive it. Despite its flaws, "Stutz" brings proactive mental health tools within the reach of millions. Setting realistic expectations, prioritizing physical health and accepting that forward progress is success were meaningful to me. I am happy to have seen "Stutz" and hope that others find The Tools as helpful as I did.