

Coming of Age in the Social Media Era

By Ethel Weiner, Associate Wealth Consultant

Cidel's holistic approach to wealth management goes beyond the dollars and cents of managing our clients' investment portfolios. What sets us apart is our genuine commitment to our clients and their overall well-being. Over the last few years, mental health has become an increasingly prevalent topic. And, simultaneously, concerns about technology and its impact on health have emerged. This year, Cidel's Annual Women's Event sought to address both of these areas.

On May 8th, we welcomed Dr. Ian Chen, a Toronto-based expert in adolescent medicine, along with sixty Cidel clients and friends, to our 2019 Women's Event at Toronto's Hazelton Hotel. Dr. Chen led a highly relevant and illuminating discussion on brain development in adolescents and the impacts of social media and technology on mental health.

Dr. Chen has a long history of being an influencer in health policy and is currently on the board of Havergal College, a girls' school in Toronto. He is launching Chen Medimo Clinic to provide state-of-the-art mental health treatment driven by outcome metrics. As a result of both rigorous research and clinical experience, Dr. Chen is a recognised authority on the effects of technology on the developing brain.

The Power of Technology

Dr. Chen kicked off his recent presentation with a clip from the movie Mean Girls to illustrate the power of technology amongst teens. When the movie came out in 2004, gossip, as always, carried significant weight in social culture. Now, with the advent of social media, gossip is all the more powerful since it can be disseminated through multiple channels with the swipe of a finger. With such a powerful tool in the hands of developing teens, social situations have become much more complicated.

The Developing Brain

For teenagers, structural changes and developments in the brain are constant. Dr. Chen explained that teenage brains have more synapses, which he likened to roads, and added that, until adulthood, these roads are essentially "under construction." If they are not used or explored, they will not develop properly. Along with this construction comes a shift in reliance from what he terms the "lizard brain" to the "human brain." The lizard brain promotes passive learning which requires no reasoning. Conversely, the human brain (or developed brain) is slower moving, engages in problem solving, regulates emotions and promotes active learning. Contentment in the two brain types is also derived from different sources. In the human brain, serotonin is responsible for the feeling of pleasure, while in the lizard brain, dopamine is the driver. Frequently, a teenager's behaviour can be attributed to their reliance on the lizard brain, resulting in impulsiveness, lack of focus and shifting emotions. Often, this renders teenagers incapable of seeing the long-term ramifications of their actions.

Technology and Social Media

Dr. Chen noted that, at such a complicated and confusing time when teenagers' bodies and minds are going through vast and rapid change, the influx of technology and social media is especially problematic. These platforms encourage a passive lifestyle and create a "pleasure cocoon" that enforces the lizard brain type. Social media creates an alternate universe with continuous stimuli, where much of adolescence is now playing out. As an example, being left out of a Friday night sleepover 10 years ago would not hurt

too much when you heard about it on Monday. Today, that same sleepover is broadcast, in real time, on Instagram. While this notion is problematic at any stage, it can be especially troubling while individual development is underway and teenagers are forming their adult selves.

How Can We Support Healthy Development?

Given its societal presence, we cannot eliminate technology or social media from our daily lives. Nevertheless, Dr. Chen believes that a better understanding of brain development can help us to assist teens on their road to maturity. He spoke of the importance of the “Consultant” in the shift from childhood towards adulthood. A consultant need not be a parent, according to Dr. Chen, but can be any positive adult influencer who assists in balancing the lizard versus human brain aspects of development. The consultant can put things into context for the teen and help them understand the real-life consequences of their actions. Exploring consequences does not mean that risk-taking behaviour should be entirely discouraged. In fact, Dr. Chen highlighted the importance of risk-taking as a means of exploring and learning from mistakes. Problem-solving abilities come from practice, so teenagers have to be allowed to make mistakes and figure out how to rectify them. They do not have to do this alone, but it cannot be done for them.

Consultants are invaluable in moderating and mediating the use of technology. They can help teenagers use this tool to their advantage and in appropriate ways, while tempering the desire to engage in unhealthy and unhelpful behaviour online. Dr. Chen suggested creating strict guidelines for teens around the amount of time spent using technology; and, while the suggested time varies by age, he generally encourages limited usage in favour of real social interaction, physical activity and family time.

Broader Application

Though the focus of Dr. Chen’s discussion was on teenagers and their development, many elements can be applied broadly. In an increasingly technological world, we can also strive to maintain human connections and engage in real conversations. At Cidel, it is our belief that the human elements of relationships will never be replaced by technology. As a result, we continue to focus on deepening our connections and relationships with our clients.