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Albright uses avatars, horses to improve mental health

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“When I was a college student, I was struggling in an intimate relationship I was forming, and it got to the point where I had to do something about it. So I went into the counseling center, and that’s what really turned me on—noticing the change within myself and the impact of counseling on the way we view our lives.”

That is the way Dr. Glenn Albright explains how he became interested in psychology in general and in counseling in particular. A native of Albany, New York, Albright received his bachelor’s in biology from Parson College in Iowa, his MS in physiology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and his Ph.D. in psychology from the City University of New York. Today he is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College.

Although that seems to be a very straightforward path, new technologies gave him a new direction in which to apply his expertise. “I’ve always been interested in how technology impacts people. I remember back in the eighties doing a study using email with our Introduction to Psychology students on how technology impacts communication and pedagogy. I was fortunate enough to run into some very talented people who knew about technology, who knew about simulation, who knew about business; and that combination, along with my passion for working with students and helping students, made a phenomenal combination. Particularly after Virginia Tech, we saw that huge tragedy, and the thought was to use simulation technology to enhance the mental health of our students. And that’s where it kind of began.”

With an increase in cases of psychological disorders among college students, some of them leading to tragic consequences such as the Virginia Tech shooting, this effort seems more important than ever. “Some studies are showing 35 to 40 percent of students are reporting symptoms of depression and saying that it’s interfering with their functioning in any academic year. And then you combine that with your anxiety disorders, other types of concerns that students have, and it’s clear that a large portion of our student pop-



Dr. Albright in class.

ulation is being impacted. It’s really important to be able to identify these students early because the earlier you identify and intervene, the more successful you will be in helping them now and also in enabling them to be more successful as adults,” explains Albright.

Because of budget cuts, colleges and universities do not have the necessary resources to deal with this ballooning problem. “There have been numerous studies showing that supporting your counseling center—increasing its capability, hiring more people—actually improves the institution. That it increases satisfaction rates, graduation rates, alumni donations. Those studies have proven that, in the long term, it makes sense for the institution to invest.”

One of the contributions that Albright has made in this field is the use of computer simulations—that is, avatars that can talk with students at the other end of the computer and offer counseling. “I researched

the impact of the simulations designed to give faculty members or students practice in identifying and managing difficult conversations. I’ve got to tell you, they are incredibly effective. It de-stigmatizes people’s perceptions about mental health—knowing that it’s very common, knowing that you’re not alone, that people with mental health concerns are approachable and helpable.”

One surprising finding of his research is that people are actually more comfortable in talking to a virtual character. “They are more likely to open up and reveal themselves. They are less likely to have what we call social-evaluative threat. The roleplays are more effective than they are if you have a face-to-face exchange with other people watching or a professional roleplay person critiquing you. People are much more willing to respond to someone online who is not threatening.”

One common condition among those who return from active duty in the military is that they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. “You have people who’ve gone to Iraq or Afghanistan. They come to college as freshmen, but they’re not eighteen-year-old freshmen. They’ve had life experiences. They’ve seen things that perhaps no other person should see. They are part of a very elite group of people. And faculty should understand the experience they’ve gone through,” says Albright.

One obstacle in dealing with these issues is the macho culture in the military. “The Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Air Force—they’re all working very hard to get members in their services to identify that this is not a weakness. As a matter of fact, when you think of it, if you’re exposed to the kind of traumatic events that our active duty people are exposed to, you’re supposed to get PTSD. That’s what happens. In fact, that’s the way our brain handles these things, and I could make an argument that understanding this allows you to be able to solve it later on in life.”

Japan, because of its aging population, has been experimenting with robots that act as nurses. But will that work in dealing with psychological issues? “There have been doubts each time different technologies have arrived—television, computers, simulation technology, artificial intelligence. I don’t know, but people seem to adapt.”

But the solution may lie in a direction more familiar to all of us, and this is a new line of research for Albright. “I’m interested in horses—equine psychotherapy, particularly as applied to veterans. When you have veterans who are not making any movement in face-to-face therapy, and you put them in an environment where they’re interacting with horses, they make metaphors that change their lives. I’m incredibly interested in understanding that and doing research on how these animals interact with veterans to alleviate the impact of trauma on their lives and the lives of their families.”

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/226888476>
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Photo by Yulia Rock