The New York Times | https://nyti.ms/2H9SDRN

N.Y. / REGION

Homework Therapists' Job: Help Solve Math Problems, and Emotional Ones

By KYLE SPENCER APRIL 4, 2018

On a recent Sunday, Bari Hillman, who works during the week as a clinical psychologist at a New York mental health clinic, was perched at a clear, plastic desk inside a 16-year-old's Manhattan bedroom, her shoeless feet resting on a fluffy white rug. Dr. Hillman was helping a private school sophomore manage her outsize worry over a long-term writing project. The student had taped the project outline on the wall above the desk, at Dr. Hillman's prodding. It was designed to serve both as a reminder that the project was due, and an empowering indicator of progress.

Dr. Hillman mused about the way worry can morph into unhealthy avoidance, the cathartic power of deep breathing and the soothing nature of to-do lists.

Dr. Hillman, 30, represents a new niche in the $100 billion tutoring industry. Neither a traditional tutor nor a straight-up therapist, she is an amalgam of the two. "Homework therapists," as they are now sometimes called, administer academic help and emotional support as needed. Via Skype, email and text, and during pricey one-on-one sessions, they soothe cranky students, hoping to steer them back to the path of achievement.

The service is not cheap. Parents in New York generally pay between $200 and $600 for regularly scheduled in-person sessions that range from 50 to 75 minutes. This on top of the hefty fees New York mothers and fathers already pay

to help their children get ahead, or just stay on pace, from coaching for kindergarten gifted and talented tests, to subject tutoring, SAT prep and help with writing their college essays.

Tutors make themselves available for last-minute interventions before midterms or when writing projects are due. They respond to texts and emails and often send their own, nudging students to finish a homework assignment or stay positive before and during a big exam.

Some have teenagers create playlists on Spotify that express their feelings about homework. Others hand out blobs of scented putty, known as therapy dough, that is designed to calm. Others use meditation and mindfulness to refocus their charges on the hunt for a 4.0 and higher SAT scores.

Homework therapists often have day jobs as clinicians at hospitals, family counseling centers or their own private practices. Evenings they work with overwhelmed students to create study guides, do algebra problems, organize binders, smooth out crumpled papers at the bottom of book bags and do “error analyses” when a biology test goes awry. But they also help children address the psychological issues that are holding them back, using common counseling techniques like motivational interviewing and exposure therapy, a strategy sometimes used with victims of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ariel Kornblum, a psychologist for children and adolescents, works out of her ground-floor office at the Manhattan Psychology Group’s Upper West Side location. When she is not administering regular therapy, she is often advising middle and high school students whose inability to organize their schoolwork, she says, is hurting their grades, and their self-esteem. Dr. Kornblum helps them develop sorting strategies, workable planners and study schedules while also challenging some of the negative thoughts swimming around in their heads.

“A lot of my clients will say: ‘I did my homework. I forgot to hand it in a number of times. My grades are suffering. And now I feel badly about myself,’” she said. “What we do is get at the core of why.”

There is no official count of how many New York City tutors do this hybrid

work. But tutoring centers say demand is on the rise.

The Brooklyn Learning Center launched its Homework Therapy program in 2001 with one therapist-tutor in its Brooklyn Heights office. It has since opened centers in Park Slope and TriBeCa and enlists 12 homework therapists, 10 of them full time.

Anna Levy-Warren, a New York-based psychotherapist who opened her one-person practice in 2005, now has more than 50 tutors with mental health-related degrees who fan out across the city on weeknights and weekends. They also conduct sessions via Skype.

And 10 years ago, Inspirica, a high-priced, New York City-based tutoring company that specializes in one-on-one test preparation, had no tutors with social work or psychology-related degrees. The founder and chief executive, Lisa Jacobson, says there are now eight in her New York office.

“Now, it’s all about calming people down,” Ms. Jacobson said.

The focus on students’ emotional health is part of a larger movement in education. Today, most educators are trained in social-emotional development, and advancements in brain imaging are increasingly indicating how closely cognition and emotions are linked.

Work by the Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck on “growth mind-set” — the importance of believing that you can learn and change — and the University of Pennsylvania’s Angela Duckworth on grit, or the ability to overcome setbacks, have convinced parents and educators that they can increase children’s motivation and goal setting with the right techniques.

Further, school administrators say there has been a notable uptick in the number of students who arrive each year with neuropsychological evaluations, a costly but extensive set of tests, often used to determine why a student is struggling to perform. The results include information about learning disabilities, like attention deficit disorder and dyslexia, but also a student’s emotional state.

Ellen B. Braaten, the associate director of The Clay Center for Young and

Healthy Minds in Boston, says the arrival of this new breed of clinician/coaches is not unique to New York, but is also finding a footing in areas around Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Northern California, where pressure on students to succeed is high and "therapy isn't stigmatized."

The homework therapists can put up with a lot of drama.

Leah Kesselman, a 28-year-old psychologist who works with Beyond BookSmart, a Boston-based firm with dozens of coaches in the New York area, says she has dealt with students who have repeatedly yelled at her, "Get Out," or "We don't need you." To calm them down, she sometimes suggests a few minutes of video gaming or the Spotify playlists.

Dr. Levy-Warren, the New York psychotherapist, says she worked with a student who once sobbed to her after learning she had received a "B" on a paper. To help, she used "reframing," a popular cognitive behavioral therapy technique, getting at what a "B" symbolized to her and helping her develop a more positive outlook.

Mellora Ansbro, a recent graduate of Johns Hopkins University, began working with Dr. Levy-Warren when she was a junior at Riverdale Country School, a private school in the Bronx. During meetings that sometimes began at 9 p.m., Dr. Levy-Warren taught her how to write an essay and take better notes, and also how to navigate the high school social scene and manage her parents. Six years later, shortly after graduating from college and anxious about her life, Ms. Ansbro, now 24, hired Dr. Levy-Warren again.

"I was freaking out," she said. "It was a big transition. And I felt underprepared."

Over the last year and a half, Dr. Levy-Warren has helped her come up with a study plan for the GRE, apply to graduate school and ward off worries about what she should and should not be doing with her life. She has also boosted Ms. Ansbro's spirits when occasional bouts of worry and depression have set in.

But Dr. Braaten at The Clay Center notes that there are no licensing requirements for homework therapists, so guidelines as to what services they

actually provide can be murky and uniform standards are nonexistent. Some build glitter globes with their students to serve as relaxing tools. Others use aromatherapy oils, and encourage students to create flash cards with affirming motivational mantras like “I got this,” or “Done is Better than Perfect.”

Further, Dr. Braaten says there is no strong evidence that this type of hybrid treatment works.

Holly Schiffrin, a professor of psychological science at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va., who researches adolescent development and depression, says she thinks a tutor who helps a struggling student with study skills and confidence makes sense.

“But there should be a plan in place for them to become fully functioning, independent adults,” she said.

A version of this article appears in print on April 5, 2018, on Page A22 of the New York edition with the headline: Guiding Hand For Algebra And Anxiety.
