



# RED & WHITE FOR LIFE

## Alum hopes website helps families improve communications

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[Kevin Strauss](#) wants to help families around the world do a better job of communicating with each other.

Never mind that Strauss is single and has no children. Or that he has degrees in mechanical and biomedical engineering. Or that most of his professional life has involved developing new medical devices (his name is on more than a dozen patents and he has nearly three dozen patents pending) and helping companies get such devices approved by the FDA.



But Strauss says he is an outside-the-box thinker who is keenly interested in human behavior, having read a lot of books and spent a lot of time thinking about why people do the things that they do. Why do they smoke? Why do they do drugs? Why do they fight with each other?

"I want people to live a happier life and a more successful life," he says. "When people feel connected to one another, all their behaviors improve. I'm trying to improve communications in families and improve their connections."

Strauss hopes to do that through something known

as [familyjournal](#). It is a website created by Strauss to prompt families (or any sort of group seeking stronger connections with

each other) to communicate in more meaningful ways. It is a project that Strauss fiddled with for years as a sidelight to his regular job. But in late 2012, Strauss quit his job so that he could devote all his efforts to building familyjournal. He relaunched a new website earlier this month, and already has a few hundred active members.

"The need for connection is a basic human need," says Strauss, who lives outside Washington, D.C. "I would love to have this helping families all over the world."

Familyjournal is a free service in which members are asked to spend a few minutes at their computer each day to respond to a handful of simple questions — What was the best part of your day? How would you define a really good conversation? What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Those responses can then be seen by other family members and, Strauss says, can prompt subsequent conversations that have more depth and meaning. Those conversations could take place around the dinner

table, riding in the car together or by email or telephone in instances where family members don't live together. It can be a useful tool, he says, to keep parents connected with their children when they are off at college or to help families with military members stationed overseas.

"We're not trying to find out your deepest, darkest secrets," Strauss says. "We're just trying to help get the communications ball rolling. It just lets you talk about your feelings."

Social media, or texting, can give the illusion of meaningful communication, Strauss says. Most texts between parents and children typically involve logistics — When will you be home? When do I need to pick you up? — rather than meaningful conversation.

"This is much more guided," Strauss says. "It's so simple, but it works so well."

Strauss is partnering with a few universities to conduct studies of the effectiveness of the approach used by familyejournal, but says the anecdotal data he has is encouraging. "I have testimonials from around the world from family members who haven't talked who are now talking," he says. "A parent wrote in to say

that from the very first day they signed up, life around the house was better."

Strauss believes that familyejournal could even help reduce high-risk behavior such as binge drinking and eating disorders. "Studies show that when people feel connected to something — and especially when teenagers feel connected to something — all of their high-risk behavior is reduced," he says. "All of these behaviors that people participate in are symptoms of a bigger problem. If you address that one root cause, everything improves."

While the service is free to members who sign up,

Strauss hopes to make money off the venture by selling advertising on the site and by partnering with larger organizations such as universities, churches and hospitals. In exchange for a fee, those organizations will get data on how frequently members of their organizations are using familyejournal and use that to track changes in behavior such as graduation rates or counseling sessions for depression. Strauss says the responses of individual members are private and will not be shared with partner organizations.

"What I find is that the mental health professionals — counselors and therapists — they all love the concept," he says. "If you really believe in the concept, just give it a try."