

Uncertainty

As we approach the end of term and 2016, it seems a good time to reflect upon the past year. For many that I have spoken with, professionally and personally, this year has been somewhat tainted by an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. Daily, on the news, we have been confronted with horrific images of war, mass displacements of desperate people, heinous acts of terrorism, as well as climatic and other natural disasters. In addition to these anxiety-promoting reports, the West has seen two potentially very significant political changes. The UK's new PM Teresa May has promised Brexit, by triggering Article 50, next spring and following recent elections in the US, Donald Trump has surprised the world by becoming the new President Elect. It's no wonder the US-borne, "killer clown" prank raised such somewhat irrational fear in many, to the extent that even on Hallowe'en, parents were ditching clown outfits they'd bought for their toddlers, considering them now inappropriate for trick-or-treating. This year's offerings are perhaps enough to cause anyone to wonder what 2017 has in store? The school counselling service seems to have been particularly busy this autumn term, leaving me questioning has the global climate of uncertainty been, at least in part, responsible?

All of these events are difficult to witness and process as an adult, but they're even more terrifying and confusing for young people who, by virtue of their age, dependency and inexperience, may already be feeling vulnerable and powerless. Hence I'd encourage open conversations with your children about these issues. Additionally, I wonder if, as a society, we are increasingly pushing the idea that our futures can be certain, so long as we plan for them appropriately. I'm always surprised by how many young people express genuine concern if they don't know their future career path, sometimes even before they have sat GCSEs. Somehow we are no longer allowed simply to not yet know and see where life leads us. Indeed, the unknown has become something to be feared, rather than something to potentially be excited about.

Some interesting research published this year in the British Journal of Psychiatry, reported that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is more likely to affect those of us living in affluent countries, than in poorer nations, even when accounting for better diagnosis or more treatments available in the former. What is proposed is that PTSD often links in with something that has violated a person's expectations. Hence, if a person believes they live in a safe, friendly world, where they can craft the life they want (e.g. through hard work, good relationships, doing the "right" thing), when something contrary to these beliefs occurs, this can shatter their world view. This is much harder to get over if you've not grown up expecting to face some difficulties.

What can we do about our inevitable fear of uncertainty? Firstly, while it sounds obvious, it's important for us all to accept not everything in life can be controlled through hard work and detailed planning. Therefore, perhaps we should think about how we promote this to our children? What happens when the grand plan just does not work? What then? Additionally, just as bad things can happen, uncertainty can leave the door open for life to take a turn for the better, even when everything appears to be conspiring against us. If we are feeling particularly worried about something, it can also be helpful to refocus our thoughts more on now, on the things we can actually change and control today. We need to rein in those hypothetical "what if... next year or in ten years..." scenarios in our minds that we think we can prepare for by overthinking, but simply become anxious about. Sometimes, we just have to look after today, or this week, or this month and let the future take care of itself. Furthermore, while worrying about the future, we often fail to appreciate and enjoy the good things we have in our lives right now.

None of us can know what 2017 has in store. However, if there are challenges, I hope that they aren't ones that any of us have to face entirely alone and without support. For those facing particularly challenging times, it can be helpful to remember of the words of the *Serenity Prayer*:

By Anna Albert, No5 Counsellor at Kendrick School.

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*Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things that I can
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

Wishing everyone in the Kendrick community all the best over the holidays. Here's to 2017!