

Attacked From Within

Countless recent reports in the news are quoting statistics indicating that our young people are experiencing worsening mental health issues. With cuts to government funding into mental health support, some even refer to us having a mental health crisis amongst our young – our future. Looking at the majority of young people today, however, it is tempting to focus on how in certain respects they might be privileged, having access possibly to more parental input, more opportunities and experiences, as well as material possessions, than the parental generation at a commensurate age. This can lead to a bit of a block sometimes to understanding and empathising with, what is therefore behind this “crisis.”

Anxiety-related issues currently seem to be particularly prevalent amongst young people. If we think about what anxiety really boils down to, it is a fear of something terrible happening in the future - and on a very primitive level, fear for our survival. Hence, our young people really fear the future. For many teenagers, particularly those for whom their academic achievements are important and valued, studying for GCSEs and A levels can result in huge amounts of chronic anxiety, sometimes experienced for years at a stretch. As the world financial and job markets feel less secure, attending a top university understandably becomes most parents’ wish for their children. Hence, the emphasis on school exams being important intensifies. Naturally, young people come to correlate success in their exams with self-worth – but the idea of perceived failure then equates to annihilation of whom they are. Our fight or flight stress-response system has evolved to deal with immediate and usually external threats to our survival, but it doesn’t cope so well with chronic stresses. We can’t flee the imagined future we fear. We are stuck with those fears attacking us from within.

How can we help our young people to cope better when we can’t change the world? We can start by making sure we talk to them often about their worries so they know they don’t carry them alone. We can try to understand their situation and not assume it is exactly the same as ours was at their age. We can let them know that actually they are a lot more resilient than they realise and remind them of all the difficult situations they’ve already managed and survived. We can let them know they aren’t alone in how they feel. We can share some examples of our own struggles that have ended positively. We can let them know that “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry” and that is okay. There is always a solution, a new path to follow, sometimes even a better one than the one we originally imagined. We can let them know that so long as they have tried their best, within the unique circumstances given, no one can ask for any more. We can let them know we are proud of who they are and how they are managing pressures that didn’t even exist when we were their age. And we can remind them that, no matter what, we love them just as they are.

Wishing everyone all the best over the spring break and good luck to all exam students next term.