



Anxiety in Children and Young People (CYP)

by Christine Pinder

Mental health issues regarding young people are often in the news. Even as I write this, the Children's Society¹ have just released their Good Childhood report for 2021, and yet again it tells us that wellbeing in young people has declined, and that compared to other countries in Europe, the UK is at the bottom of the league table. The issues highlighted are worries about appearance, and the pressures of school, two areas of life young people reported as being of most concern when surveyed in 2020.

This corresponds with our experience here at Footsteps, our centre in Suffolk, where the most common presenting problem for young people is anxiety. Clearly there are many factors that can contribute to anxiety in young people, from bullying and abuse to homelessness or concerns about climate change and other global issues. However, the Good Childhood report, and our experience as counsellors, would suggest that the most common causes of anxiety in young people revolve around a sense of identity. The research highlights the pressure young people feel to be 'successful', with the most pressing anxiety being 'Am I good enough?', whether in terms of academic ability, appearance, popularity with peers and social skills, wealth and possessions compared to others, or just a general sense of inadequacy

and a failure to have succeeded.

The 2021 report puts appearance at the top of the list of those factors, which comes as no surprise to anyone working with young people or with body dysmorphia.

Anxiety affects young people in many different ways; trouble with sleeping, difficulties concentrating, panic attacks and the physical sensations of sweating, beating (pounding) heart and feeling sick, and wanting to withdraw from school or social situations. These are all common experiences. And of course we must not forget that the label of anxiety covers a wide spectrum of experiences, from milder symptoms which are uncomfortable but manageable, to the more extreme end which can result in severe mental health conditions.

For young people, the added pressure of living with anxiety is that it comes at a crucial time in their development. Teenage years are the years when exams loom, followed by decision-making regarding careers options. Likewise, many teenagers are working out relationships and / or developing their belief systems, in addition to (fundamentally) discovering the person they are going to be in connection with the world around. Any condition that affects their ability to carry out those life-tasks has potentially negative consequences for the

future. Often young people are aware of that, which of course adds to the 'anxiety of having anxiety', which is so common.

WHAT FACTORS ARE CONTRIBUTING TO ANXIETY IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

Mention the problems that young people have with anxiety in conversation and the chances are that people will point to the pressures of social media. Undoubtedly this adds to the pressure and anecdotally there are stories that many of us will have heard about the negative impact of social media on some young peoples' wellbeing. Selected photos seem to tell a story of glamorous people living an exciting and fulfilled life. This crafted imagery can create anxiety surrounding, for example, envy or frustration. Alongside that, hurtful comments online can rapidly descend into bullying. Surprisingly though, the statistics tell a slightly different story. Whilst social media is undoubtedly a problem in some ways, it doesn't appear to be the main cause of the mental health decline in young people. Statistics show that in the UK young people's mental health is poorer than in other similar countries across Europe, where young people are just as equally exposed to social media. Surprisingly, body dysmorphic disorder has actually been around since the 19th

century, long before the advent of platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

So if not social media, what is causing the increases in anxiety amongst our young people? Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist writes eloquently about the changes in our society and their impact on mental health. Our disconnection from the environment, broken and dislocated communities, the advance of technology and 'compulsive' use of screens, the growth of bureaucracy, focus on celebrity and image, and increasingly reductionist and mechanistic ways of thinking, all reflect the growing dominance of the brain's left hemisphere over the right. The consequences of this on our sense of identity and embodiment, and our (dis) connection to the world in which we live are devastating to our mental health, and to our anxiety levels. Our lack of embodiment means that our ability to process any trauma that comes our way is impaired, reducing our resilience to the stresses of life.

If we add to this a consequent and concurrent decline in spirituality and faith which could offer people a sense of worth, value and meaning that goes beyond the simple functioning of day-to-day life, we can understand the emptiness that some young people are facing. If society reduces them to mere 'robots' completing a task, for example, young people find themselves living on an achievement / failure seesaw with no inherent value for themselves, and it is no wonder, therefore, that we see exponential increases in anxiety. Our young people have inherited a perfect storm of disconnections, and the chickens have come home to roost in their generation.

Let me give you a typical (representative, non-specific) example: 'Ellie' was 15 when she came for counselling because her

anxiety levels had become so bad that there were many mornings that she found herself unable to face going to school. We agreed between us to explore her sense of identity and how she felt about herself. I asked her some simple questions about who she was. Her answer was 'I'm quite skinny with brown eyes and dark hair'. That was it, all she was able to tell me about herself. I asked what she liked and didn't like about herself. 'I like my nails', she said, 'but I don't like my nose'. In her mind, she was simply a body, to be approved of or disapproved of by others, depending on whether 'it' fitted the requirements of the consumerist society around her. No sense of inner value, or even



a sense of personal identity at all. Certainly no sense of being created by a God of love to flourish and thrive in a created world, to find meaning and relationship, and to enjoy his love in communion with him for ever.

Who wouldn't feel anxious with a worldview like that?

HOW DO WE WORK WITH ANXIETY IN YOUNG PEOPLE?

Working with anxiety in young people often involves similar skills to those employed in the counselling of adults. Young people need relationship and they need to discover who they are. Often families are well-meaning

and doing their best, but in the midst of parents working full-time and the normal demands of life, time to listen or relate to their children is minimal. As counsellors we have the privilege of spending some quality time with clients, of building an 'I, thou' relationship where acceptance and genuineness are paramount. The simple experiencing of core conditions for some young people is revolutionary in itself, and at times it takes only a few sessions for a sense of worth to be reawakened and for them to begin to flourish. It's as though at times they need to hear some acceptance from another person in order to put down the negative comments and judgements that have come their way, and to begin to believe in themselves again.

For others it is less simple and straightforward. Exploring identity and relationships is central to the work and this can expose a variety of issues including complex family relationships, LGBTQ+ questions, developmental issues, body dysmorphia and eating disorders. The work may involve identifying and finding language for feelings, or simply finding ways of communicating feelings creatively.

I often use a set of 'bear cards', pictures of bears demonstrating different emotions. Clients can simply point at the one that most closely resembles their own emotion and the strength of the emotion, from mildly annoyed to furious rage if they're angry, and then we can develop language for their feelings based around that.

Boundaries are central to developing identity and for teenagers who are crossing the bridge from being children who are told what to think and how to do things, to becoming adults who decide for themselves. Learning how to build and manage boundaries is crucial. Life is going

to be anxious if other people are giving you negative labels and you have no 'armour' of boundaries with which to dismiss those labels. At the same time, you are in a class at school where you have minimal say in how your day runs and little opportunity to implement said boundaries. I've only been working with this age group for a few years but I've already lost count of the number of times that anxiety is reduced when a teacher simply moves the seating plan so that children are not sitting next to a person who bullies them. Sadly, not all teachers are as responsive as others in this regard.

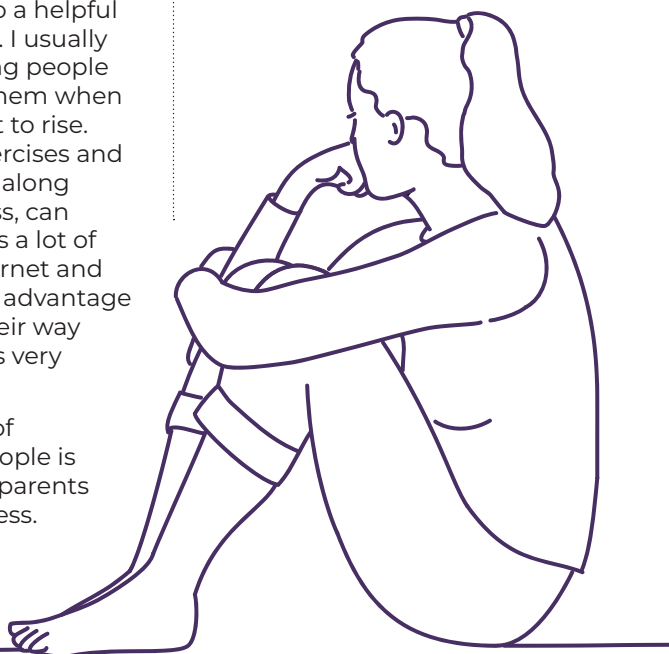
For some young people creative counselling tools are helpful. Talking to an adult is not easy for some, and for others, finding the language to express themselves is difficult. Creative tools can really come into their own for these clients. From working with sand, to play dough, to simple drawing and story-telling can all be useful, and as with adults can help process emotions that often run deeper than words. I can think of teenagers who processed trauma simply by playing in a sand tray whilst talking, or even by singing their own words to songs they knew.

Psychoeducation is also a helpful tool with young people. I usually explain to anxious young people what is happening to them when their anxiety levels start to rise. Teaching breathing exercises and grounding techniques, along with gentle mindfulness, can be very helpful. There is a lot of information on the internet and young people have the advantage of being able to find their way onto apps and websites very easily.

One of the challenges of working with young people is that relationships with parents can be part of the process. Working

for a charity where parents are bringing their children for counselling, or are organising and paying for online counselling, we find parents sometimes want to talk about their child's issues. I can easily understand and identify with parents' concerns, but I also find myself feeling quite protective of my young clients. We are not able to disclose what is happening in the counselling room, but we very often find an anxious child has an anxious parent. Building a positive, but very bounded relationship with parents is important in enabling the counselling to proceed.

There are various resources out there to help young people with their anxiety. The Young Minds website has some helpful information, along with stories from other young people who have been through similar experiences. The Children's Society website also has useful information and resources for young people, and of course there is a growing number of counsellors within ACC working with children and young people who may be able to help.



Notes

- 1 <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/>
- 2 <https://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/service.page?id=KYeHTdIO3d0>
- 3 McGilchrist, Ian (2009), 'The Master and his Emissary – The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World', Yale University Press.
- 4 <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

Christine Pinder

About the author

Reverend Christine Pinder began working as a counsellor with young people back in the 1980s. She completed her diploma working with adults and returned to young people's work only a few years ago. In 2018 she was part of a group that established a group of us set up Footsteps, a centre working with 11-25 year olds in Suffolk, in response to the desperate need for young people to find counselling help. Christine is also an Associate Vicar in her local church.



Diary Date:

The next Open Forum led by ACC's Children and Young People's Group is on 9th February 2022 at 7.30pm, and will represent an opportunity to reflect on and explore working with spirituality in Children's and Young People's work.