

CHILDREN'S SOCIETY WEBINAR ON MENTAL HEALTH

It's said that the mark of a good society is the way it cares for the victims of a crisis. There have been many casualties from the pandemic, but children and young people stand out. Their schooling has been disrupted, they will enter the world of work off the back of a second major recession in their short lifetime, and they will inherit a big national debt in addition to their own personal debts.

And then there is mental health.

It is reassuring to hear more talk about the mental health of children and young people in this pandemic. But this issue predates lockdown. Most informed people know there has been a significant spike in mental illness among younger people in the last ten to fifteen years. Worrying increases that can't be ignored.

Older generations still find it difficult to talk honestly about mental illness. Thirty years from now, when Generation Z inherits public power, there will be a whole new way of speaking about and addressing issues of mental health. But why should we wait for that moment, to tackle this challenge with greater empathy? The freedom with which young people speak of their mental health is an open invitation to my generation to show the same courage and integrity.

Mental health and well-being is a complex issue and there are many overlapping causes of its deterioration in younger generations. In this short space, I want to highlight three.

The first is the culture of perfection. Stephen Hinshaw and Rachel Kranz have described this for young people, and especially young women, as 'the triple bind' – the need to achieve perfection academically, socially and physically. They painfully describe this as: 'act sweet and nice; be a star athlete and get straight A's; seem sexy and hot even if you're not'.

As social mobility freezes, more emphasis is placed on academic achievement as the only available route in a society with big divides between rich and poor. Adults with more life experience know that exam grades at GCSE and A level do not define the rest of your life, but we persist in pressuring young people with less life experience into believing they do. Personal worth and destiny are not bundled up into a set of exam grades, but this is the deceit we have allowed to take hold.

This cult of perfection has leaked into personal relationships and appearance too, which leads into a second cause of the deterioration of mental health. And this is digital architecture.

The speed with which Silicon Valley has shaped the way we relate to one another is astonishing. Social media has been described by the US scriptwriter and film director Aaron Sorkin as the biggest social experiment in human history.

But it's an experiment without adequate consent or safety measures. We can now make a numerical calculation of how popular we are, by virtue of the likes and

retweets we get. And on Instagram especially, we can grade our looks, going up against elite competition we have little chance of matching.

Today's social media is not aligned with the values we desire and that young people are especially prone to its effects. No-one intended this, but it has happened because our tech know-how has outstripped our wisdom. And the tech revolution has only just got going. At the start of this century, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok didn't exist. There are things yet to be called into being that may challenge us even more deeply.

We haven't addressed social media properly as a safeguarding issue. For fifteen years it has been hiding in plain sight. It's not that social media is a bad thing. But its architecture is leaky, cold and unsafe. We made it, and we can do better.

The third cause of the hit to mental health is the culture of winners and losers we have created. Learning to win at some things and lose at others is part of human development. But asking people to look at their whole lives in terms of winning and losing is a sickness. Market values of competition are so dominant, they have become the liturgy by which we articulate our lives, leaking into areas they do not belong and can only corrode.

This liturgy is both familiar and damaging. How often do we hear people say they succeeded at something because they wanted it more than anyone else? Determination and will power are important, but do not decide outcomes alone. Natural talent, loving parents, family wealth, good schooling, personal contacts all come into play. I wonder sometimes if people use the mantra that they succeeded because they wanted it more than others to obscure the fact they had a head start in life? Telling young people they will always make it if they want it enough creates the cult of winners and losers, where those who miss out have only themselves to blame.

The pandemic started as a disrupter but over time will be an amplifier of existing trends. It has heightened a sense that things won't work out well for young people unless they succeed at everything.

The Church's own culture could be improved in response to this. A generation of leaders of which I am a part has often ignored mental health or - if it pays any attention - it is sometimes to question why people's minds are messed up when they should be living a victorious life in Christ - more than conquerors at every turn.

Yet the man who said this also told people there was a point when he despaired of life itself, being unable to cope with the pressure he was under.

We should read between the lines of scripture. What is not being said, but calls out for attention? The writers of the Bible did not reveal much of what was going on inside people's heads. It just wasn't the ancient house style. But all kinds of things would have been. We need to spend more time together in the Book of Psalms, because there you get a psychiatrist's couch full of testimony about feelings. Those

who sense they are drowning and that, in the spirit of the Phil Collins song, God is not lending a hand.

We should prioritise Mental Health First Aid training in the Church, using the many agencies that exist to help. We should make our premises, often the biggest in a locality, intentionally available for the support of children and young people's mental health and well-being.

The Church has a prophetic calling to speak up on behalf of those who have no voice or who cannot be heard. We imagine that young people have a voice because they are digital natives, inhabiting this land with ease. But this voice is not properly heard by others and what appears to be self-confidence is often a cover for insecurity.

And we need to address that digital architecture. We can only do this in co-operation and it is a huge task. We need to employ the power of the State, of law, of policy, to achieve this. And also the power of example. What does it mean to be an adult follower of Jesus online? If we curate perfect images of our lives and show them off, compete for likes and attention, and run other people down on social media, what are we showing to children and young people?

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