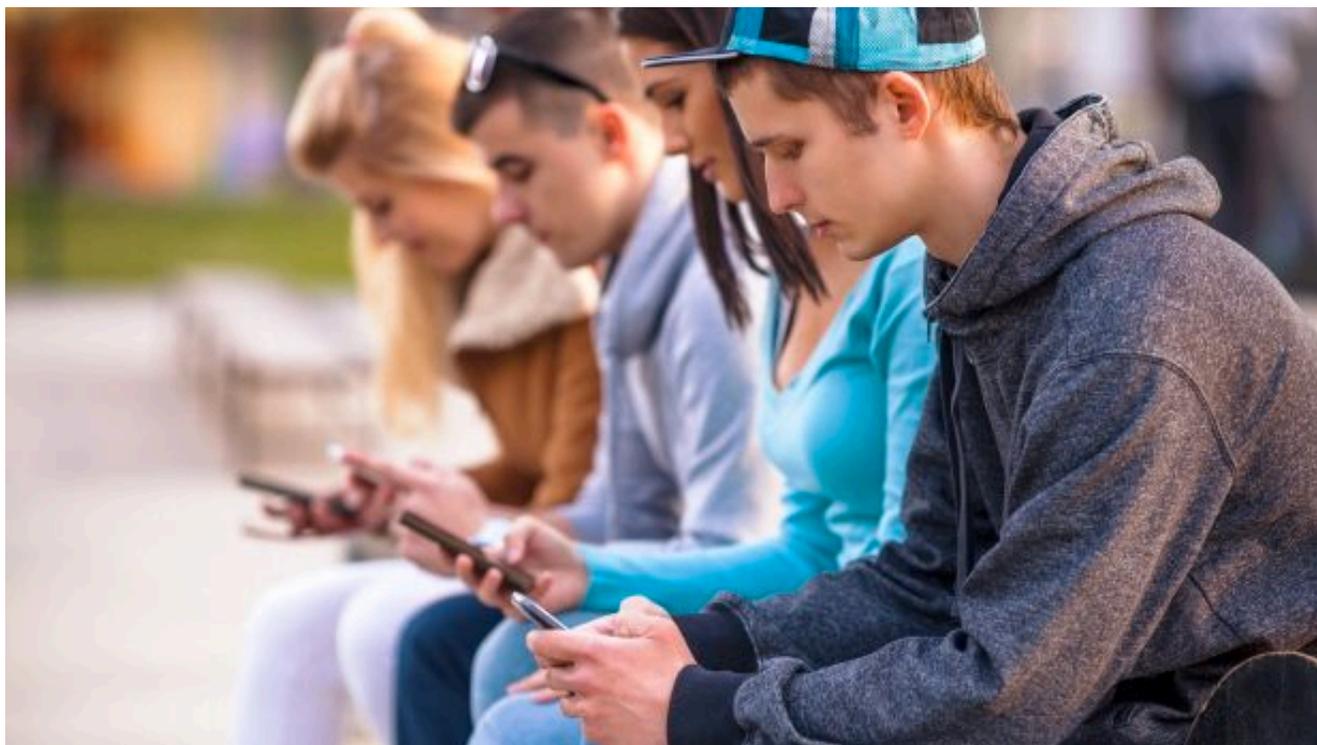


Clicks and likes contributing to a teen anxiety crisis

By Chris Fotinopoulos

A psychiatrist speaking to a group of teachers at the beginning of the school year warned of the "anxiety tsunami" that was about to strike this generation of students. "It's already arrived," whispered the welfare co-ordinator sitting directly behind me. Unsurprisingly, most teachers attending the "The Science of Happiness" forum organised by the school I teach at agreed.



According to statistics provided by beyondblue, it is estimated that in any one year, around 1 million Australian adults will experience depression, and more than 2 million will have anxiety. What's more, one in 14 young Australians (6.9 per cent) aged 4-17 experienced an anxiety disorder in 2015. This is equivalent to approximately 278 000 young people.

It is heartbreaking to see bright and seemingly happy students withdraw from school because of their inability to get out of bed. And it is particularly devastating for parents to see their once upbeat child broken by a malady that they did not see coming. Even for those who did detect something amiss, many had little idea on how to assist.

As one parent put it, "With a physical illness the family is in it together, but with a mental illness everyone feels alone."

Another parent described it as "watching your child bobbing up and down like a cork at sea and unable to reach them".

While there is a range of complex epidemiological reasons for mental illness, the keynote speaker at the forum, Dr Tony Fernando from the University of Auckland, pointed to an increasing dependency on activities associated with the brain's excitement-pleasure circuitry for the rising levels of anxiety and depression in teenagers today. Prominent in this cerebral circuitry is social media.

These days, teenagers depend on their digital devices to form friendships, fight battles, argue, gossip and bully. All of which provide instances of pleasure or displeasure.

People like to be liked, especially children. This is Facebook's attraction. For each "like" or positive acknowledgment, the recipient experiences a burst of pleasure. But, just as it feels good to be liked, it also feels good to dislike. According to Dr Fernando, the feel-good brain chemical, dopamine, is also produced by antisocial behaviour. This is because dopamine is blind to cruelty. And that's why ridiculing, shaming or making fun of others can be pleasurable for some. I recall a group of 13-year old girls telling me that they automatically take their phone to bed out of fear of missing out.

With an eye-roll and a dismissive hand gesture she said, "Look, you just don't want to be left out of the loop."

And with eyes fixed to her smartphone, another girl added, "You don't want to roll up to school the next morning not knowing why certain girls are staring at you and sniggering."

So, it seems that teenagers are ensnared in an ever-widening net of peer surveillance where much of what is said and done is recorded, posted, shared, manipulated, fabricated and ridiculed. It's the kind of social interaction that feeds into the mental chatter that keeps kids awake at night. It's enough to drive anyone's anxiety levels through the roof.

There is no point in mollycoddling children or imploring them to switch off their phone or forgo digital technology altogether. This would be as pointless as telling kids that television rots the brain. As my students remind me, social media allows them to talk freely about their struggle with anxiety and depression. And as Justin Kenardy, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Queensland notes, "There is more awareness about anxiety in kids because many more are self-reporting because of social media."

Thanks to the efforts of mental health advocates, clinician, social workers, and teachers, a lot is being done in Australia to combat the teenage mental health crisis in Australia. But as with any crisis, it requires a practical, clear-eyed and non-nonsense approach.

One such approach is the introduction of school-based programs that help kids focus on their interior world. Previous generations may have known this as meditation, reflection, prayer or even daydreaming. These days it is known as mindfulness.

In spite of its New Age connotation, mindfulness helps kids avoid getting caught up in worrying, dwelling, judging, and fight/flight reactivity. It can help us all avoid succumbing to our visceral reactions by helping us understand the brain and its traps.

Greg Hassed from the Department of General Practice, Monash University, explains, "Mindfulness helps us grow new connections in the brain areas associated with concentration, self-awareness and managing emotion."

This is not all that new. To hark back to the controversial countercultural American psychologist Timothy Leary, the practice helps us "turn on" our neural equipment, "tune in" to our inner world, and "drop out" of involuntary commitments. Sounds like good advice to a generation that defaults to a world of social chatter and cruelty.

Mindfulness does, however, require patience. And patience, it seems, is giving way to instant pleasure. For many teenagers and indeed adults, anything less than immediate will not suffice.

As Dr Fernando put it, we're sitting on a mountain of happiness, it's just that we don't have time to mine it. As the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle argued, there is a far greater chance of finding contentment and emotional equanimity in the things that take time to propagate. And if we want our children to be less anxious or depressed, we need to impress on them the importance of acting and relating to others with fellow feeling and care, which opens the way to lifelong friendships, community and social harmony.

We need to emphasise that happiness is a lifelong pursuit that cannot be fast-tracked. Anything that helps kids understand that happiness is more than just a series of taps and clicks or an aggregation of short-lived pleasures is a step towards better mental health.

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