

Four common myths about young people and mental health debunked

By Matthew Jenkin

It's Saturday night, it's The X Factor – the popular talent show which spawned pop superstars One Direction and Leona Lewis. Watched by millions of teenagers every week, its power to influence legions of young fans is undeniable. Which is why mental health campaigners were left baffled, confused and furious when contestant Lola Saunders performed a rendition of [Gnarls Barkley's Crazy](#) with a troupe of dancers in straitjackets. With [one in 10 children and young people aged five to 16](#) suffering from a diagnosable mental health problem – that is around three children in every class – the show's misguided attempt at Halloween humour was not only bad taste, it was potentially damaging.

It's not the first time mental health problems have been misrepresented and, in effect, stigmatised. Only last year, [Asda had its knuckles rapped for selling mental health patient fancy dress costumes](#) for Halloween, while this year [Jokers' Masquerade was criticised by MP Norman Lamb](#) for selling “schizo” costumes.

It's clear the battle against mental illness misconceptions and misrepresentations still has a long way to go. But with [more than half of all adults with mental health problems diagnosed in childhood](#), and less than half treated appropriately at the time, it is important for schools to play their part in dispelling some of the most damaging stereotypes. We spoke to mental health experts and teachers to bust some common myths.

1. People with mental health problems are dangerous

Although many television dramas and soaps are being [more authentic in their portrayal of mental illnesses](#), many media depictions have led to the impression that people with mental health problems are dangerous individuals. However, it's a huge stigma which has absolutely no evidence to back it up. An extensive study undertaken in Sweden in 2010 found that [illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder](#) are not the reason why violent crimes are committed by people with mental health problems. Rather, it's the abuse of illegal drugs and alcohol that perpetuates these crimes.

The idea that people with a mental illness might explode at any moment and run amok with a weapon is mediaeval, says Katherine Weare, professor of education at the [University of Southampton](#). She has researched into and written extensively about mental health and says that there is a continued misguided belief that mental illness is contagious, but at the same time unlike a physical ailment it is also seen as someone's own fault.

“You wouldn’t go to someone lying in bed with a fever and tell them they could get up if they wanted to. There is a failure to understand that mental health problems are an illness – they are not something that you can snap out of and are not anybody’s fault.”

2. Teenagers’ ups and downs are just due to hormones

On the surface, bad behaviour in schools is often seen as a sign that a young person is simply acting out their frustration at struggling academically. The solution is usually to punish the student. If the child has a mental health problem, known or unknown, this is not the best way of handling the situation. Rather, it’s often a matter of digging under the surface to find out what is actually going on, explains Lucy Russell, director of campaigns at [Young Minds](#).

“It is difficult for teachers to really get to the bottom of the problem, because they are not social workers or counsellors,” she says, adding that the myth is that these are just naughty kids.

“It’s what some GPs say as well. You’re a teenager and going through a lot of hormonal changes and it’s just a phase that you’ll get through. Brain development in teenage years is absolutely massive and there is a lot of turmoil. It’s about picking apart what is typical and what is a sign of a much more serious problem.”

It’s particularly relevant to conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The problem, Russell explains, is that teachers simply don’t know enough about these conditions to determine the reasons why a child might be disrupting the class. Russell is therefore calling for mental health related training to be included for all new teachers. In the meantime she recommends teachers visit online portal [MindEd](#), for information about understanding children’s mental health and being able to see the signs.

3. Serious mental health problems are obvious

While suspicious cuts and marks on a student’s arm may be a sign of self-harm, other mental health problems are less readily visible. Depression, for example, could go unnoticed by a teacher who may be searching for more obvious signs of disturbance. “There is a problem that the children that are more challenging in their behaviour get noticed more,” says Janette Steel, principal of the [Chelsea community hospital school](#). Steel, a drama and family therapist who helps run the [Well at School](#) website to support children affected by mental illness, says it’s the withdrawn child who often goes unnoticed.

Many girls with a mental health problems are particularly reserved and that is often not picked up early enough to get the help they need.

4. Mental health is about mental illness

We all have a level of mental health, insists Russell. It is our shared responsibility to help young people maintain healthy minds and successfully navigate school and later life. Steel, who works closely with schools to identify children who are not managing, agrees. Our mental health can be linked to friendships and coping with disappointments. The children who are not mentally healthy, she says, are those who find everything that happens to them completely overwhelming and lack resilience.

The most important way to help children stay mentally healthy, Steel says, is to give young people a feeling of success. The majority of referrals to the psychiatric unit at the hospital where Steel works are secondary school students who are struggling to cope with the transition from primary. For many, the academic demands and discipline required are simply too much to handle.

“Imagine you go to school and every day your name is up on the board, you’re being sent to the head teacher, your parents are getting a phone call, you can’t work because it is too difficult and you are put in the lower group. You just feel rubbish.

“So, it’s about finding for those children who are failing at school, failing socially and feeling rotten about themselves, something at which they can be successful, whatever it is, and rewarding that child appropriately for it.”

Source; <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/nov/26/myths-mental-health-problems-young-people>