

June 26, 2007

Anxiety Attack

Compassion, as well as cash, should be brought to the aid of young depressives

Childhood depression is not new. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, born in 1772, struggled with the demons of melancholia as a boy. As detailed in [times2](#) today, however, childhood anxiety is seemingly becoming more prevalent. It is bringing misery, distress and disruption where there should be innocence, playfulness and confidence.

It must be assumed that the problem looks bigger now than in the past because mental illness is more readily recognised. But a litany of factors – ranging from family breakdown and teenage drunkenness to exam pressure and “affluenza” – is spreading the blight of unhappiness.

The World Health Organisation reckons that the global incidence of neuropsychiatric disorders will rise 50 per cent by 2020 and become one of the five most common causes of childhood morbidity, mortality and disability. Meanwhile, depression in Britain among the young is apparently more prevalent than in many countries, though direct statistical comparisons are inevitably limited.

No one can read [the story of ten-year-old Juliette in times2](#) and suggest that mental distress is a figment of a youthful imagination. She says that she does not deserve to live and talks of ending her life so that she can be “at peace”.

We should be no less appalled to read that Catherine’s illness went untreated because of the risk that she might be stigmatised with an official record, almost as if she were a criminal. Similarly with Rachel: an educational welfare officer threatened her parents with a £2,000 fine because their daughter’s leaden affliction made her too scared to go to school.

The Mental Health Bill that is currently progressing through Parliament has focused attention on the plight of children incarcerated in hospital alongside adults. Knotty questions are also asked about the care of those who are so ill that they pose dangers to others. But it is at least as important to ensure that children – and adults – with less acute symptoms receive high-quality help and support.

NHS spending on mental health has increased by one third over the past five years and is set to rise further. But it is essential that the cash is allocated wisely and efficiently. As with most medical conditions, each case is an individual circumstance and requires its own remedies. There is a place for the use of prescription drugs but it would be shameful if, as with drugs used to fight attention deficiency disorder, financial temptation to press for medication drives decision-making. Pharmaceutical assistance cannot replace person-to-person therapy. Although one in ten of our children might suffer some sort of problem, it is thought that only one in a hundred has a clinical condition.

Support is required for the saintly legions of parents and carers and it is also important that efforts are made to change attitudes. We should be full of praise for Jessica Murphy, whose story is one of those told today, who talks openly about her difficulties. She, alone among those interviewed, was willing to use her real name. No one should think it is necessary, or even advisable, to wear their heavy hearts on their sleeves. But nor should mental illness be an embarrassment.

For some, permanent cures are not possible. But with attentive and sensitive management, a majority will lead satisfying lives. Most of those born with an anxious gene as well as those who acquire susceptibility to depression will repay, with interest, the effort devoted to them.

From The Times
June 1, 2007

Men ‘afraid to work with children’

Rosemary Bennett, Social Affairs Correspondent

Men are refusing to volunteer to work with children because they are frightened of being labelled a paedophile, according to a survey.

The check by the Criminal Records Bureau that everyone working with children must undergo was also found to be another major deterrent in getting men to volunteer.

The poll, conducted by the children’s charity NCH and the volunteer group Chance UK, reveals that many charities are struggling to recruit men, often to mentor boys who have no male role model in their lives. NCH says that only 20 per cent of its volunteers are male, forcing it to use women in roles where men are preferable.

The poll found that work commitments and a lack of time were the most common reason cited by men for not volunteering, but one in five said that they did not want to be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau, and 13 per cent said that they were scared of being branded paedophiles.

The two charities urged men to overcome their fears. “Many children, especially boys, are desperately in need of a male mentor, which is why we urgently need men to come forward despite any fears they may have about public perception,” said Clare Tickell, chief executive of NCH.

Jo Hobbs, of Chance UK, said: “Male volunteers are more difficult to recruit, yet positive male role models can make a huge difference to the lives of challenging children and young people.”

Alan Lion, who has been mentoring boys of primary school age on behalf of Chance UK in Surey, said that it was one of the most worthwhile things he had done. A boy he mentored last year had never spent a day in a mainstream school and was told he never would, was frightened of heights and scared of water. Now the boy swims regularly and is excelling at school.

Although he has not faced suspicion he does take precautions. “You don’t see the child alone in private. You are always in a public place, sometimes even with his parent. I suppose I subconsciously look to check that other people are around if we are in the swimming pool changing rooms.

“I have found people take what I do at face value. At the end of the day, mentoring can make an enormous difference to the life of another human being, an that far outweighs any concerns I have about what people might think.”

Children’s charities are not the only organisations to suffer from the impact of child protection regulations. The Times reported in April that hobby clubs, which teach children to fly model aeroplanes or climb, are closing their doors to young people because they cannot get enough volunteers

to undergo checks.

Hugh Thornberry, head of children's services at NCH, said that although the Criminal Records Bureau checks were necessary, they were also more straightforward than people expected. "Men need to know CRB checks are a painless process unless you have something to hide and they are there to protect children." he said.

"In terms of being branded a paedophile, unfortunately that is one of the consequences of abusers, quite properly, being exposed in voluntary groups and church organisations. We have to work against that perception. It is also a problem that our social care work force is predominantly female."

Volunteer week, which starts today, will involve many events designed to encourage more people to volunteer. Despite a government campaign the numbers of volunteers has remained static at about 18 per cent since 2002, according to the consultancy nfpSynergy.

The Government, however, claims that about half the population volunteers, although its definition is wide. Contacting the local authority, giving someone help if they ask for it and baby-sitting for a friend all count as volunteering.

Whilst it is true that men (generally) are afraid of working with children for fear of being labelled a paedophile the problem is more deep rooted than that. It is not just the fear of being accused of sexual abuse or improper motive that men fear but also being wrongly accused of anything.

The situation has become so bad that it is virtually impossible to recruit male teachers in primary schools. In addition a lot of community activities are folding up - or by passing children because men known to them have been wrongly accused in the past.

The problem would not be so bad if child protection agencies firstly acknowledged that people (men and women) are sometimes falsely accused of child abuse, and secondly exonerate them when they this happens.

The position has become so bad that men and women no longer know who to believe when a person has been accused. This undermines confidence in the system and cannot be helpful, and only places children in more danger.

Michael Barnes, Cardiff,

Could another way of getting around this witchhunt, the trauma caused to children (and the implications listed in the article) not be by reducing age of consent laws and loosening penalties on "sex" crimes which seemingly have no victim?

As far as I understand, this view was shared by many children's groups in the 70s, before the said tabloid witchhunt had began, especially in the Netherlands, where the abolition of consent laws (and subsequent use of rape laws) was almost put into practice.

These views would seem to be well informed, in that scientists have never been able to establish anything *innately* harmful about erotically expressed intergenerational relationships (as opposed to societally induced trauma).

Further support would come from closely related species of primate, in which reciprocal and pleasure-driven intergenerational sexual contact is an everyday occurrence (see the Bonobo, humans' closest relative).

Could abolition not be the best protection measure?

L. Ervèil, Plymouth / Devon, UK

While I have no problem with feminism per se, it is the malignant branch of feminism that has criminalized and demonized the sometimes sexually expressed relationships that have existed between boys and older males since the beginning of time. The intent is to marginalize men and to feminize boys - and, sadly, they are succeeding.

Empirical, Thule, Greenland

June 20, 2007

Mental problems among young 'twice 1930s level'

Lucy Bannerman

The mental wellbeing of children and young people is in decline, with emotional problems and conduct disorders twice as common as they were in the 1930s, according to research.

Studies carried out by NCH, the children's charity, found that one in ten children now has a mental health disorder to a "clinically significant" level. The charity defines an "emotionally well" child as one who demonstrates empathy, self-awareness, an ability to manage their feelings, motivation and good social skills.

The report also showed that the British public believe that the healthy development of these skills plays a greater role than family income, physical health and IQ in determining the child's future social standing. Clare Tickell, chief executive of NCH, said: "The lack of emotional wellbeing among our children and young people is undermining the foundations of any social policy to combat social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility.

"The emphasis must change from social class to social skills, self-esteem and resilience if we are to give the next generation the chance they deserve."

Related Links

- [Young men face soaring suicide rate in Ulster](#)
- [Three friends each hanged themselves in the same way](#)

The final findings of the studies will be published in the autumn, when the charity will begin its new campaign, Growing Strong.

However, Beverley Hughes, the Minister for Children, said that figures issued by the Office for National Statistics in 2005 did not support the charity's claims that incidences of childhood depression were rising. She said: "In fact, they show that the prevalence of mental disorders among 5 to 16-year-olds in 2004 has remained broadly unchanged from the previous survey in 1999."