

Young People Are Depressed...Who Can Blame Them?

Last year a Harvard Youth Poll found 51 percent of Americans ages 18-29 had felt depressed, down, or hopeless at times in the two weeks before responding to the survey. While adults might respond in similar numbers—feeling “down” covers a lot of territory—let’s take the poll at face value and assume that teens and twenty-somethings are emotionally rocky these days.

Abigail Hess provides more information from this study in [an article for CNBC](#):

Young people reported a range of serious mental health symptoms in the Harvard survey. A startling 68% say they have little energy; 59% say they have trouble with sleep; 52% find little pleasure in doing things; 49% have a poor appetite or are over-eating; 48% have trouble concentrating; 32% are moving so slowly, or are fidgety to the point that others notice; and 28% have had thoughts of self-harm.

In Hess’s article and Jeffrey Kluger’s more recent *Time* [essay](#), “Why So Many Young Adults with Depression Don’t Get Treatment,” mental health advocates recommend more counseling and psychiatric services for the young. But while that call for expanding treatment may be founded in compassion, it doesn’t get at the real problems. It’s a Band-Aid, treating the symptoms of despair rather than the sorrows of the young. Some of those teens and twenty-somethings, particularly those with clinical depression, are suffering from real mental illness. Many others, however, are afflicted by a septic culture, swimming, so to speak, in a sea poisoned with harmful bacteria.

From elementary school until they finish their formal education, many students are repeatedly told that America is

corrupt, that many of its heroes were bogus or evil, that racism is rampant, and that climate change may kill us all. Regarding that last point, nearly 30 years ago I knew a North Carolina elementary school student who was taught that the Amazon rain forests were being eradicated, which might mean the end of humankind.

Listen to this sort of message year after year, and I doubt any of us would feel particularly chipper.

Then there's the fallout from the pandemic. High school senior [Daniel Idfresne tells Newsweek readers](#) that the COVID school lockdowns left several students he knew severely depressed. One young woman told him she cried from loneliness for hours every day. Another friend grew totally uninterested in his online classes, and his grades and mental health both took a tumble. Another classmate, an athlete "tied to the football field," became so depressed in the wake of the school closures that he attempted suicide.

Screen time and social media add to this widespread malaise and sadness. Earlier this year journalist Derek Thompson spoke with social psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt on the [Plain English podcast](#) about why teens are so sad and anxious. Haidt believes that the value of play for children and face-to-face friendships for teens are invaluable, but then says "what we did beginning around 2009 was we put all of our kids on experience blockers." Experience blockers are Haidt's term for the electronic devices used by children—and by many adults—rather than engaging in real life.

And so, instead of playing in the woods as children, taking a hike with their teenage classmates, or, a few years later, meeting up with friends at a pub or a café, many stay latched to their phones. They spend more hours every day with their electronic compadres than they do with real people, using that handheld device, not flesh-and-blood encounters, as their tether to the world. I'm not sure how that makes young people

feel, but such a scenario makes me want to go to bed and bury my head in a blanket.

Finally, young people must contend with the many ills of our present age: our therapeutic society, our emphasis on victimhood, our new-found racism and sexism in which some groups, white males in particular, are shoved to the back of the bus. They must deal with confusion regarding sex and gender, the breakdown of the family, the ongoing demise of chivalry (for both sexes) and romance, and other discontents. No one now or in the future would slap a smiley face on today's American culture.

Tom Bodett, the author and radio personality who's perhaps best known for Motel 6 line, "We'll leave the light on for you," once [wrote](#), "They say a person needs just three things to be truly happy in this world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for." That may be too simple a formula for curing the blues, but it's a start. Aim for those things, young folks, and they just might change your life.

As for those of us in the older generation, we need look for ways to furnish young people with hope, some promise for a bright future. In short, we need to try harder "to leave the light on" for them.

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