

## An age of uncertainty: mental health in young people

Young people face a world with multiple crises and much uncertainty. A person born in 2006 will have gone through the great recession and the subsequent austerity measures, a pandemic with disrupted schooling and social isolation, a cost-of-living crisis, war in Europe, and a world coming to terms with the magnitude of climate change. There have been many tumultuous times in history, but evidence on the mental wellbeing of young people during those periods is scant. How should we think about the mental health of young people during an age of such uncertainty?

In their Seminar on Depression in Young People in this week's issue, Anita Thapar and colleagues identify the importance of viewing mental ill health as a spectrum. At one end is a "mood state in the context of normative mood fluctuations" that do not meet full diagnostic criteria but impact quality of life and can be risk factors for depressive disorders in later life. At the other end is a heterogeneous cluster of symptoms that can constitute depressive or mood disorders (including anxiety). Prevalence across the spectrum has risen sharply in the past decade, even before COVID-19, and particularly in young women.

Most mental disorders are rare during childhood and become more prevalent in adolescence, a stage that lasts up to age 24 years. Although prevalence estimates vary, the peak incidence appears to be at age 17–19 years in high-income countries. Some estimates suggest that globally, one in three to five children or adolescents have an anxiety disorder at some point. The prevalence of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts is still relatively low in adolescents, but together they represented the fourth leading cause of death for adolescents between age 15–19 years globally in 2019. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* estimated a pooled prevalence of 7.5% (95% CI 5.9–9.6) for suicidal ideation in children younger than 12 years. The picture is undoubtedly concerning. It also presents both medical and societal challenges. Medically, for severe disorders in children and adolescents, there are few treatment trials to guide clinicians, and a serious lack of access to services means too many people go without proper support or treatment. At the less severe end of the spectrum, to what degree is an increase in the burden of mental ill

health in young people a normal response to a set of abnormal circumstances?

It is easy to see how feelings of unhappiness, worthlessness, or fear of going out in young people could be reasonable responses to more than 2 years of social isolation during the pandemic, particularly when that social isolation occurred during adolescence—a time crucial in developing young adults. Peer support, physically being with each other, and learning from each other's social cues and behaviours are critical to future mental wellbeing. One report indicates that young people in Europe were more likely than older age groups to "experience job loss, financial insecurity, and mental health problems. They reported reduced life satisfaction and mental wellbeing associated with the stay-at-home requirements and school closures." Anxiety about climate change is also a factor. In a survey of 10 000 children across ten countries, feeling sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty were all emotions reported by more than 50% of respondents. When the future of all living things is in danger, it is difficult not to feel depressed. Such responses cut across unhelpful generational stereotypes about wokeness or a sensitive and coddled generation. These are appropriate reactions to a vision of a better future in jeopardy.

This week, *The Lancet* launches the second adolescent health and wellbeing Commission, tasked with ensuring "that today's adolescents have the means to address the unique challenges of their generation". The recent increases in the burden of mental ill health in young people are sending an important signal. Mental health issues in children and adolescents are neither unusual nor unexpected—the response needs to be shaped accordingly. Improved treatments and better, more accessible services are clearly needed, but the need goes beyond the health service. Schools, for example, instead of being centres for academic achievement, should become places that cultivate mental wellbeing. Governments and policy makers must also act by centring their efforts on the concerns of young people. It is the systems in which young people live and interact, from families to communities, that are the key to mental wellbeing. It is here that young people can be supported to lay the foundations for healthier futures.

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For the **Seminar on Depression in Young People** see [Seminar Lancet](#) 2022; published online Aug 5. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01012-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01012-1)

For more on **anxiety in young people** see [Seminar Lancet](#) 2021; **397**: 914–27

For the **systematic review on death by suicide** see [Articles Lancet Psychiatry](#) 2022; **9**: 703–14

For the **Eurofound report** see <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2021/impact-of-covid-19-on-young-people-in-the-eu#:~:text=COVID%2D19%20pandemic-,Young%20people%20were%20more%20likely%20than%20older%20groups%20to%20experience,home%20requirements%20and%20school%20closures>

For more on **anxiety about climate change** see [Articles Lancet Planetary Health](#) 2021; **5**: e863–73

For more on **healthier schools** see [Viewpoint Lancet Child & Adolescent Health](#) 2021; **5**: 295–303