

**Anxiety and Depression in Teenagers and Young Adults:**  
***Why the Alarming Increase and What to do About It***  
***by Jack Thaw, Ph.D.***

Multiple studies and sources have documented the dramatic rise in experiences of anxiety and depression in recent years, especially among teenagers and young adults. Unfortunately, there also are ample data showing that public schools, colleges, and universities are unable to meet the increasing demand for mental health services in response to these conditions. This is the first in the series of Counseling Affiliates Information Commentaries on this subject. It will address the nature and roots of this modern American affliction of anxiety and depression as well as treatment and “life condition” responses for individuals and families.

While each case of anxiety and depression has its own origin, narrative, and signature which must be addressed individually, there are some general footprints that may be helpful in framing an understanding of anxiety and depression in today’s world.

First, the distribution of anxiety and depression is not confined to one group or type of person. Students with straight “A’s” and those struggling academically are both showing up in our offices. Socially “popular” individuals as well as those on the margins of the “in” subcultures are both vulnerable. I recall consulting at a high school in another state some years ago when “Bill”, the valedictorian, captain of the football team, and easily most popular guy on campus disclosed to me that he “couldn’t take it anymore. He went on: “Each day I have to come to this place and be who everyone wants me to be....I don’t know who I am anymore. I feel lost....” We got him into therapy and he did exceptionally well, but the point of the story is that his experience (despite his considerable accomplishments) is not atypical. Rather; it may be closer to the norm. The good news is that, for those, like “Bill” who seek counseling or psychotherapy, the outlook is extremely favorable. Rather, it may be closer to the norm.

A second lens through which to understand anxiety and depression is that it manifests, at least in part, as a dysregulation in one or more life functions. These functions can be biological (e.g., stomach aches, migraines, etc.), neuro-biological (e.g., general nervousness,” rapid heart beat, light-headedness, feeling of panic, etc.), cognitive (e.g., racing thoughts, distorted thinking, etc.), emotional (e.g., fear, anger, stress, etc.) as well as many other specific domains. As an example, depression rarely does not involve

chronic negative thinking. For most patients, these dysregulated functions can be corrected and often without medication.

A third and increasingly central matter for young people today, concerns the fact that their anxiety and depressive symptoms are a response to some life condition that is “off line.” For many of these individuals, they are overwhelmed with “input,” mostly from multiple, non-stop 24 hour social media platforms---overwhelmed but under connected in more deep and meaningful ways with others. Too many live in a sound-bite, high velocity, device driven information world (e.g., “friendship – by – text”) too often at the expense of underdeveloped interpersonal skills. Excessive reliance on “communication by device” often “protects” them from learning how to manage the messy demands of authentic relationships. Thus, many young people report being digitally “over – connected,” but emotionally lonely.

The vast majority of young people we see in our practice eventually reveal that they feel “lost” and without meaning in their lives. They are “drifting” rather than “steering.” They are without direction in life. They have no discernable “North Star” nor the skill set to develop one. Some kind of “internal axis” around which their values, beliefs, morality, and very identity revolves and grows seems, in alarming numbers, to be missing.

Finally, with an endless menu of distractions available from “screen world,” they have learned how to avoid hardship, adversity and discomfort in life...and thus in too many cases, they have not yet learned one of life’s grand lessons: that adversity introduces us to ourselves, if we allow it to do so.

Once again, most of these conditions are potentially correctable, at individual levels, at family levels, and, with resources, perhaps even at more systemic levels. These will be subjects of subsequent Counseling Affiliates Commentaries.