

Crippled by Something Nameless

It is disconcerting that health professionals overestimate adolescent understanding of depression and other psychological health problems. It is not something adolescents talk about like they discuss music, actors, and their social lives. It is an underground topic, like sex, referred to with juvenile banter; not seriously discussed with any mature insight.

For this reason it is important for mental health educators to understand the emotional immaturity adolescents possess and how this can affect their understanding of serious health issues. Adults seem to forget that when you are a teenager you do not yet have names for mature experiences. Adolescence is a world of misused and misunderstood slang terms, thrown around with audacity by teenagers who think maturity comes with the use of such terms. They joke about car accidents, people dying, and people with mental illnesses.

It was not until I was an adult that I was diagnosed with manic depression. I spent my adolescence crippled by the feeling that something was wrong with me and that it didn't have a name. I spent four years waiting to snap out of it and be more like my peers.

The most difficult part of living with bipolar disorder was accepting that this is the way it will be. It will not go away and I will not magically become a new better version of myself.

When I look back on my adolescent years I often wonder why my teachers did not notice that I had alienated myself from my friends. I do not think they knew what to do; they were not counsellors. But, aside from my mother, they were the consistent adults in my life; some of them consistent throughout my secondary schooling. I do not think it fair that teachers are expected to perform the role of counsellor, however the unique position some teachers are in, of observing their students regularly, is a position that needs to be given more weight in addressing adolescent disorders. Teachers could instantly identify students who are frequently truant, who are alienated from their peers, and whose academic work has decreased in standard over a period.

Teenagers are often between groups of friends in the early years of secondary school; but when a teen is without friends it does not necessarily mean they are between groups. I began to alienate myself when I decided that I did not want to be here anymore and that it would be easier to leave without the burden of close connections. By the time I had completed Year 11, I had successfully alienated myself

from all of my peers. I spent the entirety of Year 12 on my own whilst at school. My former friends noticed that I had retreated, but attributed my behaviour to an attitude problem.

It is too easy to hide the way you really feel from family and professionals. I did not envisage a great deal of acceptance from family and peers if they saw the real me. I received enough of the “cheer up” and “get over it” sentiment as it was. I felt there was too much pressure to be stereotypically “happy” and “fun” and anyone who wasn’t like this was rejected. The idea of confessing my thoughts to anyone was out of the question.

I fear that the “grassroots solutions” being sought will in fact turn out to be more band-aid solutions. The root causes of adolescent mood disorders relate to the role of teenagers in our society and the pressures and expectations placed on them externally and from themselves. Although adolescents like to think they are all grown up, and behave as such, they are innocent of the real adult world; which is why increasing numbers of adolescents are simply unable to cope with the portions of adult life forced upon them. Fundamentally, young people are forced to grow up too soon and are confronted with adult life before they are emotionally equipped for it. If I had a captive audience of adolescents I would tell them that the reason this stage of their life is often described as “the best years of your life” is because it is a time of maturing innocence; and should be nothing more.

I think educating adolescents about mental health needs to be more likened to sex education. Sex is not a seriously discussed topic among adolescent peers, or with parents, and mental health has a similar taboo. Based on my own experiences, I think there would have been great benefit in learning about mental health disorders in the context of health education. As with sex education, it would provide a non-threatening environment in which young people can learn to understand what it means to have a mental health disorder and how the mood disorders affecting many adolescents are common instances. As a teenager I remember thinking that depression was an illness belonging in the same category as schizophrenia, and feared what may happen to me if anyone knew what thoughts were passing through my mind.

It is also important for adolescents to understand that suffering in silence will only make matters worse. I am now twenty-seven years old and have only recently begun to open up to close friends about my experiences with bipolar disorder and how it still affects my life. In hindsight I wish I had sought help sooner and not lost five years of my adult life to a black hole. To a large degree I have no practical advice to offer as to “solutions” for adolescent mood disorders; because I am still unsure how I survived that

period of my life. I remember that period as swinging between daily struggles to find reasons to get out of bed and living in a fantasy world to avoid the real one.

If I was able to communicate with my sixteen-year-old self, I would stress that there is so much more to life than these teenage years. It is not important to decide on a career path at this stage of life. It does not matter if you do not know what you want to do with your life. It is ridiculous to have a life-plan by 18 years of age. Your Year 12 grades will not determine the course of your life. Most importantly, I would tell myself to start liking me. Because although the darkness will always be there on some level, it is a part of who I am and it is possible to learn to live well with it.