

1. HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

“Roy, do you really think the mental health problems with young people today are as big as some are making it out to be? I mean, is it that things are that much worse, or do we just know more than we once did?” This question from a friend is one I’m asked often. It suggests that the psycho-spiritual state of today’s youth may be no better or worse than it was fifty years ago, but now, due to advances in technology and access to unprecedented amounts of research and information, we may be identifying a problem and its magnitude that has long been present yet unidentified.

It’s hard to answer such questions with empirical certitude. I suspect the truth, as in most things, is somewhere between the two extremes. Spiritual, emotional, and psychological distress in young people has always been an element of adolescence, yet societal taboos, lack of research funding (due to lack of awareness of the significance of the problem), and limited access to information made it hard to comprehend and respond to teens in earlier generations. On the other hand, the particular ways in which these problems are presenting themselves has changed and is currently changing at a pace many of us who work with young people are finding hard to keep up with. And there is solid research to suggest we are indeed facing unprecedented challenges in helping teens respond to mental health issues.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Anxiety

The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 31.9 percent of adolescents have had an anxiety disorder, making it the most

commonly diagnosed mental health disorder in America today for teens. Most adults I encounter as I speak and consult across the world tell me they are seeing not only this trend but also teens experiencing more and more anxiety, stress, and worry over the last five to ten years. This seems to be most acute in developed countries such as the United States.¹ In chapter 5 we'll discuss the various reasons for this sharp increase.

Depression

In 2016 the National Institute of Mental Health reported that approximately 3.1 million young people aged twelve to seventeen experienced a major depressive episode (they were clinically depressed); this represents nearly 13 percent of the US population in this age group. Of those young people, 19 percent are female compared to 9 percent males.

Suicide

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate for young people aged ten to seventeen has increased 70 percent between 2006 and 2016.² Nearly 9 percent of teens attempt suicide each year (of teens who report having attempted suicide).³ As of this writing, in the United States, suicide ranks as the second-leading cause of death for young people aged twelve to nineteen.⁴

Self-Injury

On average, one in five teens “self-injures,” meaning they intentionally harm themselves by way of cutting, carving, burning, extreme hair pulling, punching themselves, scratching, or hitting something with a part of their body intended to cause harm.⁵ Most young people aren't born wanting to hurt themselves. Self-injurious behavior is a symptom of a deeper problem, most often stress, anxiety, or depression.

Eating Disorders

Disordered eating, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, affect roughly one in ten teens. Young people with an eating disorder often experience other problems as well, such as anxiety, depression, and self-injurious behavior. This is not a problem that only affects females.

LGBTQ+

In case you aren't familiar with the acronym, LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and (+) other nontraditional, male or female gender orientations or sexual orientations.

Regardless of how you feel or what you believe about these issues and the people who identify with them, these young people are at a significantly higher risk for anxiety, depression, self-injury, eating disorders, and suicide. The suicide rate for LGBTQ+ youth is ten times higher than for the rest of the population.

Bullying

Approximately 21 percent of young people aged twelve to eighteen experience bullying,⁶ with 160,000 teens each day missing school because of bullying.⁷ This could easily be a chicken-or-egg-type question, but suffice it to say this is a meaningful statistic indicating a problem among today's young people. Bullying is often the cause of absenteeism.

Disaffiliation from Religion

In the United States, an increasing number of families are divorcing from religion and in some cases God altogether. In surveys of religious affiliation, the largest group today is "unaffiliated." This ever-growing group of Americans who choose not to affiliate with any particular religion or denomination aren't necessarily atheists or agnostics. They just don't want to participate in organized religion. Knowing that religious practice and affiliation can be for many a source of hope,

inspiration, and calm, it is not a leap to conclude that the lack of what used to be a readily available coping mechanism—that is, faith and religious affiliation/practice—is leading to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in our country today. This is also easy to observe in other developed nations.

It would be easy to look at the numbers and assume there's a relationship between religious disaffiliation and rising mental health concerns among young people. I've found that to be the case. I'm not suggesting that youth who are religious, go to church, and pray don't have problems, even serious problems. What I am suggesting is that I've seen young people begin struggling, get confused as to why God isn't "showing up" or "answering their prayers," and then, often unconsciously, begin drifting away from personal prayer, other devotions, and even communal participation. We'll discuss in detail in chapter 7 how we can help young people find renewed strength in religion even when they previously searched but couldn't find the help they were looking for.

Family Issues

The nature and shape of the American family has changed drastically over the last few decades. The traditional family as once understood—a father and mother married once with one or more children whom they physically bore, where Dad worked and Mom stayed home to raise children and manage the household—exists today in fewer than 7 percent of homes. I'm not suggesting that the traditional family was without flaw, nor do I suggest that young people from traditional families were and are immune to pressures and challenges. But these changing dynamics are affecting young people in ways we do know about, such as increased stress, anxiety, and depression, and also in ways we are still discovering.

Divorce

The divorce rate continues to hover around 50 percent. Many young people say that their parents' fighting or divorce doesn't bother them. Some who have good coping skills and a healthy diversified support

system (multiple assets) survive divorce relatively unscathed. For others without a good support system, it can be a nightmare. The challenges of divorce for young people are complicated by the fact that many of today's teens resist acknowledging the problem for fear of appearing too cliché. Take my client Sam who was severely depressed at fifteen years old. He initially stated, as do many teens, "My parents' divorce didn't affect me. We don't need to talk about that. I'm not this angsty teen who hates my parents because they decided to get a divorce. It's fine. I'm okay and they're better off without each other." For Sam and roughly half of the youth in America, their parents' divorce doesn't make them special because so many others are going through the same thing. Teens often dismiss the distress that divorce causes them simply because it is so common. Over time, Sam would eventually share how scared he felt when his parents would fight and how alone he felt during and after the divorce.

Adoptive Families

Each year more than 150,000 young people are adopted in the United States. In 2015 there were nearly 1.5 million youth in adoptive families.⁸ Like any other setting that has potential challenges, adoptive families do too. There are young people who begin and end their lives filled with gratitude for the amazing life being adopted gave to them and never once question their origins and identity. They seem not to experience any severe emotional challenges. Yet for many adopted youth, it can be tough.

Jaley (age 14) said, "I love my mom and dad," referring to her adoptive parents. "They have given me a life I'd have never had in Russia. But I want to know not where I come from but *who* I come from. It doesn't happen often, but when I see a friend who resembles their mom or dad, I get sad 'cause I know I'll never get that." Jaley, like all adopted kids, is at a heightened risk for adverse mental health problems. She continued, "It helps that I can talk about this with my parents who listen without getting defensive when I'm sad or upset. I know how big a deal that is, Roy. My friend is adopted too, and his parents get all butthurt when he asks about his birth parents, telling him how grateful he should be. He's like, 'I am grateful! *And* I want to know who my birth mom is.' I guess I'm lucky."

Foster Families

There are more than 450,000 young people in foster care in the United States.⁹ Many of these young people know who their birth parents are. Some young people wish they could be with them, and many others are grateful to be out of the situation they were in. For Alex (age 9), the stress of being in the foster system caused severe anxiety. He'd have multiple panic attacks every day. Talking helped. One day he told me, "I just want to stay somewhere. I just never know when they'll send me back (to his birth parents), or I dunno if these people want to keep me. I try to be real good so they want me and my little sister."

Blended Families

Sarah (age 10) whose parents divorced and remarried, lives in a blended family, as do 67 percent of youth from divorced homes. These are families that have been combined from two previously existing relationships. Sarah says, "I've learned that family is what you define it to be. No one gets to tell you what family means to you. I've got four parents and consider myself lucky." For her it is a great experience. For Josh (age 15) it's not. "How is it I'm the only one who didn't get a vote. Mom and Dad voted and their boyfriend and girlfriend voted, but I didn't get a vote. Now I'm supposed to 'get on board' and pretend to love and like these two new people who aren't my mom and dad. And I'm supposed to treat them like they are? No thanks."

Kids will each experience blended families differently. What's important for us adults who care for and support them is to be aware that kids in blended families represent a large percentage of youth, and it can be a significant stressor that puts them at risk for other problems.

Single Parents

About 34 percent of young people live in single-parent homes in the United States. As in many of the nontraditional family settings young people are in, this is often a better situation than what these young people previously knew. That being said, the pressures of one parent

trying to do the job of two take a toll on both parent and child. I watched my single mom work more and stress more because there wasn't another adult at home to share the multitude of responsibilities that come with raising children. Today, I'm married with two kids, and I don't know how she did it. I have the deepest respect for single parents, many of whom didn't make the choice to be a single parent or who felt compelled to make that choice so they could put themselves and their children in better, safer places.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

In 2016 the Pew Foundation reported that 2.9 million grandchildren were being raised by their grandparents.¹⁰ Hilda's daughter was in and out of rehab so often that Hilda felt obligated to give her grandchildren some sense of stability. So she took them into her home and assumed joint custody of them along with her daughter. "Raising one set of kids when you're younger is tough enough, much less doing it again during your golden years, years I once dreamed I'd have more time for. Don't get me wrong, Roy. I *love* these kids like they were my own—I guess 'cause they are. But I wanted to love them as a grandparent, not a mom. I know it's tough for them too. I just don't have the energy to keep up with middle school kids, and I'm afraid when they get to high school, me going to events for them and with them will be embarrassing for them."

Now, I know many grandparents who can outrun and outwork me any day! But setting and maintaining boundaries with a child or a teenager is tough. Yet most young people want to be raised by healthy birth or adopted parents and are affected when that's not possible for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, a parent's death, physical illness, serious mental illness, or an otherwise lack of capacity to parent effectively.

Same-Sex Marriages and Relationships

Nearly 200,000 youth live in homes with a same-sex couple, and between 2 and 3.7 million young people in the United States have at least one parent who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.¹¹ As one young man told me, "I think it's cool that

my dad and his partner are together and that they are my parents. But there are times when it's a little weird and embarrassing.”



The notion of “family” is being radically redefined for this current Generation Z as well as the millennials before them. Many believe that family transcends blood relationships and extends beyond the physical boundaries of their home and extended blood relations. To be sure, there are positive benefits to this emerging reality. For example, when John’s parents were arguing, he was able to reach out to his friends, what some call the “second family,” for crucial support and encouragement. John says, “I love my mom and dad. But I can’t count on them. I never know when they’ll blow up or what they’ll blow up about. I know I can count on my friends.”

There are also obvious drawbacks for young people counting on friends as their primary means of support. Sure, kids will naturally pull away from parents and rely on their friends. But when a young person, especially an adolescent, who by nature will have vacillating moods and a shifting identity, depends too heavily on friends, problems often arise. Friendships often shift quickly and unexpectedly in adolescence, leaving vulnerable teens open to disappointment and sometimes crushing feelings of failure and isolation. As Katie says, “I really thought I could count on them. I made sure they always could count on me. But when I needed them the most, they weren’t there.” As adults, it’s somewhat easy to understand the limited emotional availability an adolescent can offer. But for young people, it’s as if the rug got pulled out from under them. When this happens, teens often feel their whole world is falling apart.

IS THERE REASON TO HAVE HOPE?

Glancing at these statistics can be disheartening and truly scary. Really pondering them can be especially distressing for us who care about,

live with, or work with young people. But we are not alone in our desire to help, nor are we without hope.

We all know the highlight of the parable of the prodigal son: boy wants independence, asks Dad for money, which he then squanders. When the reality of his plight hits him, the son returns home to his father's forgiving embrace amid the backdrop of a jealous older brother. That was what I read for decades. But there's one line in the parable that I always managed to miss. "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and . . . *ran* to his son" (Lk 15:20, italics added).

I always envisioned the father working on his favorite hobby when his ragged son tapped him on the shoulder from behind and they embraced. But the scripture implies that the father was waiting and looking for him, perhaps even anticipating his arrival. He was watching and, when he saw his son, ran to him.

Our God is a God who wears running shoes. Long before, during, and long after we're fatigued, disheartened, discouraged, sad, hurt, and burnt out, our God reminds us that "our kids" were his first! This parable reminds me that if our omniscient God refuses to give up hope and refuses to be discouraged, maybe I should as well.

These statistics are real. The problems *are real*, and in many ways we're currently scrambling for ways to make it better. This is not cause to lose hope and give in to discouragement. We acknowledge the reality, and we do what we can with whatever resources we have, whatever gifts we have to cooperate with the grace of God in us, the same grace that is also in the young people whom we parent, teach, supervise, minister among, and serve.

Just in case you're still debating whether or not to enter the fray, don't decide until you read the next chapter, "Should I Step In?"