

Mental Health and Young Adults
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Hi! For those who don't know me, my name is Anya, and I am currently in my second year of university. I was asked to speak today about how I see mental health and illness around me as a young adult. To be honest, I think it would be hard to be a young adult and not see many examples of mental health struggles around you. Generally, I am more surprised when I hear someone say that they have not dealt with mental health challenges, than if they have. Many people wonder why mental illness rates are so high among young adults and youth, so I am going to name 7 contributing factors that I have observed through my own experiences and conversations with peers. Before I begin, I would like to make it clear that these are my personal observations – they are not scientific studies and definitely do not apply to everyone equally.

Firstly, with current technology, we are never given a break from the news. This is one of the most common things I hear from people when they talk about what makes them stressed – and while I am sure that this stressor is not exclusive to my generation, we are the first generation to have grown up with it. We are constantly bombarded with news about all the things that are wrong in the world, and it can seem like the only way to get a break from it, is to avoid the news entirely. But we know that it's irresponsible to do that, because we cannot make the world's problems go away by simply ignoring them. We know we have an obligation to work toward peace, justice and healing for the world, but it can be hard to know how to make a difference as an individual. So, we end up stuck being hit with all this bad news, and no effective way to take action. This is a recipe for hopelessness.

In particular, the fear of climate change is overwhelming. I was talking to my mom about this, and she compared it to the fear of nuclear bombing when she was young. In her experience, she and her peers did not always think they would make it to adulthood. Climate change makes me feel the same way; I find it hard to picture my future beyond the next few years. I love kids, but when I start to really think about it, it seems immoral for me to have kids someday, because

frankly it would not be fair to them to make them deal with this mess of a planet. Their lives would be a struggle. I don't like to think about what the world will look like when I'm fifty – but if I do, I see wars, famine, diseases, natural disasters and ecosystems falling apart. My generation will be in our mid-adulthood when climate change is expected to really spin out of control. We will be the ones who will have to work with those consequences. The fear of that has shaped my generation, and I'll be honest, this is a very real source of anxiety for me.

Another reason that technology is harmful to mental health, is the consistent exposure to social media and advertising, which causes us to constantly compare our own lives to those of others. Ads depend on us feeling invalid to buy the product they are selling. On social media, so many people look like they've got the perfect life – like they've got it all figured out, and they are happier, more athletic, more accomplished than we are. We don't see the hard work and hurt behind those pictures. We don't hear the lies behind the ads. Without the backstory, all we see is ourselves slouching on the couch, depressed and anxious, while we scroll through everyone else's achievements and ads of what we should have or should be. This makes our own accomplishments seem invalid or unsatisfactory.

Another reason that I see so many young adults struggle with mental health has to do with how we were raised in society. Now, I realize that I am presenting to primarily the people who raised my generation, so I want to make something clear; I am NOT saying that any one person in particular is responsible for this. I have simply noticed some trends in the culture in which my generation grew up, that had some impacts that I would like to name.

Firstly, my generation grew up being told that you can do anything. This sounds empowering, but we were also rarely told when we were bad at something. For example, we'd be given participation medals for achieving, frankly, not much, and we were constantly told we were smart. Now, I am not diminishing the importance of recognizing effort – that is important. But it's also important for students to learn what they're good at or not good at. So, young adults feel like we should be able to do anything and everything (and ideally something great) without

much guidance on what we're actually good at. This leaves people unsure of how to move forward with a career and, when they do pursue something, they quickly despair when they are not immediately successful.

Secondly, my generation commonly had our paths cleared for us so that we never had to face serious stress or challenge. This is sometimes referred to as snow-plow parenting. I was lucky enough to have parents who let me be quite independent (although they would say I didn't give them much of a choice in that matter) but many my age did not have that privilege – and even those that did still experienced the snow-plow parenting mentality through school. If something wasn't working, we were often shown what to do, rather than being given the tools and time to problem-solve on our own. If something seemed overwhelming, our parents and teachers would take care of it for us. I know many people my age who are struggling in their courses, because they are simply unable to start working until they are told explicitly what to do next. Many don't know how to take risks, or how to cope with setbacks, but in life, these are common. Without the tools to deal with them as they come up, it is easy to feel incapable.

Another stressor for young adults is the lack of access to the outdoors, and the culture of staying indoors. This is certainly true for me – almost 100% of the time, when I spend some time outside, I instantly feel better, happier and calmer – even if it's overcast and grey. We people need fresh air, sunlight and green spaces to thrive, yet we have this culture of staying inside and spending our days sitting down. Many young adults don't know where to find green spaces, or, even more sadly, don't know how to spend time outside. Even for people who were taught to go outside daily as kids, it is hard to make time for it in a culture that does not prioritize it.

And finally, there is a lack of feeling grounded among my generation. As a highly individualistic culture, that, as a whole, does not promote religion, we are told that every decision is up to us. But without religion or a sense of connectedness to greater community or purpose, there is no

guidance for how to make those decisions. We then get stuck, not knowing how to move forward in building meaningful lives and relationships.

There are many factors that affect people's mental health, and I am sure that some of the ones I named are not exclusive to my generation. However, having grown up surrounded by these various factors, they have influenced my peers and me greatly. It's true that especially among young adults it is fairly socially acceptable to talk about mental health, but I think we rarely talk about the root causes of it. Moving forward, I think it's important to talk about the societal shifts we need to help prevent mental health struggles. For example, can we as a society change how we approach technology, the environment, how kids are raised, and build a sense of being grounded? I know it's easy to say this, and much harder to know how to implement that change, but at the very least I think it is useful to recognize the reasons that young adults are struggling. This is how I experience mental health and illness around me as a young adult.