

Number of Ontario teens with psychological distress rising at alarming rate: study Add to ...

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Erin Anderssen

A lot of Ontario teens are feeling anxious and depressed, and their numbers have grown. That's the take-away from [a large-scale study](#) that's been tracking students in the province for the last 20 years. One-third of the students in the survey were found to have moderate to severe symptoms of psychological distress – an alarming leap from two years earlier, when only one-quarter of students met the same threshold.

Now comes the hard part: figuring out why high schoolers are increasingly describing their lives as overwhelming, anxiety-inducing and stress-filled, and how to help them early because the higher up the grades you go, the worse the situation tends to get. Grade 12s, for instance, were four times more likely than Grade 7s to report high levels of stress, and more than twice as likely to rate their mental health as fair or poor. Older teens were significantly more likely to think about suicide. Yet they were no more likely than younger teens to seek help.

That's a worrisome trend, especially for teenagers about to make the leap out of the relatively safe confines of high school and into adulthood.

"Most of us consider the adolescent years the peak of your life – your life is ahead of you, the world is your oyster – but that seems not to be the case," said Robert Mann, a head researcher on the survey, conducted by the Toronto-based Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

"Given that you are shaping the rest of your life in adolescence, it's important for us to understand what the challenges teens are dealing with."

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The study was based on responses by 10,426 students from Grades 7 to 12 in 220 schools across the province. Researchers scored psychological stress, based on a well-known assessment, by asking students how often in the last four weeks they had experienced certain symptoms: feeling nervous, or hopeless, or worthless, or so depressed that nothing could cheer them up. Overall, 14 per cent of students met the bar for "serious" psychological distress – an increase from 10 per cent in 2013.

Gender adds another layer to the story: On most measures, girls were significantly more likely to report problems than boys. And while more students are reporting stress and other mental-health issues, over all, the percentage who reported thinking seriously about suicide is roughly the same, at 12 per cent, as in 2001.

The study presents data but doesn't draw conclusions. For instance, Grade 12 students were three times less likely to be getting a full night's sleep and less likely to be exercising – factors that affect mental health. They spent significantly more time sitting in front of a screen and more time on social media – behaviour that has also been linked to mental-health issues. By Grade 12, nearly 23 per cent of students were spending five or more hours on social media, more than twice as much as in Grade 7. (By comparison, the percentage of students who reported being bullied, either online and in person, held steady across grades. Nearly one-quarter said they had been bullied in school since September; roughly one-fifth said they had experienced cyberbullying in the last year.)

A [recent project](#) by The Globe and Mail that explored the attitudes and habits of Grade 12 students in Canada found that older teens are also worried about student debt and the job market, and feeling overwhelmed by the demands

of social media, and even a diminished sense of safety in a world plagued by bombings, shootings and attacks on innocent civilians. “If we think about what life is like, it seems fairly depressing,” Dr. Mann says, and certainly, “nastier than the one their parents grew up with.”

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Many of these stress-inducing factors are beyond the control of any mental-health strategy. But early intervention and school-based education have worked before, Dr. Mann points out. For instance, he says, substance abuse among teenagers has fallen significantly over the two decades – a result he partly attributes to raised awareness about the risks of drugs and alcohol.

Stan Kutcher, a Dalhousie University psychiatrist who specializes in adolescent mental health, fervently agrees that teenagers need to improve their mental-health literacy. He suggests that what's really rising is the percentage of students struggling to manage the stress of everyday life. “We are creating generations of kids who think life has to be stress-free,” he argues. “We have not been teaching them how to solve the problems causing the stress.”

Life, social media, poor coping skills or clinical mental illness – whatever is going on, when so many teenagers feel miserable, Dr. Mann says, “that needs attention.” This is not a question of whether the kids are all right. Many are struggling – and, in this survey, they have told us so.

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