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ANXIOUS TIMES

YOUTH PASTOR KELCY WESTCOTT IS ON THE FRONTLINE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS. AND IT'S NOT GOING TO GO AWAY

FOOD WARM AND WHOLESOME CAFE FARE TRAVEL BLISS IN THE CITY HEART ART DIGGING IN TO THE DETAIL



Fight, flight, freeze or freak out

Anxiety triggers part of the brain to fire up a response to protect us from danger. But some young people cannot function because of the stress they experience, says headspace Hobart manager Miranda Ashby. She is among a growing number of specialists helping young people build up their “courage muscles”

WORDS TRACY RENKIN MAIN PORTRAIT LUKE BOWDEN

Even saying the word — anxiety — out loud can bring some teenagers to tears. It's a normal occurrence Devonport youth pastor Kelcy Westcott and her team leaders have seen time and time again. Their Gateway Church youth nights are designed to help teenagers feel comfortable enough to open up and spill the beans about how they are really going.

The leaders spend lots of time getting to know the kids, building trust and connecting with them so they feel comfortable enough to share.

“We talk about the deeper stuff,” Westcott says. “It's not just the surface stuff. We get into where they are really at and how they are feeling.”

And it turns out many of these kids are feeling anxious. They are anxious about all sorts of things that impact on their lives in all sorts of ways. Sometimes it presents as butterflies in the stomach which can make them feel so nauseous that they don't ever feel like eating breakfast.

For David*, 17, it can trigger a racing heart that makes him breathe really fast. They can break out in a sweat like Sarah*, 18, does or get lightheaded and dizzy. They can see spots in their eyes or, like Natasha*, 14, get the shakes. It can stop them sleeping and literally stop them in their tracks. Some anxious teenagers freeze. They are simply not even able to walk out their front door to school in the morning.

Westcott believes the biggest issues stem around social anxiety.

“I think there is a lot of social anxiety, particularly for girls,” Westcott says. “Social anxiety seems to be a huge problem, and it stems from the fear of what people will think of them, and comparing themselves to others and people pleasing. Girls are much more likely to admit they are anxious than boys.”

In the five years she's been involved in youth ministry, Westcott says she believes anxiety among teenagers is really increasing. “A lot of our teenagers are suffering,” she says.

“I would say most young people I see would be struggling with some level of anxiety. Anxiety is a topic they are all talking about because most of them are experiencing it.”

Westcott runs a ministry for Grade 7-12 girls called Crowned, that helps them process the often challenging transition into



Clockwise from main: headspace Hobart Centre Manager Miranda Ashby; Bellerive psychologist Dr Cassie Xintavelonis; headspace psychologist Jesse Greenwood speaks to Ash Langham; Devonport youth pastor and youth group coordinator Kelcy Westcott with members of her youth group; Brisbane-based resilience expert Michelle Mitchell.

womanhood. In late August, she's flying Brisbane-based resilience expert Michelle Mitchell down for four days as the guest speaker for the young women's conference. She has also organised for her to tour and talk with teenagers at four local high schools.

Mitchell says what Westcott has observed in her youth group is very real. She says anxiety among teenagers has reached epidemic proportions. When she's in Devonport, Mitchell will be talking about body image and stresses of social media, and explaining how teenagers can manage anxiety.

"Anxiety comes into everything these days," Mitchell told *TasWeekend*. "It doesn't matter what topic I am talking about, it has its roots in anxiety or a lack of skills to manage it."

Last month an Australian non-profit organisation for youth mental health called headspace released new research revealing psychological distress in young Australians had trebled in just over a decade. Almost one in three young people aged 12 to 25 reported high or very high levels of psychological distress.

Anxiety is the most common mental health condition in Australia. It is more than just feeling stressed or worried. If you have anxiety your worries and stresses don't go away.

Experts say the sooner you get help for it, the more likely you will be able to control it.

There's been a huge shift in what used to be a really negative stigma attached to mental health and conditions like anxiety, says Bellerive psychologist Dr Cassie Xintavelonis.

When she started her private practice ten years ago, Xintavelonis says some parents were worried about not wanting to tarnish their child's Medicare records with a label of mental illness. "It was ludicrous," Xintavelonis told *TasWeekend*. "They didn't even want an inkling of a mental health diagnosis in case it jeopardised them in the future."

But now more people are accepting it, she says. "If you've got a toothache you go to a dentist; if you've got anxiety, you go to a psychologist." She says more and more teenagers are seeking help for anxiety but often, by the time they are sitting in front of her, they have battled with it for too long it's reached a chronic level.

For example, she has quite a few, what she calls "chronic school refusers". "I'm seeing kids becoming very reclusive," Xintavelonis says. "I've got some teenagers who haven't gone to school for a few years now."

"By the time they come to me it's been a long-term issue that has spiralled — and these are really bright kids with great prospects — but because of their anxiety they can't access the education system."

Statistics show that anxiety was the main reason young people walked through the headspace doors in Hobart last year. Anxious teenagers and young adults are the "bread and butter clients" headspace psychologists help every day.

Its centre manager, Miranda Ashby, says the level of demand for headspace services has been increasing ever since they opened the doors seven years ago.

And she says there has been a "big jump" in the past 12 months — an increase which has been "quite challenging". But she says the increase is a reflection of more young people understanding where they can go to get help. "Sometimes these young people cannot function because of the stress and anxiety they experience," she says.

One of her team members, Hobart headspace psychologist Jesse Greenwood, says he sees teenagers struggling with anxiety every day. Greenwood says just being brave enough to tell someone about your anxiety often brings enormous relief.

Many young people try to hide their anxiety by keeping it a secret. Sadly, despite the stigma linked to mental health having diminished in recent years, there is often still shame linked to conditions like anxiety.

"The relief from sharing can be huge," Greenwood told *TasWeekend*. In any week the 29-year-old hears teenagers sharing about being too anxious to eat, or too anxious to go to school —



Picture: LUKE BOWDEN



“It's not surprising our children are more anxious than ever before ... they are comparing themselves to the ideal and photo-shopped lifestyles that idolise wealth and happiness

Michelle Mitchell

or too anxious to leave the house to spend time with their friends. Shockingly, a large number of teenagers who walk through the headspace doors are seeking help on their own because the adults in their life don't believe mental health is even "a thing".

"We have a lot of young people who come in on their own because their parents or grandparents don't believe anxiety exists," Greenwood says.

"But on the flip side, because the stigma around mental health has diminished, there are now many more conversations going on at home between parents and their young ones seeking help."

When *TasWeekend* speaks with Ash Langham, her anxiety has triggered four teary meltdowns in just seven days. Her anxiety is a constant, she says, and makes her feel like she's never actually going to get anything done.

Langham says being able to share her anxiety with a headspace counsellor means she doesn't have to burden her loved ones with her worries.

"I get to rock up, fall apart for, like, an hour and a half," 22-year-old Langham says. "And it doesn't impact on a single other part of my life."

She says after she's shared about how she's feeling, she feels like a valve has been released inside her. "I could talk to my friends, but they have their own shit going on, partners have their own stress and parents have trouble understanding."



Picture: CHRIS KIDD

Anxiety can be passed on from parents to children — it is a hereditary condition — but sometimes it can be passed on behaviourally as well. And sometimes the parents of anxious teenagers can become so anxious themselves about not knowing what to do to help that it makes their child even more anxious than they originally were.

Several anxiety experts *TasWeekend* spoke with said parents didn't realise how much they were modelling this anxious behaviour. "Anxiety breeds anxiety and can be contagious," says wellbeing expert Dr Jodi Richardson.

"If a parent is highly anxious and stressed that can be 'caught' by the teenager. Anxious teenagers can also pass on their anxiety to other teenagers or siblings."

Dr Richardson says while anxiety is a normal human emotion in response to stressful events, sometimes it doesn't settle down. Sometimes it can spill over into a disorder that gets in the way of normal functioning, and can cause a person to feel worried, nervous and unable to relax.

Dr Richardson says no amount of reasoning with an anxious teen is helpful. Instead they need to learn how to breathe to calm down the part of their brain that triggers the anxious response.

Teens can practise building breathing into their daily lives so they are more prepared for when anxiety next strikes. She also advocates for teenagers to learn to look at their thoughts rather than getting swept up and lost in the thoughts that bring on anxious moments. ▶



Dr Richardson has just co-authored a book with parenting author Michael Grose called *Anxious Kids: How Children Can Turn Their Anxiety into Resilience*. The book covers what happens in an anxious brain and body, and shares strategies to support mums and dads parenting an anxious child. It explains the tools that can be used to help manage anxiety. In August, they will both be speaking in Hobart to help Tasmanian parents better understand what they can do to help their anxious kids.

Dr Richardson says she battled through 20 years of undiagnosed anxiety she believes she inherited from her mother. As a child, she always felt anxious, to the point of constantly feeling sick in her stomach and not wanting to go to school. It was a problem that was never professionally dealt with.

"I think of how I suffered," Dr Richardson told *TasWeekend*. "I don't even remember much of my childhood because my brain was so focussed on the anxiety, that it didn't have time to lay down my memories."

Research shows, Dr Richardson says, that if you live in urban areas in Australia it can take eight years for young people to seek help with their anxiety. In rural Australia it is up to 18 years. In Dr Richardson's case, her undiagnosed anxiety was so bad it triggered major clinical depression. Some people don't understand that you don't have to get rid of anxiety, she says. You just have to learn how to manage it.

"Anxiety is a bit like the radio," Dr Richardson says. "It might be on in the background of your life but it doesn't need to stop you from doing the things that are important to you."

Anxious teenagers need their parents to show them love and warmth and a willingness to sit with them as they express their emotions. "If parents can do that then it shows teenagers that we get it," she says. "And it validates for them that they have every right to feel the way they do. After all, there's no such thing as wrong feelings. It's all about showing our kids that their message has been received, and that they have a soft place to land and the conversations can come later."

"Living with everyday anxiety is exhausting," says Dr Richardson's co-author Michael Grose. "Anxiety triggers part of the brain to fire up the fight or flight response — or as some people call it the fight, flight, freeze or freak out response — to protect us from danger. It's an emotion, and like other emotions it has a start, a middle and an end. Except when it doesn't."

Anxious kids have a brain that works really hard to protect them from danger, Grose says. "That part of the brain — the amygdala — is always working overtime. This means anxious kids spend an inordinate amount of time with their fight or flight response in full swing. It can make them feel like a revved-up race car that is stuck in the pits."

When teenagers feel anxious, the part of the brain that controls rational thinking, decision-making and concentration temporarily goes offline. Anxiety makes it extremely hard for teenagers to sit still and to learn. It can make them feel awful — they might end up with an intense headache or with a case of the shakes. They can feel easily overwhelmed by simple, everyday situations like someone not liking an Instagram post or worrying about an upcoming camp or not feeling like they belong to a friendship group.

Parenting an anxious child can be a rollercoaster for mums and dads. However, Grose says, it's the parents who can actually play a crucial role in helping their anxious kids work through their feelings. The first thing parents can do is recognise anxiety in their children and then help their children learn tools like deep breathing and mindfulness to manage it. Then they can make lifestyle changes within the home like ensuring everyone is eating well and getting plenty of exercise.

"Parents can learn to respond to anxiety," Dr Grose says. "Instead of just reacting to it. They can normalise anxiety and encourage their children to talk about it and they can role model powerful anxiety-coping strategies."

Also, parents of anxious teenagers need to learn not to over-



Parenting author Michael Grose and wellbeing expert Dr Jodi Richardson, who have co-authored *Anxious Kids: How Children Can Turn Their Anxiety into Resilience*.

protect their children by keeping them home instead of encouraging them to face their fears. "Parents need to resist the temptation to rescue or fix the situation that is making their teenager feel anxious," Grose says.

"Rather than protecting your child by allowing them to avoid meeting these challenges, you can respond with empathy and understanding to their concerns."

The choice of words parents and teachers use when a child is struggling with anxiety can also make a big difference, he says. The wrong words or even the wrong tone of voice can not only get a teenager's back up but can upset them even more and make them uncooperative.

"Telling our kids to 'just get on with it' or that 'it's not worth worrying about' and to 'stop being silly' doesn't help," Grose says. "Not taking a child's fears seriously or, even worse, making light of them, isn't going to help them. Kids need to know somebody understands how they feel." He says research shows untreated anxiety in childhood will likely reoccur as an adult.

Michelle Mitchell's advice is so sought after that some worried parents don't mind driving for more than two hours just for an appointment. She says everywhere she goes parents and teachers are talking about anxious kids.

"Anxiety is an epidemic. It's real," Mitchell says. "And it's not just the kids who are struggling with anxiety. Parents and teachers are also floundering in how to help them."

Mitchell has spoken to thousands of teenagers in about 2000 different talks all over the country, and says "whenever kids are going through challenges, there is a level of anxiety that comes with that". One GP told Mitchell in late June that she'd bought multiple copies of her recently published *Everyday Resilience* book because every second family that walks through

her doctor's door has a child with anxiety-related issues they don't know how to address.

It's not surprising our children are more anxious than ever before, says Mitchell, because they are dealing with the internet and "comparing themselves to the ideal and photo-shopped lifestyles that idolise wealth and happiness and paint an unrealistic picture of what life is meant to be like".

They are also not doing enough "circuit breaking" activities like exercise and non-screen, fun activities to help them recharge after episodes of anxiousness.

And Mitchell says the adults in their life are often living such a fast-paced existence, they can struggle to find the time to nip these issues in the bud. They often wait until they become a big deal, she says. "They are hoping the anxiety will rectify itself, but in reality what they need to do is to just stop, spend the time to understand what's going on, and then take the steps to make the changes they need so it doesn't escalate.

She says anxiety is a challenge teenagers need courage to face head-on. Building their courage muscles takes practise, she says, but the more you practise the better you will get.

"Anxiety is an opportunity to be brave. It doesn't have to look like a sensationalised, Hollywood kind of brave — and, as my colleague Karen Young says, success can be even just a little shuffle in the right direction."

Tickets to the Anxious Kids seminar in Hobart on, August 5, at 7pm at Hellenic House, 67 Federal Street, North Hobart can be purchased through www.parentingideas.com.au.

** The names of the teens quoted in this story have been changed for privacy reasons.*

If you or someone you know needs support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or contact beyondblue on 1300 224 636



ADVICE FOR PARENTS

THINGS PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP SUCCESSFULLY MANAGE TEENAGE ANXIETY

- Make sure they are getting plenty of sleep
- Encourage them to exercise every day
- Practise deep breathing or mindfulness as a family
- Bring calm into your own home environment by managing your own stress
- More outside time, less inside time
- Provide alternatives to screen time
- Openly talking about anxiety and encourage conversations about it
- Encourage them to do things that they enjoy
- Encourage them to make meaningful connections with friends
- Avoid activities that allow them to hide their anxiety



ADVICE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

WHERE TO GET HELP IN TASMANIA

- Primary Health Tasmania has a portal that lists Tasmanian mental health services on it
- Apart from headspace clinics in Hobart, Launceston and Devonport, there are other services for young people struggling with anxiety. Look for private psychologists, counsellors and even social workers
- Call helplines like eheadspace, mental health helpline and Kids Help Line. There is also Pulse Youth Health Service South and The Link Youth Health Services short-term psychological intervention program
- A GP is a great starting point to help you find local support and further information