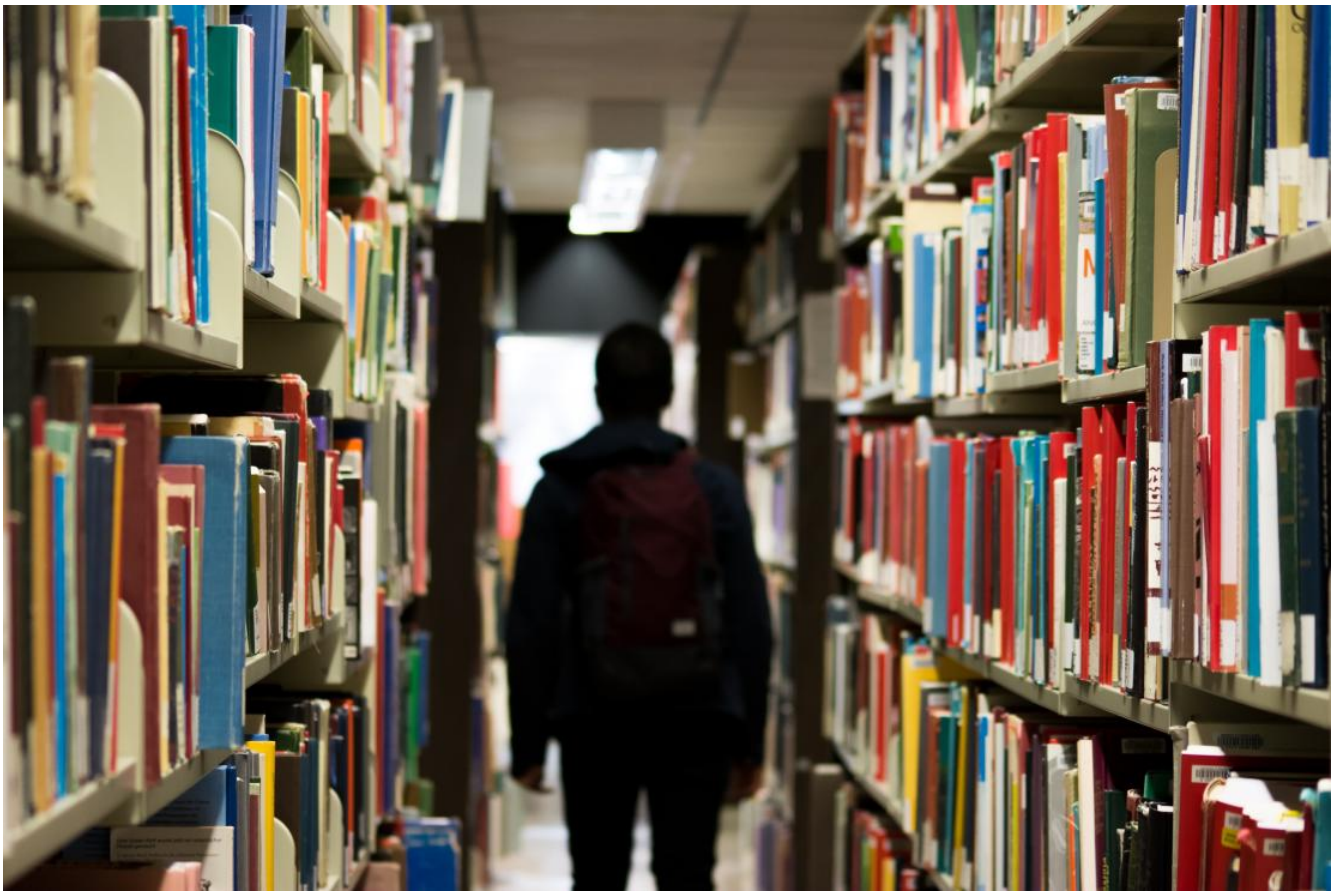
Horizon
The EU Research & Innovation Magazine

European Commission



Adolescent angst gains attention with focus on school stress

While teen years are never easy, research is examining whether they are harder than ever for the current generation of teenagers.

01 March 2023 - By ALI JONES

Media headlines lamenting spiralling levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide among Europe's teenagers make regular and uncomfortable reading. In recent years, news on this front seems to have gotten only worse.

In 2021, UNICEF estimated that over 16% of Europeans between the ages of 10 and 19 live with a mental disorder. The global figure is 13.2%.

Formative years

EU-funded research is looking at what exactly is troubling young people and how this is likely to affect their longer-term mental health. Early indications are that increasing strains at school may be a driving factor.

‘There is no health without mental health – and the foundation of mental health is largely laid in adolescence,’ said Dr Alina Cosma, who leads the EU-funded GenerationZ project running for two years through January 2024.

It is analysing a study that shows substantial variations in mental well-being across countries. Conducted with the World Health Organization's European office, WHO/Europe, the study covers adolescents in 45 countries and regions in Europe and Canada.

To understand what’s behind the results, Cosma is also drawing on country-specific projects that are actively talking to teenagers, notably from Nordic nations, the Netherlands and the UK.

Her work shows that one in four adolescents reported feeling nervous, being irritable or having problems falling asleep at least once a week. The demands on teenagers of schoolwork have risen in about a third of countries and the number of young people reporting that they like school has declined.

Looking after people in their formative years not only brings immediate benefits but also represents a long-term investment in public health. This is because more than half of adult mental-health troubles can be traced back to before a person’s 14th birthday.

Teen tracks

The teens offer a window of opportunity to prevent problems from occurring later on.

Childhood until the age of five is a period of rapid development when, if something goes wrong, it can really put a person off track, according to Cosma, who is a psychologist at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland.

Adolescence provides a second chance to intervene and reverse some of the vulnerabilities that may have developed earlier.

Cosma also wants to identify “predictors” of mental well-being such as good relationships with friends and family, saying sound mental health depends not just on the absence of problems but also on the existence of positive factors.

Her findings come as no surprise to a team of researchers at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.

They are recording the experiences of young people and their friends and families at key times of transition in schooling. The team is familiar with first-hand stories about the stress that school can create for teenagers.

Pivotal moments

The researchers are part of the EU-funded INTRANSITION project looking at two pivotal moments in the teenage trajectory.

The first is when young people move from elementary to secondary school at about the age of 12. The second is in adolescence at around 16 to 18 years of age when the transition takes place to the next stage of schooling – be it tertiary, vocational or higher education.

The five-year project, which ends this August, has looked at how these stages affect teenage identity. The conclusion is that, for many, these moments mark a turning point.

Deciding where to go to school, what to study and what career to pursue is wrapped up in expectations around academic achievement and the pressure to make choices that will steer the rest of adult life. This can be an overwhelming period, causing anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.

Still, many young people going through this phase are far from being angst-ridden.

‘There’s quite a sizeable group for whom we see the opposite,’ said Professor Susan Branje, who leads INTRANSITION.

Extracurricular factors

For teenagers who are happy with their choices, the transition can help generate feelings of commitment, motivation and comfort with identity.

This period presents an opportunity to guide adolescents and help them make the right choices, according to Branje. She said that means valuing relationships built in school and not letting the curriculum dominate.

When parents, peers, teachers and school staff support adolescent autonomy, they create an environment that fosters choice, a sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation, according to Branje.

Adolescents learn better when they are intrinsically motivated. It helps them to make better choices because they are more aligned with their own interests and abilities.

Supporting young people to develop autonomy and a clear identity is important for finding a healthy balance between "performance pressure” and relaxation – and can help to deflect any negative effects on mental health.

Pandemic punch

The COVID-19 pandemic that erupted in 2020 brought an unprecedented set of new challenges for teenagers that might be assumed could have dire consequences for future mental health. However, INTRANSITION has discovered a much more nuanced picture.

The project found that young people who had poor friendships before the pandemic were more vulnerable to internalising problems. Similarly, those who were more prone to internalising troubles before the pandemic were more likely to develop friendship difficulties during it.

‘It’s the young people that were already more vulnerable that were especially impacted by the pandemic,’ Branje said.

These findings confirm a view by Cosma back in Dublin: while there is mounting evidence that the current generation of teenagers is suffering more mental-health troubles than its predecessors, it is far from being an across-the-board phenomenon.

Cosma, who describes herself as an outdoor and a sports enthusiast, hopes that research from GenerationZ will help identify the ‘‘at-risk’’ groups and show the value of targeted help for those most likely to face difficulties.

Although since the pandemic’s outbreak daily life has largely returned to normal for most teenagers, the past year has also featured a devastating war in Ukraine, heightened fears about climate change and widespread economic strains.

Cosma hopes to study these issues in the future, putting the voices of young people at the centre of her research.

‘It’s such a formative period and what happens during these years is so important,’ she said. ‘If something goes wrong, it has long-term consequences into adulthood and we don’t want that.’

Research in this article was funded via the EU’s European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Sk?odowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).
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