

Why anxiety is inevitable and necessary

Adolescence has never happened to an adolescent before

As I write this, I'm anxious. Will it make sense? Will it be worth reading? Will I make a fool of myself? Young people in schools are also writing stuff. They also have to be seen in public, to interact in public, to speak in public. The only difference between their anxiety and mine is that I've had decades to get used to it. I know I'm going to doubt myself and worry about what other people will think. I know that's normal, at least for me. I know I won't sleep well the night before a difficult day. I know I'll have mixed feelings about meeting new people and being in unfamiliar situations. I know perfectly well that part of me will wake up in the morning and want to run away from any responsibility.

But for a young person, these anxieties are new, at the same time as their brains are changing, their bodies are changing, the way they see themselves and the way they're seen by other people is changing. Adolescence has never happened to an adolescent before. So of course they're anxious.

We might think of the word 'anxious' as describing a conflict of some sort, a conflict between the urge to run from responsibility and the confidence to face it, between the part of us wanting to become a child again and the part of us excited by the prospect of adulthood. Some young people complain of 'anxiety' when they're effectively describing the conflict that they feel between their love of their parents and their hatred of their parents, between their loyalty towards important people in their lives and their anger towards those people. For some, the conflict is between how they must behave outwardly and how they can't help feeling inwardly. For others, 'anxious' is the conflict between thinking and feeling, between knowing one thing but feeling another.

These conflicts are familiar and are never resolved: adults just get used to them. But young people aren't used to them. So they panic. They google their symptoms and receive a diagnosis which implies that they're suffering from a disorder when in fact they're suffering from adolescence, from the turbulence of a world that often isn't fair and often doesn't make sense, a world in which we don't always know what to feel or who to trust or what's going to happen next.

I'm not suggesting that anxiety disorders should ever be scorned or dismissed. I *am* suggesting that we should be careful in our rush to diagnose, however, in case we suggest to young people that, somehow, anxiety is wrong and that really well-adjusted young people should be sailing through life without a care.

Sometimes it seems as if diagnosis has become the way in which we try to cure ourselves of anxiety when, in fact, life is an anxious business and we need a degree of anxiety to survive: staying alert, aware of what could go wrong, anticipating possible danger. The help most young people need isn't diagnosis or the suggestion that there's anything wrong with them. Rather, they need someone to listen and understand, assuring them that their anxieties are inevitable and make complete sense. Those anxieties become entrenched and chronically debilitating when we – the experienced adults – don't understand and over-react ourselves, reaching for a diagnosis rather than listening, listening, listening.