

The importance of Misery

Happiness is not an entitlement for young people

Like anyone, I want to be happy. And I want all the children and young people I know to be happy. What bothers me is the idea that they *should* be happy and that, if they're not, if they're feeling miserable and hopeless, then it must be someone's fault. Blame the parents! The school! The therapist! The government! The young people themselves! And find a fix quickly: CBT, anti-depressants, mindfulness, coaching, positive psychology, solution-focused therapy, a magician with a magic wand... Whatever it takes. But please do something, *anything!*

Happiness is not an entitlement. Nor is success. After all, the world has the potential to be both good and bad, and our lives are usually a mixture of the two, at the end of which we die. So finding meaning in our lives is what matters most, not trying to find perpetual, beaming happiness. That would be lovely but quite unrealistic because misery, misfortune, failure and disappointment are all part of the mix. And finding meaning in our lives takes time. The world promises us many things – prosperity, romance, fame, sex - and young people have a go at all of them. Only once they've tried and failed or been disillusioned by these things can they start to pick up the pieces, gradually working out their own *raison d'être*.

Of course it's agonizing to watch the children we love and the students we care about going through miserable times: the break-up of relationships, fall-outs with friends, bad exam results, not getting chosen for a team, a job, a university. It's hard when young people question the point of anything, when they despair and feel like giving up.

But it's normal. It's what eventually creates resilience and maturity. It's what eventually helps them to make better sense of the world, learning to take responsibility for the things that they control while accepting the things they can't.

I'm not a believer but I'm always struck by Jesus's words from the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Far from holding onto some belief in the essential benevolence of everything, Jesus despairs because that's what we all do when nothing makes sense any longer, when we feel abandoned and afraid. And at those times we need people like our parents, our teachers and counsellors to hear and to bear our despair with us. Not to say, "Cheer up, Jesus! Try to think positively. I can refer you for a bit of CBT if you'd like!"

There's a pernicious suggestion that young people can have everything if they want it enough, if they aspire. It suggests that they can be and can accomplish anything as long as they're prepared to work hard. It suggests that the capitalist world is essentially fair and that, eventually, good people will get their just rewards.

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It isn't fair and they won't necessarily get their just rewards. Once the disillusionment of this kicks in, it's difficult for young people to make sense of their experience, and it's agonising for the adults trying to support them. In our desire to relieve young people of their distress, the danger is that we find ourselves suggesting that it's going to be okay because all problems can somehow be fixed.

If there *are* fixes, then fine, wonderful! But one of the jobs of therapists and other professionals is to remind parents, teachers and young people that, unfortunately, life really does suck sometimes. So don't be fooled by the promises of happiness waiting just around the corner. Stay calm. Hang in there. Keep trying to work things out. But don't expect it to be easy.