Mind

Why being more open about mental health could be making us feel worse

The language of the therapy room is creeping into everyday life. Psychologist Lucy Foulkes says therapy speak and overpsychologising could do mor

By Catherine de Lange

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🔺 Nabil Nezzar

WHEN Lucy Foulkes 🔗 https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/team/lucy-foulkes was growing up, young people didn't discuss their mental health have become the front line in dealing with the mental health issues of young people.

Even so, Foulkes doesn't believe things have necessarily changed for the better. As a psychologist at the University of Oxford, she argues

Catherine de Lange: It feels like there is a mental health awareness campaign almost every week. Surely that is a good thing?

Lucy Foulkes: It seems like it is, but I think there are all sorts of reasons why it might not be. These campaigns are often designed for soc people to listen.

The big thing that I'm really interested in is whether they encourage people to interpret essentially all negative thoughts and feelings as s[...] have the most serious [mental health problems](#) 🔗 /article/2354563-one-brain-network-may-be-involved-in-six-mental-health-condit[...]

What sort of language are people using inappropriately?

I saw a TikTok video the other day, and it said: "If you're wondering if you've had trauma, here is the test: are you hurting? If you're hur[...]

There has been a general trend in the past 10, 20 or 30 years to view our experience through the psychiatric lens. We're looking for everyt[...]

[Nick Haslam](#) 🔗 https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/profile/6837-nicholas-haslam [at the University of Melbourne, Australia] talks abo[...] everywhere – and seeing ourselves as being vulnerable to harm. In some respects that's a good thing as plenty of people have been abuse[...]

Is therapy speak also having a detrimental effect on society? For example, the actor [Jonah Hill was criticised recently](#) 🔗 https://eu.u[...]

I guess it's a problem when it's used the way Jonah Hill was said to have used it – under the guise of self-care to manipulate and control[...]

🔺 **For some people, it is useful to put a label on their mental health issues**
OliviasPrintEmporium/Etsy

Surely for some people it is useful to put a label on things?

Definitely. It's very validating. It helps you understand yourself. It helps you communicate your distress to other people and it might pot[...]

There have been several studies in schools showing that teaching young people about mental health can make them feel worse. They end [...] something. This is the concept of the "sick role": how you change once you've adopted a diagnosis.

What research are you doing to explore this?

It's basically about trying to test the hypothesis that mental health awareness efforts are contributing to the [increase in reported rates of](#) [...] strand that I'm setting up is trying to see whether you can experimentally manipulate the information you show people or tell them and [...] setting, that would be quite a powerful argument that it's potentially happening on a bigger scale in society.

You have also been working in schools in the UK. What is the situation there?

In the past, schools didn't consider people's psychological well-being or mental health, or the impact that education might have on it. Bu

I worked on a big mindfulness trial ⌾ /article/mg25033370-300-the-mindfulness-revolution-a-clear-headed-look-at-the-evidence/ th
I have spoken to a lot of schools and they're desperate for mental health support. They want to know what their role should be. There's s
these messages about a mental health crisis, like everyone else.

⚠ **Schools are now on the front line of mental health, but aren't well equipped to take on that role**
Peter Titmuss/Alamy

How might this kind of over-psychiatrising in schools lead to further problems?

Anxiety ⌾ /definition/anxiety/ is a really good example. An increasing number of young people are saying that they don't want to do son
they shouldn't have to sit exams in a big hall, for example. But this genuine, useful principle has been blown out of proportion. It seems

The trouble is that the worst thing you can do in terms of maintaining anxiety in the long run is allowing people to not do the thing that
if it is bad, you cope. If you avoid things, you never get the opportunity to discover this so you just remain perpetually anxious.

It sounds like what's going on in schools isn't working. What should we do differently?

Something needs to change. I don't yet know what the answer is. I feel like I'm at the very beginning of trying to press pause on what's l
to be better understanding of who are the young people who really do need one-to-one support and who can be supported just by teache

The reason teachers are often in such a bind is that there's a big chunk of children who aren't unwell enough for a referral to CAMHS 🔗
tackle that – including something called mental health support teams 🔗 https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/trailblazers/ th

I've heard you jokingly compare some of your views to those of the controversial commentator Piers Morgan. How have people respo

I disagree with Piers's approach – I'm definitely not calling all young people snowflakes 🔗 /article/mg24132162-300-the-truth-about-g

I've generally had a lot of support, a lot of people saying they agree but they didn't want to say this themselves. So I think there is an app

Catherine de Lange is magazine editor at New Scientist

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