



Youth depression rising at alarming rates, especially for girls and young women

Issue 16/2022: October 5, 2022

A report released yesterday by the Black Dog Institute has highlighted the increasing rates of depression – particularly among young girls and women. The findings showed depression rates have more than doubled over the past 14 years in adolescent girls.

The report *Turning the tide on depression: A vision that starts with Australia's youth* looks at depression across four groups: children; adolescents; young adults; and young First Nations peoples.

Reviewing data from their own *Future Proofing Study* and the latest national surveys the researchers at Black Dog found that depression has become more common in adolescents and young adults over the past decade. The study found just over 15 per cent of adolescents reported symptoms consistent with depression, including high rates of self-harm and suicidal thoughts. They also observed an increase in depressive symptoms in children under 12 years since the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as looking at trends in the prevalence of depression over recent years, the report also looks at how the lives of children, adolescents and young adults have changed in the last two decades, and whether certain societal changes may be driving their risk of depression.

Some of these changes were identified as being particularly important for certain age groups. For children, decreased physical activity, poor sleep and greater family stress may have contributed to increased depressive symptoms during the pandemic.

For adolescents, the researchers noted that life had changed in many ways. Adolescence today is characterised by a delay in reaching adult milestones compared to previous generations with adolescents less likely to have paid jobs, to go out with their parents, to be involved in romantic relationships or to consume alcohol. Yet they are more likely to be exposed to adult concepts and content through digital technology; have increased digital social interaction — teenagers spend, on average, 14.4 hours per week online and one-third spend an equal amount of time interacting with peers online as they do in-person; experience loneliness — 1 in 6 teens experience problematic levels of loneliness, get insufficient sleep; and be concerned about their future. Similarly, Professor Jean Twenge (2021), an international expert on teen depression, found today's teenagers are less independent than earlier generations, spend more time at home and less time out with friends. Part of this change in teen behaviour, Twenge argues, is due to the advent of helicopter parenting, but she also believes that young people don't need, or even want, to go out as much because they can socialise with their friends online instead.

The Black Dog study further investigated how these changes may be interacting with the key risk factors for depression. Of particular note was the complex relationship between depression and screen time for adolescents. For years there have been reports on the dangers of screen time as well as possible positive impacts, leaving many parents and educators confused. The report found that screen time and symptoms of depression were closely linked, with more screen time associated with high rates of depression and a more pronounced association for girls.





While the study found screen time and depression were linked, particularly in teenage girls, the researchers warned it was too early to conclude that increased screen use actually caused depression in young people: "There are higher rates of depression in younger people than before and people who have higher symptoms of depression are more likely to use screens."

The researchers looked more closely at factors that may explain why girls are disproportionately impacted by screen time. They found a direct relationship between increasing levels of screen time and negative social evaluation associated with social media use in girls but not boys. Yet the strong relationship between depression and screen time remained even when negative social evaluation was controlled. Similarly when researchers controlled for the effects of cyberbullying, social support networks and loneliness, the link between screen time and depression remained significantly stronger for girls.

In summary they found that none of the factors typically associated with screen time — lack of sleep; cyberbullying; loneliness and lack of positive support networks; and feelings of negative social evaluation — fully explained the stronger links found between higher screen time and depression among girls compared to boys.

While they found that a greater amount of screen time is linked with depression in teen years simply using screen time as the only measure of online behaviour was limiting. In fact they posited that rather than screen time being a cause of adolescent depression, the reverse may be true, that is: depressed teens may be more inclined to use digital media as a coping mechanism or strategy to manage their wellbeing.

Digital technologies can have both positive and negative influence on wellbeing and the researchers hypothesised that adolescents who are using screen time to play interactive games and engage positively with friends may also be effectively using digital technologies to regulate negative emotions. But for those who have high screen time but are less actively engaged with digital technology — using them more passively — the opposite may be true and they may be at increased risk of depression. This also fits with Twenge's (2021) findings that different types of screen time have different impacts on wellbeing. The Black Dog Institute intends to further explore the relationship between depression and screen time in their ongoing *Future Proofing Study* which follows the mental health of more than 6,000 Australian high school students across 134 schools.

Given that previous studies have made a connection between frequent social media use and lower wellbeing, and that frequent social media use may precede low wellbeing (and not the other way around), at a minimum, high screen time, particularly in girls, may indicate that all is not well and that a more careful monitoring for mental health issues may be warranted.

The research also listed the top concerns of adolescents and noted that these did not differ substantially between girls and boys, geographic location, or school sector. While school and academics was the top concern for adolescents generally for those with depression the top concerns were mental health and social relationships prompting researchers to suggest that "in the school context, providing support around peer relationships is more important for students experiencing depression". Adolescents top six concerns were

- School and academics
- COVID-19
- Social relationships
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Family and home life
- Environment, society and the world

For young adults, those who experienced financial strain and loneliness were at higher risk for depression with women, international students and LGBTQIA+ young adults being particularly vulnerable.

The researchers found that compared to previous decades, young adults today face increased financial pressure, greater competition for entry levels jobs, more complex tertiary education pathways, and increased loneliness. These risk factors are often more pronounced for young women.

First Nations youth were highlighted as being at particularly high risk, although the exact level of risk was difficult to determine as the measures used to diagnose and monitor depression were often unsuitable for use with First Nations peoples.

References:

Black Dog Institute (2022). Turning the tide on depression: A vision that starts with Australia's youth. Sydney, AU: Black Dog Institute.

Twenge, J. M. & Farley, E. (2021). Not all screen time is created equal: Associations with mental health vary by activity and gender. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 56, 207-217. DOI: 10.1007/s00127-020-01906-9

