

YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Several days ago I asked a beginning grade nine student, whom I know quite well, if he had at least one teacher this year whom he considered to be outstanding. He paused and thoughtfully said, "No". I then asked if he had one teacher who thought he was awesome. He paused and thoughtfully said, "As if!". He then added that he had one teacher that was sort of okay. With the look in his eye and the smile on his face, I took this to mean that a connection had been made.

Our youth have willingly shared with us insights into their dietary, motivational, sexual, social, emotional, physical and intellectual behaviour and style of learning. We are currently living with the most educated generation of youth to ever inhabit the earth, who, within minutes, can become connected to every 'heartbeat' that occurs in the world. We know a great deal about youth and the cultural and multigenerational influences upon parenting; peer influence; development of identity; strategies to reduce impulsivity; attitudes; engagement in risky behaviours and choices; health concerns; and components of general wellbeing. We are also aware of the significant developmental role played by having a sense of achievement and potency, and an established connectedness within a community, and the importance that "place" has upon self-esteem and a sense of purpose. The articles in this edition of *Youth Studies Australia* attest to our burgeoning

knowledge and expertise as we seek to better understand and know how and when to intervene in the lives of our youth.

In light of the abundance of these research outcomes – anecdotal and observed data collected over the past 50 years of active research on youth – we still don't know a great deal when it comes to dealing with the incidence of depression, academic failure, debilitating stress, high-risk behaviours, binge-drinking, violent acts, suicidal ideation and self abuse in the face of a seemingly rich and abundant future filled with possibilities. What is crucial to realise is that most of us at some time or another experience depression, think about suicide, feel crushed and rejected and, if given the chance, would go away and hide. These feelings are heightened during adolescence and yet what is more astounding is that an emerging sense of resilience, personal power, control of impulses and capacity to seek support militate against the urge to act on these impulses.

Within this plethora of research outcomes and evaluation reports on quite innovative programs, I see little discussion about an existential sense of place, spiritual meaning or what it means for an adolescent to be alone in the world and have no-one to trust, to reassure them that their life makes a difference and to suggest how they might actually make a lasting contribution to the world. Drug medications might change behaviour for the short term, but they do not help to answer the weightier questions

of existence. If youth do not have the opportunity to address issues of purpose in life and personal meaning (i.e. spiritual), we will continue to proliferate studies that measure sub-components of self-esteem and look at social and political causes and so forth. We will continue to produce research on youth that reveals high introspection, low involvement with others, high stress and low productivity with little idea as to what we can actually do about it.

Having a sense of place, knowing how to initiate and maintain a meaningful connection with others, being able to laugh at oneself, failing and not being crushed, rising from the depths of rejection to have hope, having the capacity to influence change and make a difference, being significant because of who you are in the moment, having a purpose for living beyond the moment and holding on to a dream beyond oneself are all crucial indicators of balanced mental health.

Most of which I saw in a nanosecond from the look in that young man's eye and the smile on his face.

Carey Denholm

Professor Carey Denholm, a former director of the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, is a registered psychologist and the Dean of Graduate Research at the University of Tasmania.