

# Tired of Anxiety

by Dr. Sarah Cassidy

It has been typical of Irish and other European cultures in recent times to hide the things we are ashamed of - like the fact that we might be anxious or afraid. Being anxious has been seen as a sign of weakness and something that could be a cause for exclusion in modern social groups. For our ancestors, the converse would have been true because the anxious response alerted them to dangers in their surroundings and helped to keep them alive. Someone who was highly anxious would likely have been seen as a protector, rather than a weakling. Anxiety is a completely normal and adaptive human response to perceived dangers in the environment - we are supposed to feel our feelings and respond to them, not ignore them. That is what has kept the human species alive for millennia.

So how have we come to a place where we keep telling our young people that they are supposed to ignore what they are feeling? That they should simply stop feeling what they are feeling? That this will somehow make it go away? Not only does it not work, but it can serve to magnify the person's anxious thoughts and feelings.

In Ireland, 22% of adolescents report severe anxiety levels, while 26% of young adults fall into severe and very severe categories for anxiety. According to the World Health Organisation, anxiety is the ninth leading cause of disease and illness for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds and is the sixth leading problem for those aged between ten and fourteen. Research also estimates that the prevalence of clinically elevated child and adolescent anxiety is at a stark 20.5% of the global population with those figures following a similar pattern here in Ireland - almost one fifth of young children experience either social phobia or generalized anxiety disorder.

Lots of us want to blame social media for this situation, but the problem is far more nuanced and multi-faceted than just social media. We can't just eradicate technology from all situations forever as many of us are reliant on it for our jobs and for connecting with our friends and families.

What can parents, teachers and other adults do? Well, we don't have to actually fix every problem that our young people are facing, as many of life's problems aren't fixable! And our young people themselves aren't broken and don't need to be fixed. What they do need is for us to start listening to them - really and truly listening to what their experience is like and respecting them for who they are.

The good news is that we can help in how we use language and speak about our own everyday experiences.



We can demonstrate curiosity, courage, and bravery. We can de-stigmatise anxiety and other mental health difficulties by openly acknowledging that we all feel anxious or low or sad or worried sometimes because these are all completely normal parts of the human experience.

We can say helpful and encouraging things, like, "That sounds hard. I wonder what that must be like for you. Is there anything I can do? I get scared too sometimes".

We can also notice situations where we ourselves tend to avoid things that are anxiety provoking, and we can talk about them with our young people. We can then purposefully take small brave steps towards the things that might feel a bit scary for us, whilst talking about them.

This is not about forcing people, at all costs, to do the things that they are terrified of. It's not about shoving a child through the school gates. It is about teaching a life skill for what we know is a truly difficult world for today's young people. It is about modelling and shaping courage and bravery for the rest of their lives so that they can go on all their life's journeys.

This is not about fixing it for them. It's about holding their hand in the dark.

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