

LOST IN THOUGHT

24/3/2009 – Stefan Dimou

We now know more about ourselves and our world than ever before, but it is in this climate of knowledge and progress that we see today's youth falter.

Over the past few decades, technological advancements and improvements in the general economic environment have led to a better quality of life for most Australians. Modernity has led to advancements in a wide variety of areas, as industries grow, researchers research and builders build. The fact is that today more and more young Australians are finding themselves victim to mental illness.

Depression, anxiety and eating disorders are affecting more of our youth than at any other time in our history. Today, between 14 and 18 per cent of Australians between the ages of 4 and 18 are experiencing mental health problems of clinical significance, while according to the *1997 ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, rates of mental disorder peak at age 18 to 24 years, with more than one in every four young adults having one or more mental disorders. These figures, however shocking, revert back to the idea that despite all the benefits of modernity come the starkly negative side effects. The youth of this country are turning inwards, towards cliques and online networking, away from traditional family and community support groups. By doing so they are increasingly isolating themselves from loved ones as well as the help they need in dealing with and preventing the occurrence of mental health problems.

Furthermore, industry professionals are finding that young people are at times reluctant to seek the help offered. They cite the fact that today's youth are very discerning about when, and from whom they seek assistance. Concomitant with this idea is the fact that many young people are afraid of the stigma often associated with making use of mental health services and the physical attendance of a mental health clinic. These realities have let this matter snowball to a point of 'crisis,' one which our government and our society must solve together.

It seems that despite an increase in the general socio-economic standing of everyday Australians over the past few decades, mental health problems have become increasingly common. Therefore, we as a society need to appreciate that the solutions we administer need to tackle the root cause rather than the end outcome of such conditions. The problems in the system are obvious, in terms of funding and resources; a Senate inquiry into this matter found that patients in Victoria for example, under the age of 16 can only seek mental health services between the hours of 9am to 5pm, while patients 16 years and over can receive 24 hour care. The overall issue takes its roots elsewhere in other areas of society. Therefore, Government action should not merely tackle the lack of mechanisms in place to combat the mental health issues themselves, they should tackle the causes of our youth's problems. It is widely accepted that social disadvantage, as well as violence and familial instability in childhood reduces an individual's likelihood of enjoying both good mental and

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physical health later in life. The government needs to acknowledge the pivotal role that wider economic and social measures can play in reducing both the incidence and the impact of mental health problems.

We require a well functioning mental health system, one which truly cares for younger Australians. To do this, services must be youth centred and family focussed. In addition they must be community based while maintaining cultural sensitivity. State and Federal Governments need to appreciate the diversity of needs required by those seeking care. They need to provide the infrastructure and the funding required to ensure access to a mélange of services which best suit patients' individual needs including clinics, and residential centres adapted to dealing with these issues. Early intervention is paramount

Closer to home, our Governments must seek to involve both parents and teachers on a home and school based level. These two groups must be proactive and appreciate that this exigent issue exists in Australian society today. Legal guardians and teachers have a responsibility to act upon any misgivings they may have regarding their son, daughter or pupil's mental health; they have a duty of care to those under their supervision.

It is about providing care and support to the younger members of society who suffer from these mental issues. It is about providing attention tailored to their individual needs.

The issue is too great and the ramifications too dire. The future of our country is at stake, literally.

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