

DR PADDY POWER

Youth mental health is finally on the national agenda



Getting worked up about your mental health

“ However, for about a quarter of us our late teens and early adulthood is when we first experience the onset of mental illness. It can be a very dark, lonely and disturbing time

”

WHAT has us all worked up about the state of mental health of our young people. Is it the media angst about the spate of youth suicides, the casualties of drink and drugs, the painful cases of abuse, the spectre of wasted lives and unemployment? Are these a barometer of festering ills in our society that breeds a generation of ill health or has it always been there and we just haven't bothered to acknowledge it before?

What are the mental challenges that young people face as they move from adolescence into adulthood? These days young people are encouraged to believe that anything is possible. It's a period of individual discovery, experimentation, independence, identity, carving out one's place in society, and finding a partner. However, it's also a time of emotional setbacks, realisation, limitations, failures, rejections, doubts and struggles, particularly in coming to terms with oneself. It doesn't help when one is at the mercy of intense emotions and one's dreams can be so painfully shattered.

If this is a struggle for young people it's an equally anxious period for their parents. Will their two decades of emotional investment pay off? Or will those difficulties experienced during childhood now come home to roost? Sadly, when kids do experience emotional problems, parents are generally oblivious to their extent until it has reached a life-threatening crisis.

Thankfully, most young people make it through this transition relatively unscathed but sadly about a third come to grief and experience mental health problems. It's important not to assume that this is always pathological as it may be an understandable reaction to life's adversities. What is remarkable is how many of us recover from these challenges with little or no help.

However, for about a quarter of us our late teens and early adulthood is when we first experience the onset of mental illness. It can be a very dark, lonely and disturbing time. For the majority though recovery is the norm and the episode is a temporary blip in an otherwise healthy life. But for a minority it is the beginning of a lifetime of further episodes, repeated hospitalisations and complicating disability. What seems to differentiate these outcomes is whether one seeks help early and long enough to ensure a



full recovery and prevent relapse. It is still surprising how long people endure their symptoms before they finally seek professional help. It's on average 6-8 years for mood disorders and longer for anxiety disorders. By then, the damage is done, more difficult to reverse, and treatment more complicated.

Unfortunately, accessing mental health services quickly is not easy. Most services have long waiting lists and only one in four succeed in getting treatment. Services are not particularly youth friendly. Teenagers face the added problem of the split between adolescent and adult services – unfortunately the majority fall between the gaps. Young people clearly need a better deal.

However, things are getting better. Youth mental health is now on the agenda. Irish groups are at the forefront internationally.

The Special Interest Group of the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ACAMH) launched the International Declaration on Youth Mental Health. The RCSI Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) has just published its report on the prevalence of mental illness in Irish adolescents and young adults. Headstrong, Inspire, ACAMH, St Patrick's Mental Health services and College of

Psychiatrists of Ireland actively promote youth mental health services.

Campaigns such as Darkness in Light and Walk in My Shoes have become national annual charity fixtures. Dublin hosted this year's European conference (ESCAP) on child and adolescent mental health. The International Association for Youth Mental Health (IAYMH) has just held its conference in Brighton, bringing together young people, their families, professionals, clinicians, academics and policy makers to exchange ideas, collaborate and establish common goals.

Though these initiatives might seem far removed from the coalface they are an absolutely essential vehicle for promoting change and uniting efforts.

While the mental health scene might still seem grim for young people, there is a gathering impetus and acknowledgment that its high time services improve and no longer will we as a nation tolerate the scandals, the misery, and the waste of so many young lives. This is something definitely worth convulsing about. ■

Dr Paddy Power is a Consultant Child & Adolescent, Adult Psychiatrist & Honorary Senior Lecturer, Young Adult Service, St Patrick's University Hospital, James Street, Dublin 8 and a member of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland