

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(John Donne, Meditation XVII, 1624)

BY DR A WILLIAMS

THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH SUICIDE



To recall a familiar theory, when a butterfly flaps its delicate wings in one corner of the world, a major natural upheaval is claimed to be triggered at the opposite end of the earth. Therefore, why not use this concept to examine the exponential, all-encompassing impact that a young person's death by suicide causes in our society, no matter whose, why or where it occurs?

Whenever we are informed of the premature demise of a young person by their own hand, a small part of all of us in fact also dies. We lose the potential wealth of contributions that might have been made and value added by the young life had it been allowed to continue. The world may well have been a better place for the difference made by the person.

It is a sad, disturbing fact that in Australia youth suicide is increasing. 'How is that possible?' one might wonder when considering the typical social iconography associated with the Australia of travel brochures and vibrant opportunity? Why here of all places, in this land of plenty, of endless white beaches and wild surf? Leaving aside any speculation, it is an undeniable fact that these days more youth, and of increasingly younger age too, attempt to cut short their lives. Unfortunately they are all too often successful at it.

We are bringing up a generation that, despite appearing on the surface as if the world were their oyster and no door were closed to their curiosity and yearning for new experiences, is proving

to be very fragile and easily broken by the challenges normally associated with growing up and moving towards adulthood. Too many young people, to put it bluntly, simply cannot cope well in today's age. The tragic irony is that the very technology which so deeply attracts them and to which they have such easy and widespread access seems to enhance in them a false sense of security and control, where a simple shift of the cursor and the click of a button seems empower them to effect change. However, when the adolescent is faced by a real quandary, a failure, an unpleasant outcome, a loss of something significant or the challenge of a difficult relationship, it may be a shock for them to realise that there are no buttons to click or suitable apps to change those settings back to the familiar, safe context that used to be.

In those difficult moments, where do they turn for help and advice? As we well know, children do not grow up in a vacuum

as a support system. Not to mention the frustrations, anger and hopelessness that emerge out of chronic interpersonal conflicts and relational breakups experienced by today's families. Where then do our young people turn for help?

Youth suicide is no longer something we can simplistically diagnose as the result of a mental disorder in which the rest of us have little or no part in being responsible for. Even more disconcerting is the unease, the restlessness and the lack of a clear sense of direction of the younger generation, who are at a stage of existential confusion with all the implications this can have for stability and a sense of direction. As a community, we are losing this war and will continue to do so if we fail to address issues such as youth addictions, self-harm, eating disorders, and other symptoms of distress. Have we created a world where in order to survive one may have to repress one's sensitivity, one's vulnerability and emotional responses? If so, we repress that which contributes to forming deep and meaningful interpersonal connectedness and a productive sense of purpose.

As a humanist I see things systemically. I believe that everything and everybody are connected in an endless web of cause and effect to which everything and everybody contributes. Consequently in my opinion, both personally and professionally, I passionately believe that an approach to the issue of youth suicide needs to be a systemic one. We must take into account and on board every possible element of a young person's network of influences and resources, starting from proactive strategies to build up our children's resilience and a positive self-image. Setting up inclusive and meaningful post-suicide strategies to help the survivors cope with the loss and the guilt often associated with youth suicide would advantage individuals and communities.

We don't just need to love our youth, but we need to make sure that they feel loved, supported and respected as they cross the destabilising boundary between childhood and adulthood. Through their attitude, parents can either facilitate or hinder this momentous transition. Our community and education leaders, on their part, must also guarantee their complementary, integrated support for families facing this huge challenge.

The closer is the adolescents' access to and connection with holistic support systems, the less painful and scary will be the experience of letting go of their childhood whilst their natural curiosity to explore new meanings and exciting possibilities will be contained within safe boundaries and healthy behaviours and relationships. Therefore, as a community, we must revisit our priorities and shift our attention away from a 'circuses and bread' mentality to a more responsible approach towards the generation that is going to determine the very quality of society's future.

■ Dr A Williams. Psychotherapist and Family Counsellor, Tasmania.



and therefore we would expect that they might seek support, guidance and encouragement primarily from within their families. Ironically, today the family is often the least likely first option for them because families are undergoing profound changes and becoming more fragmented, smaller, more isolated from what, in the not so distant past, would have constituted an extended network of support. The current demographic trends indicate that today's families are more likely to be beset and distracted by the increasing insecurity of keeping or finding a regular source of income or adequate housing. A lack of confidence in parenting and the reduction of once-reliable support systems, both internal and external play a part in impairing the security of the family