

YOUTH SUICIDE

PREAMBLE

Youth self harm, suicide and depression would appear to be extreme forms of bad behaviour or poor judgement. This suggests that the educational or school system may be associated with the causes and most probably will be a major factor in providing a solution.

This indicates that school teachers are likely to be the central group of professional people who provide the personal contacts with the

students who require assistance. If we consider the order of magnitude involved, about two and a half millions students between the ages of five and sixteen, the ratio of teacher to student is about one to 25 in contrast with the other professional group, the doctors, where the ratio of professional to patients is of the order of one to six hundred or greater; the teachers are better placed to identify the students at risk. As teachers are also the people who are best informed about normal behaviour of they may well be the most effective group to provide solutions

This implies a major rethinking of the management and funding of the primary and secondary school system. Among other things it would be important for the near elimination of the casual teachers in the system and the introduction of regular retaining and undertaking research as part of their duties.

BAD BEHAVIOUR

What is bad behaviour. The following description of bad behaviour probably has not changed much since this account was written almost eighty years ago.

Most men do not think things in the way they encounter them, nor do they recognise what they experience, but believe their own opinions.

Heraclitus.

I. V. CHILDREN WHO MISBEHAVE

What kinds of misbehaviour?

The kinds of misbehaviour which make children problems for their elders and call for special guidance, range from the simplest cases of talkativeness, inattention and disobedience up to the gross delinquencies which may end in prison and asylum. The common feature of them all is the antisocial character: in greater or lesser measures they throw into a disorder the even tenor of life in home or school or community. But now it is their disturbing effects which make it necessary to take steps to prevent them, it is a mistake to dwell too much on the badness from the point of view if our aim is to make the child good rather than the mere prevention of evil doing. Whenever social disapproval is overemphasised, punishment in which there is always an element of revenge, becomes the main methods of treatment and external repression of misconduct takes the place of the harder but more fundamental effort to reform the wrong doer. In guidance, therefore it is better to avoid disapproval and let sympathy with the erring child take its place. Here we say, is a child who for some reason or other has become badly adjusted to the ordinary conditions of his life. Let us try to understand with a view to helping him to adjust himself better, both for his own sake and for the sake of others.

Following this line of thought and endeavour it is not long before we realise that the various misbehaviours are but manifestations in action of wrong disposition and attitudes. It is personal difficulties which creates social difficulties. The aggressive person acts aggressively the evasive person acts evasively. On this basis it is possible to classify the various forms of misdemeanour.

Consider first the active, energetic child with strong self assertive impulses, who meets the restraints of home and school with responses charged with anger and violence. In the case of persons in the first place his behaviour takes different forms according as the other person is a superior, an equal, or an inferior. With people of superior standing -- parents teachers and other elders -- his general relation sometimes takes an active form like temper tantrums, disobedience, or defiance, sometimes a less overt form like counter-suggestion when he takes a different course from that laid down for him just because it is laid down for him, or simply neglects to attend or to learn. With people of his own age and standing the reaction is usually quarrelsome, or teasing or refusal to co-operate in work or play. With inferiors, like animals or younger children, the common line of action is bossing, bullying and the infliction of pain. A special

form of this said to be most typically seen in the sphere of sex but no means confined to it, is the causing of pain to the object of love in the case of children, to members of the family and especially to the parent of the opposite sex as well as to friends. In the case of things, in the second place, the aggressive mentality appears manifestly in destructiveness and arson, and more subtly in the blundering and accidents due to the carelessness and unsympathetic handling of material objects. Theft and similar delinquencies may in one aspect be interpreted as a form of aggression in regard to other people's property, a self assertiveness that disregards the material rights of others.

The aggressive evil doings make a considerable list but the list of evil doings which have their roots in the weakness of evasion and fear is longer still, and even more diverse. Three main types may be noted:

(a), there are the active evasions. Play which is moderation is literally recreative as a relaxation from work becomes a degenerate effort to escape from the necessary routine of life when carried to excess and allowed to monopolise interest. Too great readiness to be shocked and turn away in disgust from disagreeable things is another wrong way of seeking to escape from normal demands and strong prejudices fall into the same category. These however are primarily personal weaknesses. From the social point of view evasion assumes its most objectionable forms in lying and cheating in personal relations, and in laziness, truancy and work shyness in the sphere of work;

(b) Second there are the regressive evasions. Regression occurs when a person refuses to grow up or reverts to the mental and moral attitudes of an earlier stage of growth. A common case is that of the child who wants to be treated like a baby or who behaves like a baby or the child who prefers to consort with younger children. The older person who keeps his or her affections fixed too long on father or mother and continues dependent on other people in the spirit of inferiority so that he or she evades the ordinary responsibilities of a social being manifests the same attitudes. A crude form of regression is economic dependence prolonged into adult life: a more subtle form is the over suggestibility which allows a person to take all his ideas from other people.

(c) Third, there are the withdrawal evasions, taking the form of a shrinking from life or as it is sometimes called self-frustration. The withdrawal kind of person avoids social contacts and prefers to be a solitary. He procrastinates and holds back from activities. He fears to express himself and sometimes stammers to avoid speech. He is prone to hysteria and the invalidism which is an excuse for dodging work. He lives in a world of daydreams and in extreme cases indulges continually in fantastic imaginings. He is indifferent to what goes on around him and lacks normal concentration and power to interest himself in things and people which is required for effective living.

Except in the case of the active evasions which lead to dishonesty, irresponsibility and bad workmanship, the bad behaviours due to evasions are antisocial in a different sense from those due to aggression. They are the badness of the person who is a burden to his fellows, instead of justifying his existence by contributing to the common good.

APPLICATION OF BEHAVIOUR ANALYSIS

When you are searching the job is made much easier if you know some of the characteristics of the targets. If it can be established that the different behaviour groups sent out above are significant in predicting further self harm behaviour it allows early attention to focus on the students who are likely to need help and guidance in the following years and a study of the development of the students also will indicate how future generations of students may be guided to overcome the difficulties.

Much of the attention in primary and secondary school is given to training in the skills which are required to engage but as Kant noted "neglect to help them decide what ends are worth perusing." The emphasis on studies without a genuine purpose may in fact disturb clever children and discourage them from studies because of the futility of the tasks set them.

This is particularly true of the school type of examination. Examinations have a purpose; they alert the student to the gaps in knowledge and they alert the teacher to shortcomings in the teaching offered to the students.

When examination marks are used to provide what can be a meaningless order of merit students may interpret this as an attack on their sense of intellectual integrity! When adults put such emphasis on examination results students get seriously stressed.

Students should not be exposed to purposeless stress which later in their life may produce a self harm response.

If the 1000,000 of so teachers in Australia are to be involved guiding students in this business it is important that the 20,000 (assuming about 1 in 5 are susceptible to stress) and that they are trained and briefed properly on the operation of the scheme.

STRESS IN UNIVERSITY

A similar program of research and assistance should be extended into post secondary education with health care being provided specifically for the students and staff.

A FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

Anyone familiar with the behaviour of people subject to depression will know that a central factor is the way in which the person experiencing depression clings to false concepts and models. This failing is I think at the centre of much self harm. They deal with unreal problems which consequently cannot be solved.

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