April 2022

SELF-RELIANCE, YOUTH, AND THE TASK OF CHARACTER

Dr Tanveer Ahmed

Institute of Public Affairs

Contents

Self-reliance, Youth, and the Task of Character 3

Fragile Youth 5

Safetyism: From Physical to Emotional 10

Never Coming of Age 13

Character, Virtue, and Self-reliance 22

About the Author

Dr Tanveer Ahmed is a psychiatrist and author. He works in private practice at the Hills Clinic, a public facility at Bankstown Community Health and visits jails for forensic assessments. He is the author of two books, *The Exotic Rissole* and *Fragile Nation*.

He has had various roles in the media, in both print and broadcast. Dr Ahmed is a frequent commentator and analyst, with regular columns published in the Australian Financial Review, the Sydney Morning Herald, and the ABC. He has sat on multiple Boards and held elected office. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Sydney, Australia.

Self-reliance, Youth, and the Task of Character

All human beings need meaning and purpose in one form or another to strive forward in life.

It is central to who we are – psychologically, socially, and physically – for us to believe that there is some point to all of the suffering and challenges which define life.

Finding meaning doesn't need to be complicated, but it has become more difficult in recent times especially for teenagers and young adults.

There are, broadly speaking, three domains where meaning can be found: surviving, procreating, and religious or spiritual beliefs. The first has largely been resolved for the vast majority of those living in modern, western societies. The second is a significant part of the lives of many of us, but in recent decades has been in decline punctuated with the news that Australia's birth rate fell to a record low in the year 2020. The third, and perhaps the most complicated, is still with us but is today manifesting itself in different ways, such as the belief among many young people in climate change, issues pertaining to gender identity, racism, and inclusion and diversity.

It used to be the case that the basic building blocks of a fulfilling and dignified life were laid out to us from a young age. The 'cultural script' was to get married, have kids, and stay married. Get a job, and pay your own way as far as possible. Participate in your local community. Take religious and spiritual life seriously, and avoid excesses.

Our Judeo-Christian heritage can be viewed as the inherited wisdom from thousands of years of our ancestors dealing with similar problems as we do. This inherited wisdom provides an adaptable guidebook to living, and extends from concepts as simple as don't steal and treat others how you want to be treated to more nuanced matters such as the suffering incurred before entering Heaven as being a metaphor for delayed gratification.

This did not suit everybody. For a not insignificant minority, the social mores of the past were stifling and, in a way, tyrannical. But most people most of the time who at least started with the cultural script would commence their formative years in the right direction. There are no guarantees in life, only probabilities. And the old cultural script at least provided a blueprint which is if nothing else a good approximation of how to live a life worth living without each generation needing to figure it out for themselves each time.

Now, however, our societal focus on unfettered individual autonomy, supercharged with smartphones, has led to the cratering of the family and civil society, and the rejection by many of time-honoured truths. Parents now try to be friends with their kids rather than being figures of authority, with the effect of the rise of 'helicopter parenting' and the 'bank of mum and dad' always there to offer protection.

Concomitant has been the shift in emphasis from physical to psychological and emotional safety. There is nothing wrong with seeking safety and protection. It is a natural impulse, and arguably a natural progression associated with material abundance. But it has become counter-productive. Practically every serious psychological instruction is aimed at making those who are anxious and worried better equipped to handle and confront their fears, rather than hiding from them. People who are scared of riding in elevators, for example because they had a negative or acutely stressful experience in the past, only become comfortable again through gradual and controlled exposure.

The problem with 'safe spaces' is they further embed a safety-only culture, with the effect that many young people never develop the skills and life experience to deal with challenges and problems which are inevitably a part of life.

Self-reliance is an obvious causality of this growing fragility. Self-reliance requires, firstly a belief in human agency, secondly, the ability to defer gratification, thirdly, a set of basic skills around economic and financial literacy, and, lastly, the ability to be able to get along well enough with other people to form social connection.

Many of these traits fall under the category of character, a concept with a moral connotation that is steadily being replaced by the more medicalised notion of personality.

But now, self-reliance implies a sufficiency that is linked to both a stigmatised male archetype and a psychic impenetrability.

The consequences in terms of the deterioration of the mental health of today's youth is largely beyond debate. The presentations to medical professionals of physical and psychological harm among the young has increased steadily over the past two decades, and was further revealed and accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In many ways Australia's response to Covid-19 punctuated our nation's shift from a safety-first to a safety-only culture.

The way forward is to, firstly, diagnose the problem as accurately as possible, which is the goal of this report.

Secondly, to provide based on that diagnosis a set of tools and principles which can be readily applied by today's youth so that they can rebuild a culture of self-reliance and develop the skills and experiences which used to be commonplace but now cannot be taken for granted.

Fragile Youth

Children have long been called the canaries in the mine. The term comes a century ago from miners carrying birds into their quarries. The canaries would die if the carbon monoxide levels were too high, serving as a warning to the human companions.

The analogy is apt when considering the growing discourse about mental health. This was especially pronounced during the pandemic when the mental health of children became a political football tossed about in debates about re-opening.

In August last year, as daily cases just rose beyond the thousands mark, the Chief Psychiatrist for NSW, Dr Murray Wright, outlined how self-harm presentations had increased by thirty one percent during the year to the end of July.

Other statistics showing the plight of young people amid the government-imposed lockdown restrictions include emergency department presentations up twenty percent among those under eighteen in 2021, compared to 2020. Acute mental health admissions for young people for the year to July 2021 were up 43 per cent on 2020, compared with a 2 per cent rise for the general population.

A recent survey released by Mission Australia confirms the heightened awareness that young Australians have regarding their mental health. In a survey of 20,207 Australians aged 15-19 years, Mission Australia found in its annual *Youth Survey* that the top five issues of personal concern were, in order: coping with stress, mental health, school or study problems, body image, and Covid-19. Some 46 percent of respondents said they were extremely or very concerned about coping with stress, and 42 percent said they were extremely or very concerned about mental health.

Further, about 47 percent of those surveyed said there were barriers that impacted on their achievement of their study or work goals, with the most common barrier being mental health.

It is true that there is an element of vagueness to these questionnaires. For example, it is unclear if those who select 'mental health' as a concern mean they are concerned about their own mental health, or more abstractly about the general state of mental health of their peers. Similarly, 'concern' is a subjective term with arguably a low threshold. Nonetheless, what is revealing is the rank-order of what the survey respondents have listed as their concerns – with four of the top five issues of concern for young people relating to personal rather than external issues.

The NSW Ombudsman also delivered its Biannual Report of the Deaths of Children in NSW, confirming suicide as the leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 17 in 2018 and 2019, increasing significantly for all children aged 10 to 17 since 2005.

A similar crisis was playing out Victoria, where figures to the end of May 2021 highlighted an average of 156 teens a week taken to hospital after self-harming and having thoughts of suicide, an 88 per cent increase on the year prior.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic did not cause these issues, but rather revealed and accelerated them.

Dr Wright noted that self-harm among adolescents had already been increasing across the Western world. Just as the pandemic was speeding up historical trends like digitisation, the rise in youth self-harm, eating disorders and substance abuse was already occurring.

Studies suggest a tripling of self-harm incidence over the past two decades, a figure from the British Children's Institute. In America, a study in the Journal of Paediatrics found a 268 percent increase in self harm among children between the ages of ten and twelve between 2010 and 2017. This study illustrates that not only is the self-harm increasing but it is showing up in greater numbers among younger kids.

In the United States, the screening tests also shows a shocking rise in depression in a short period of time: 56 percent more teens experienced a major depressive episode in 2015 than in 2010 and 60 percent more experienced severe impairment.

The issue is an appropriately hot button one that goes to the heart of how we raise families and, to some extent, organise society. The father of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, coiner of the term 'anomie', said that when societies hit a civilisational break the suicide rate soars. Suicide marks an extreme of individual autonomy.

Our system of liberalism makes few demands upon individuals and struggles to contend with groups, a gap that the politics of identity tends to fill. The debates amid the political cycle tend to lack answers to some of the most pressing issues, from family breakdown, loneliness, poor mental health and unfulfilling jobs. At a time of enormous collective material wealth, there is a bigger psychological overlap with public policy, in the difficult to measure metrics of status and esteem.

Youth mental health falls thoroughly into such a category. These are areas that classical liberals or libertarians might opt out from believing it was up to individuals how to self organise. But the government increasingly intervenes in such matters varying from welfare policy into aged care, family law, early childhood education or through schools that are expanding into areas previously reserved for families. There is also a moral and metaphysical component to the broad catchment of 'mental health' which overlaps with the law and definitions of disability.

There has recently developed a strand of literature, mostly among those who would consider themselves 'cultural conservatives' or 'traditionalists', which argues that liberalism is an 'anti-culture'. Its focus on individual autonomy as the ultimate goal in life demands the removal of all chosen and unchosen obligations in life. Because obligations can get in the way of self-expression, they are often viewed today more as straitjackets on the self rather than as enablers of virtue and self-development.

Professor at the University of Notre Dame, Patrick Deneen argues that in the Christian and ancient Grecian tradition, 'liberty' meant the capacity to rule over oneself through the cultivation and exercise of virtues. Now, however, 'liberty' has become re-defined to mean the absence of both government-imposed constraints, as well as the constraints of family, civil society, and nature.

There can be little question that modern liberalism has helped weaken family life, an institution that can be an impediment to personal autonomy, a constraining realm of duty. Children are one of the few binding obligations within a culture that encourages few permanent commitments. Even when they are raised in traditional nuclear families, a diminishing breed largely limited to higher socio-economic groups, it occurs in an environment prioritising the amorphous aspiration of emotional fulfilment, a relatively new metric in the context of history. Children have historically been useful. They worked in factories, in the home or in the field. But they are now, in the words of sociologist Viviana Zelizer, 'economically worthless but emotionally priceless'.

Notable books chronicling the psychological abyss afflicting today's youth include American social psychologist Jean Twenge's IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us. Diving through a slew of data she makes the case that there has been a steady but clear increase in diagnosable mental health conditions from 2007, which is exactly when smartphones became ubiquitous. A similar argument is made by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in The Coddling of the American Mind, although the focus of that book is primarily about university campuses.

One of the key themes of Twenge's and Haidt's findings about today's youth are the theme of safety. This focus has a wide meaning encompassing physical and emotional safety. It occurs in parallel with individualism and a slow life strategy amid a shadow of financial insecurity.

Indeed the concept of psychological harm and emotional safety are relatively new terms taken up with gusto by today's younger generation and in turn challenging public debates. This is despite the fact that teens are physically safer than ever before but more mentally vulnerable. In a 2016 American poll, 70 percent of adults said they thought the world had become less safe for children since they were children—even though all evidence suggests that children are actually safer now.

Australians are world leaders when it comes safetyism. We are one of three countries in the world who enforce the compulsory wearing of bicycle helmets, along with New Zealand and Argentina. The national site outlining rules for child safety seats boast that our laws are the strictest in the globe, to the chagrin of many expatriates with small children returning to our shores. We bear the questionable prize of enjoying some of slowest speed limits in the Western world.

Our status was confirmed during the pandemic where we largely approved of lockdown measures that would not be tolerated throughout much of the Western world.

Instead of basking in its status as the worlds' most liveable city, Melbourne donned the titled of the world's most locked down capital.

It stands to reason that our youth may also be further down the stay safe track.

They follow a slower life strategy in parallel with families having fewer children and cultivating each child more intensely. American author Nora Ephron described modern child rearing in 2006: 'Parenting [is] not simply about raising a child, it [is] about transforming a child, force-feeding it like a foie gras goose.'

They appear to fight less with their parents but are still more likely to having fallings out. A European study found evidence that British teenagers have less connection with adults and more with their peers. The English are also towards the bottom of league tables in measures of the quality of communication between teenage girls and their mothers. Research has repeatedly confirmed, regardless of cultural context, conflicts between mothers and daughters are especially intense.

Teens spend more hours on screens and engage in physical contact through mediating rituals, such as texts requesting IRL (in real life). American psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle documented how teens can be taken aback if forced to take calls without warning. Modern teens, and to a lesser extent millennials before them, have taken a flight from conversation—at least the kinds that might be open-ended and spontaneous.

This is noticeable in my work where early consultations with teenagers are spent merely building comfort with eye contact and longer sentences. It is not uncommon to have to politely ask adolescents to put the phone down or stop text messaging during the interview. This practice is known as 'phubbing', messaging during conversation while maintaining eye contact, something that requires considerable dexterity and skill.

While fractured attention is a hallmark of our times, continuous partial attention is more apparent with younger age groups. Despite having a medical degree, treating young people is often work in the art of patient chat, attending to the nuance of the nonverbal and allowing thoughts to unfold. This can be extremely foreign for some patients.

It is reasonable to worry about crying a moral panic. Every generation considers the upcoming youth at great risk. New technologies always inspire fear.

The technology guru Marc Andreasen says: 'In any given generation basically, whatever the kids are doing is the worst thing that's ever happened and will lead to certain doom, destruction, and the collapse of Western civilization.' Andreasen notes that heavy metal music was equated with the imminent dominance of Satan. Even the bicycle was associated with fears of unwanted teen pregnancies as a result of youth having greater freedom to roam on their pedalled vehicles.

Since the emergence of teen culture, adolescents have led parallel lives apart. Recent technological advances have opened up whole new fronts in the assertion of teen independence. Modern technology intensifies an adolescent's dual existence. They are hyperconnected to their families but also lead parallel lives quite separate and apart.

The rise of the smartphone offers a new risk of lost practice in the empathic arts - listening to others, not just the content but the tone and delivery. The importance of eye contact, further elevated in an era of masks, is downgraded when mediated by technology. The bulk of communication in person is nonverbal. American studies at summer camp show that in just five days after bans upon electronic devices most children show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others.

'We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us less lonely. But we are at risk because it is actually the reverse: If we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely.' says MIT based psychoanalyst Turkle in her book 'Reclaiming Conversation'.

In my private clinic where teens are admitted for three-week programs, a rule of thumb is an initial period of digital detoxification. It is alarming to see how some children psychologically implode without the presence of their phones. It has been appropriately compared to the dummy we have in our mouths as toddlers or being ripped from the breast of our nursing mothers.

Being attached to our phones builds fleeting illusions of friendship but makes fewer demands with regards to intimacy. Being alone is critical to process memories, integrate recent experiences with our broader past and therefore develop a more coherent sense of self. The current risk is that solitude and boredom are becoming endangered species.

A question therapists are taught to ask is about daydreaming. This can reveal wider fantasies someone may have, a barometer of desire. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, a renowned specialist in teen development, wrote that children thrive when they are given time and stillness.

But I am usually met with blank stares when asking about daydreaming among today's youth. Surfing the web is the new daydreaming.

Today's teens fall into the trap of feeling that if they are always connected they are less likely to be lonely when the opposite is the case - the inability to tolerate any kind of solitude is usually the prelude to being desperately lonely.

Safetyism: From Physical to Emotional

Negative emotion requires more processing in wider parts of the brain. This is especially relevant with regards to self-harm as patients report their inability to tolerate negative emotions. As horrible as cutting oneself will seem to others, it gives a sense of release and relief for sufferers. There is also an overlap with a culture that elevates positivity. It is perhaps no surprise teens may feel a greater stigma when the darker emotions of aggression, shame or disgust emerge, an echo of our more primitive natures. Phones are increasingly a temporary block from having to process such difficult emotions.

Importantly when considering the growth in the language of psychology in public policy, the concept of safety is extended into the emotional realm. There is a greater status to the subjective experience as appropriate evidence. This version of safety also overlaps strongly with reputation. Psychological harm and its potential impact upon vulnerable groups acquires an outsized significance. This was true during the pandemic. Those critics who argued against lockdowns through the language of human rights and inalienable legal privileges barely landed a glove. There was greater traction among colleagues of mine like Professor Patrick McGorry who argued in the language of mental health and emotional safety.

Cue the language of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and microaggressions all being derived from letting your feelings guide your interpretation of reality. iGen are more likely to agree with speech restrictions, an outcrop of greater emotional fragility, a slow life strategy and an emphasis on inclusion. This fuses into a view that people need to be protected at all costs. The John Stuart Mill concept of harm upon others being the limit at which freedom should be curtailed has a new psychological front, one with greater malleability in political battles.

Indeed, the nature of 'psychological harm' – as distinct from physical harm – while real, is inherently subjective. It is not possible to disprove a claim that someone has been 'harmed' or 'hurt' by what someone else said or did to them (or not said and not done). They may very well feel that way. And expression of negative feeling is often enough to end debate.

Unfortunately a greater focus on protection results in the exact opposite. At the level of the early teenage years they are more likely to experience cyberbullying, partly because the threshold of its classification is a lower bar, and more subjective. One set of studies by the Cyberbullying Research Center suggests that cyberbullying has become more common, with 34 percent of teens in 2016 affected, compared to 19 percent in 2007. Teens' entire lives are online, and one out of three is being bullied right where he or she lives.

There is a particular confluence between the aggression teenage girls employ in the game of social dominance such as verbal abuse, gossip and exclusion that social media magnifies. The usual girl drama of who said what to whom and who has a crush on whom is heightened on social media. Females are more likely to be relationally aggressive as opposed to boys exerting it physically.

Teens are especially sensitive to social rejection. The brain interprets such rejection in similar ways to physical pain. The emphasis on perfect selfies has amplified body image issues for girls, who often chase likes by taking hundreds of pictures. This is one contributor why along with self-harm, eating disorders are a category of mental illness that have clearly risen in the past two decades. Instagram in particular has been linked to a prestige economy of likes and looks.

Today's teenagers delay many of their life events as compared to most recent generations including Generation X and Boomers. They have fewer dates, have their first sexual encounters at a later age, are less likely to drink alcohol but more likely to smoke marijuana. The marijuana component is consistent with their views on safety because they erroneously consider it relatively harmless.

They are less likely to get their license when they turn the appropriate age, sixteen in America and seventeen in most Australian states. They are more likely to be safer drivers. They have fewer accidents and speeding tickets. This also overlaps from findings in US studies that they are less likely to simply drive around aimlessly for fun, a staple of past youth rebellion depicted in countless popular movies.

Their peak experiences, those that are most memorable in their late teens, are less likely to happen away from their parents. This could partly because driven by the changing nature of parental relationships, and the rise of 'helicopter parenting' and 'the bank of mum and dad.'

Couples are less likely to have kids, and when they do are they far more likely than in the past to have only one or two of them. Far more resources, time, attention, and emotional effort can be spent 'per child' than in the past. Children stay at home longer and are less likely to 'cut the cord' than in the past, with it now being commonplace for mum and dad to help out in areas such as attaining a mortgage. A part of this is financial, with more disposable income and higher house prices creating an environment where it is attractive for kids to ask for money. But a part of it is also the failure to teach basic financial literacy skills, along with the reduced ability of many young adults to defer gratification and to settle for something that might not be their first preference.

When it comes to relationships, there appears to be a belief one needs to be well set up before embarking on a serious relationship. The term 'catching feelings' is one to depict the potential threat of forming close bonds when circling in the orbit of intimacy.

This is at odds with the belief that there is value in growing together as a couple, being moulded through critical life periods and shared memories. I remember a proverb along the lines of 'Better to marry a man with an apple in the hand than one with house and land' reflecting this view. But the focus on being adequately established before embarking on serious commitment is consistent with iGen's view that a happy marriage and satisfying family life are not necessarily more important than striving for success.

iGen'ers are more focused on getting a better job and less focused on getting a broad education. Money is in and meaning is out, at odds with a current business fad that believes purpose and meaning, sometimes encapsulated by the term workism, is the animating feature of millennials.

Entering university students are more likely to say it's important to become well off financially. Not only are different ideas potentially upsetting and thus unsafe, but there's no point in studying them because getting a good job is much more important. According to Twenge this 'consumer mentality' of students arrived some time ago, during the GenX 1990s, but when iGen'ers combine it with their interest in safety, it ratchets up another notch.

The delaying of relationships may also be linked to a changed dating market driven by online hook up culture, a situation that makes it easier to think of romantic partners as abundant commodities. An amusing study found that the average college casual romance involves the woman having had four drinks and the men six. Prior to greater online hooking up it might have been easier for those who weren't conventionally attractive to meet and form relationships. For males, there appears to a minority for whom accessing pornography is enough.

As one would expect, their views around sexuality are much more tolerant around homosexuality and the 'fluidity' of gender. This notion of fluidity even stretches to concepts of neurodiversity, often used among autism sufferers. This has implications for disability policy given a significant part of the blowout in Australian NDIS payments relates to the ever-growing diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders.

Never Coming of Age

It can be easy to blame technology for the problems of youth mental health, but this would be a simplification. The smartphone represents the apex of delivering information through the exploitation of our lizard brain, namely the co-opting of our biological vulnerabilities by consumer products. This feature is known as evolutionary mismatch, much like how our taste buds evolved in a time of calorie scarcity.

If we consider our brain simplistically as three regions, along the lines of what legendary neuroscientist Paul Mclean called the triune, it can be informative regarding the unique challenges of the smartphone era.

The bottom layer composed of the basal ganglia and the forebrain was seen as a throwback to reptiles, responsible for 'species-typical behaviours' which arise in aggression, dominance, territoriality and ritual displays. It is also where our fear centres are, located in the amygdala.

Other layers include the limbic system known for regulating our emotional centres. It is sometimes known as the area important for socialising and bonding. As a result the region is more prominent among mammalian brains in general. The final top layer is the cortex responsible for rationality. This is bigger in humans than in any other primate.

The structure of the brain illustrates the genius of political philosophers like David Hume long before brain imaging was possible. Hume's famous quote that 'reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions' is confirmed when we consider the structure of the brain. Our centres of reason are always battling and attempting to moderate our primitive instincts. Freud described this tension as the rider and the elephant, where the elephant was the symbol of our unconscious.

The flip side of technology is that our ability to further exploit our reptilian natures, the part of our brain lurking underneath a sophisticated but fragile layer of rationality, has never been greater. This is especially true online through the feedback loop of algorithms and human actors. The history of consumerism is a greater sophistication of co-opting our primitive psychology towards the usage of goods and services. Fatty food, internet pornography and illicit drugs all prosper from sparking the same neural pleasure pathways. Social media and technology takes this to another level by exploiting our insecurities about status, connection and belonging in any hierarchy.

This is why the implications of the 1972 Stanford marshmallow experiment have only become more important. In the study of instant gratification conducted by Professor Walter Mischel, a child was offered to have a marshmallow immediately, or if they waited a period of time, they could have two comparable rewards. When the same children in the study were followed up years later those who were able to wait performed better in measures of education, work and relationships.

This teaching of impulse control and its associated task of being able to self soothe when one does not receive what they want is one of the most important tasks of early parenting, along with healthy attachment. Attachment is the formation of a trusting bond with the primary caregiver, usually the mother, which then sets up a mental model informing future relationships.

Individual self-control, hard work and a willingness to delay gratification may have been a puritanical norm for our parents but is increasingly lacking for many of our children. A significant contributor to social and income inequalities are the variations in psychological frailties.

Nobel Laureate and economist James Hickman argued there is too much focus on end outcomes in inequality debates leading to a complete focus on economic redistribution, when pre-distribution in the form of public policy to help level positive character traits should occur in parallel.

What was once called character has increasingly been replaced with the term personality, one that is more medical than moral in this connotation. This may dilute the emphasis needed in cultivating such traits.

The most effective period for investments in both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are the early years. We are the most malleable, flexible and able to be imprinted by parents and culture. Cognitive skills tend to be solidified before adolescence which is why interventions in character skills have more chance at success in the teenage years.

When the early tasks of parenting are disrupted the child is left with vulnerabilities that become more exposed in latter stages of life, especially during adolescence. The teen years are when children are expected to separate psychologically from parents. They develop an identity and firmer sense of self. They do so through experimentation with friendships and interactions with their peer group. This is also the period when teens are most sensitive to peer rejection or negative scrutiny by others.

If you grew up in a violent early household for example, you are more likely to show an intensified biological response to stress. This can manifest in misinterpreting feedback as unfair criticism or becoming paranoid that someone not texting you back is proof of betrayal or rejection. Such children have greater difficulty tolerating frustration or feel negatively evaluated by others. They are forever prepared for continuing adversity. The same kids allocate greater emotional and cognitive resources to threat vigilance, instead of exploration and learning. There is an undermining of resilience when early adversity contributes to greater reactivity to challenging or difficult events.

When faced with the pressure of completing tasks like examinations or assignments, they can feel overwhelmed. This is a common way kids present thinking they suffer attention deficit when the origins of their problems are related to heightened anxiety and its concomitant effects upon their concentration.

The importance of these vulnerabilities are such that the children who have greater difficulty in overcoming the tasks of adolescence mediated through the social realm are much more likely to fall back on technology as a safety valve. If I struggle to sustain friendships in the physical world, the control and intermittent social contact I have in the video game is even more prized, so much so that there is almost nowhere else I'd rather be. Likewise if I am extra sensitive to feeling threatened or rejected, the banter on phones varying from not being tagged on a social media post or missing a text message presents a greater risk of inciting feelings of rejection.

If, as the statistics suggest, there are growing failures in raising children with adequate skills in delaying gratification and forming healthy social bonds, part of the focus must fall on the modern family. The parenting does not have to be perfect. British paediatrician Donald Winnicott coined the term 'good enough mother' in the 1950s to describe the appropriate and sensitive response of mothers to their babies as being critical for a child to transition to a more autonomous position.

It is in the early childhood years the most important brain development takes place. This is also the period when good parenting is most critical. The vast majority of problems that teenagers present to mental health services with have their origins in these initial few years. The problems may be stressful, conflict-ridden families or detached, withdrawn care givers. In such cases it is often the mothers themselves who have a history of mental illness. A growing body of evidence from neuroscientists shows that experiencing your early years in a poor, stressful environment limits the development of the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for emotional self-regulation.

The greatest buffers to early life difficulties, including poverty, are good parenting and a strong civic society.

Unfortunately, all the measures of civic life have been in steady decline in recent decades, as widely documented among social scientists. In Australia barely fifteen percent of workers are members of unions. Church attendance has dropped dramatically, especially among educated Anglo-Saxon groups. The bulk of active churches in urban centres are dominated by ethnic groups. It is only the evangelical sections of Christian churches that have recorded growth.

In Federal Labour MP Andrew Leigh's book 'Disconnected' he outlines since the mid-1980s the number of people who said they lacked a confidant or someone to turn to in crisis had almost doubled from eleven to eighteen percent. We know we're less likely to know our neighbours.

Social scientist Marc Dunkelman writes in *The Vanishing Neighbour* that in western societies we spend more time in the inner most rings of our social universe such as our immediate family. We also congregate with what he calls the outermost rings such as those with a common hobby. The arena where there has been the biggest drop in contact is the middle ring such as neighbours, the people who are familiar but not intimate.

Studies on this topic suggest a woman with a child is among the biggest predictors of whether a household interacts with the neighbours. There is no question Australians are very generous with regards to donating or volunteering. The huge giving during the bushfire crisis was a case in point. But there is also evidence we are more likely to do this in a low commitment way. Leigh highlights research by Robert Putnam that seems to suggest social media is more like a television than the more active telephone.

It makes perfect sense what we shout from the rooftops for stronger civic connection. This view would be bipartisan. The author and cricket journalist Gideon Haigh says in Australia a core part of collective organisation comes from sporting groups, a key place where people of all classes and geography intermingle. The peer pressure of tightly knit sporting teams can be a strong positive factor in building character. More modern forms of collective organisation may benefit from being fostered beyond traditional churches and unions.

Another way of considering the terminology to discuss may be the culture of a local community. Stuart Butler argues that when academics like Charles Murray use the term virtues, he is misrepresented as blaming poor people. A better term may be the culture of a neighbourhood and how it plays a role in character development. By culture Butler refers to the prevailing social norms, influential networks and the behaviours expected by one's family and friends. The term connotes to the mix of influences in a neighbourhood that shape personalities and modify life's trajectories. If the dominant social culture undervalues education and a work ethic it can serve to condemn people with innate potential to a low achievement.

When looking at the behaviour of teens in groups an important trend is the limited attachment to any kind of institutions. Studies by Pew Research Centre in the mid-2010s found one in three millennials claimed no religious affiliation, much higher than the one in ten Americans who claimed non-religious. The figure is even higher in Australia according to figures from the 2016 Census, which found almost half of all teens declared no religious affiliation. However of this group, almost a half did view themselves as having an affinity for spirituality whereas almost a fifth saw themselves as 'this worldly', a synonym for not believing in anything beyond the material.

Even religious teens subscribe to a more individualistic brand of faith such as Pentecostalism or identity Islam. This may be a pointer to why evangelical groups have been the more successful amid a broader decline in active Christian practice.

While religious affiliation has been in decline for several decades what is unique about the smartphone generation is that they are also less likely to say they are spiritual, pray less and have reduced beliefs in a higher power or afterlife. One factor is that many Millennials and iGen'ers distrust religion because they believe it promotes socially regressive attitudes.

They are more likely to join online communities of interest. This is also how they might express themselves politically, such as changing their Facebook title page or retweeting hashtags. They are less likely to email their local MP or join a protest.

However this trend overlaps with a greater demoralisation about whether they will be able to succeed or influence the environment around them beyond their own actions, what psychologists call an external locus of control.

In this respect, the notion of a neighbourhood or local culture may be irrelevant for the average teen given their world would oscillate between immediate family, school and online interactions. The locality is relevant only in that it contributes to the environment of the local school. It was Margaret Thatcher who famously said there was no such thing as society. For teens, this analogy could be expressed as there is no such thing as a physical neighbourhood.

Beyond civic associations and group identity, it is impossible not to consider to what extent the institution of family is coping with the onslaught by modern technology upon the vulnerabilities of the teen brain. As teen researcher Jay Giedd states: 'These Stone Age tendencies are now interacting with modern marvels and can sometimes not just be amusing anecdotes, but can really lead to more lasting effects.'

There has been a historical shift in the family unit from larger, extended, multi-generational units to smaller detached groupings. This was illustrated during the pandemic with the ethnic groups who retain more traditional family units most affected by viral spread. During the pandemic strong ties to family, clan and tradition were a distinct disadvantage. Our growing multiculturalism is a break on smaller families, as newer arrivals are more likely to live in larger, multi-generational households.

The trends of younger people living a slower, safer life have led to some stabilisation in multi-generational households in the past decade. There is also the chosen family movement, initially applicable to those of different sexual orientations but an affiliation that can have resonance with other kinship networks among ethnic groups and working class. Modern adolescents live within a social world more diverse than their parents' in every respect, and more filled with nontraditional family arrangements.

But for the most part, families have steadily moved to a design that can help maximise opportunities for individual fulfilment. Marriage was previously a public institution linked to raising children and binding oneself to a community. It is now redefined as a vessel for mutual fulfilment.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks writes about the nuclear family: 'While social conservatives have a philosophy of family they can't operationalise, because it is no longer relevant, progressives have no philosophy of family life at all, because they don't want to seem judgemental.'

People spend less and less time in marriage, marrying later, if at all. In 1960 72 percent of American were married. In 2017 nearly half of American adults were single. From 1970 to 2012, the share of household comprising married couples with children has been halved. In US date, just 13 percent households were single person in 1960, whereas in 2018 the figure was 28 percent. Only 18 percent of those aged over 65 live with relatives compared to 75 percent in 1850.

When we look at Australian trends, there has been a parallel increase in cohabitation. It was six percent of Australian couples in 1986, 12 percent in 2001 and 18 percent in 2016. 81 percent of couples cohabited before marriage in 2018, whereas only sixteen percent did in 1976. Average household size in Australia has dropped from 4.5 to 2.6 between 1911 and 2016. There are more older couples, many more people living alone and fewer families with dependent children.

In 2001 the crude marriage rate reached its lowest recorded figure of 5.3 marriages per 1000, while Australia's fertility rate also reached its lowest recorded level in 2020 of 1.58 babies per woman. Meanwhile divorce was its highest peak since no fault divorces were legislated in 1976. While this may have been interpreted as a crisis in the family, marriages and birth rates increased in the first decade of the twenty first century. Whether or not Peter Costello had anything to do with it, in 2010 Australia recorded the highest number of marriages in its history. The first quarter of this decade shows something of a stabilisation of the family, albeit with a greater variety, but this does not illustrate the socio-economic varieties.

Family types vary across socio-economic lines. One of the foremost local researchers on the question of family and socio-economics is New Zealander Professor Ian Pool. He uses educational attainment as a reasonable predictor of social class.

Marriage rates have continued their long-term decline in those without any post high school qualifications. Australia and New Zealand have exhibited similar patterns, a characteristic that Pool describes as problematic given our self-image as being more egalitarian. Those with tertiary qualification will delay marriage into their 30s and even forties. While cohabitation rates have steadily increased, they have increased at similar rates across social class. Women with tertiary qualifications are less likely to divorce. If they do, they are less likely to re-marry, reflecting the younger ages childbirth may occur among lower socio-economic groups.

Men with no post-school qualifications are less likely to marry at every age. This is a broader trend of unskilled or low skilled men in a globalised post-industrial context reflecting a decline in blue collar work. For women those with an intermediate level of post-school education such as a diploma or vocational training were most likely to be married. When childbearing starts early and is sustained for longer, opportunities for educational and career advancement are fewer. Socio-economic marriage differentials may be viewed as a manifestation of labour market polarisation.

The growing class dimension predicting marital status is linked to a cultural shift attached to the institution of marriage. In the 1970s and 80s, it was educated men and women leading a shift away from marriage, whereas the 'symbolic value' of marriage has increased. Marriage is a greater marker than ever of economic security, status and relationship success.

Men and women from lower socio-economic groups both less likely to marry but, if they do, more likely to divorce. The women in these groups still as a rule have more children and do so easier. As a result they are far more likely to be lone parents.

While lone parents are most commonly formed after separation or divorce, a growing portion have never married. This group have usually been in a de facto relationship which has a greater chance of breakdown. Two thirds of lone parent families rely principally on government transfer payments as their major source of income. They are more likely to be renting or live in social housing. The proportion of lone parent families have been largely stable over the past decade. While more research is required there is little sign of upward mobility from lone parent families.

There is a much greater gap between family structures of the rich and poor. Over eighty percent of children in the highest socio-economic groups live with both biological parents. A tertiary educated woman has almost double the chance of staying married for twenty years or more as compared to someone with only a high school completion. In the United States economist Isabel Sawhill in her book Generation Unbound found differences in family structure have 'increased income inequality by 25 percent.'

The cycle perpetuates itself. Children in disrupted families are less likely to complete quality education. Their lack of employable skills then leads to ongoing financial insecurities undermining their abilities to be an adequate provider. The children from those families are more likely to follow down the same path. Repeated parental partnerships are especially disruptive for children. Almost a fifth of Australian children live in three parental partnerships before the age of fifteen.

Social norms work in parallel to government rules and regulations, and often supersede them, establishing standards of behaviour to which people conform. The pandemic was a great example of this. The punishment for non-conformity can be a fine, but the social stigma is usually more feared and damaging. The economist James Duesenberry said economics is all about how people make choices and sociology studies why they don't have any choices to make.

Sawhill outlines the more haphazard way those from lower socio-economic groups form families and bear children. She illustrates their more fatalistic attitudes cannot be explained by a purely economic argument. While Sawhill doesn't advocate illegitimacy returning as a source of stigma she does advocate a broader norm of 'don't have a child until you and your partner are ready to be parents.' Her work starkly underlines how attributes of being self-directed, future oriented and willing to control impulses are not evenly distributed.

We are searching for an effective paradigm of family life. Progressives often make attempts to underplay the importance of biology across a whole range of issues, family being one of them. All the markers point to the superiority of biological male and female parents raising children. But it also appears this model is not stable beyond the middle classes. The tension is whether it's because economic tensions strain the ability of working-class families to sustain kinship ties under one household. The concerns of poor parents may be inextricably linked to the daily pressures to feed and house themselves and their children, but this is unlikely to explain the differences in social mobility.

Parenting is also more challenging in some respects. Children used to be useful but are now protected. Before they were teenagers they worked the fields, helped in mills and mines or cared for their siblings. From the moment of birth, people were enmeshed in a complex web of obligations and formal roles. Throughout their lives they were expected to follow scripts that helped fulfill them. Now the primary role of parents is to cultivate their children. As Jennifer Senior outlines in her book 'All Joy And No Fun', no longer are parents custodians of old traditions but are instead required to invent new ones.

This has also meant the cushioning of vulnerable people that stable families and clans used to provide has largely been outsourced to the state. The modern family has to a large extent suited higher socio-economic groups but ravaged the poor and disadvantaged. There is no shortage of literature in relation to family breakdown, but my purpose is to question whether the modern family is proving successful in providing the necessary bulwark to the corrosive effects of technology. The class dimension of youth mental health is not clear cut, but clinically those presenting with self harm or other mental health problems are overwhelmingly more likely to have had a disrupted upbringing.

The purpose of schools is always fiercely debated. Whether it be controversies like transgender philosophies cloaked in an anti-bullying campaign or the re-appraisal of Aborigines as nomadic hunter-gatherers, it is appropriately one of the hottest sites of the culture wars. One of the primary aims is the project of socialisation where one generation transmits a set of values to another. This is more confused when there are fewer shared values to transmit.

Mental health is no exception. Schools and the teachers administering them have been forced to take a larger role in the emotional wellbeing of students. It is unavoidable given the behavioural disturbance, school refusal or self-harm among kids has direct overlaps with the delivery of education. Unwell children cannot be good learners.

Former NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli from the Gonski centre at the University of New South Wales says that over the past twenty years wellbeing has become a parallel priority for schools in line with educating the basics of numeracy and language. All schools now have school counsellors and teachers in charge of wellbeing. Pastoral care is a major priority. For the most part this is welcome and mirrors the wider focus on emotional fulfilment as being a priority. But critics are right to question whether happiness should be an aim of education.

Educational psychologist Professor Donna Cross of the University of Western Australia argues that as other sites of community and character formation have declined, schools have acquired more pressures to rectify the fragmentation. Teachers have increasingly been forced to become unofficial parents of some children from broken families, especially in lower socio-economic areas.

The amoral theories of positive psychology have taken on more prominence with limited effectiveness. This has its origins after a visit from renowned psychologist Martin Seligman to Geelong Grammar a decade ago.

Schools are being asked to do more of what families may have done in the past, something that is occurring across class divides. Cross relates some of her travels overseas to study other educational systems and discovered behavioural disturbance among children was far more pronounced in Australia even compared to countries like South Africa and less surprisingly countries like Finland and Singapore.

Cross believes this is related to the much higher authority and status teachers have in other cultures. It is also likely that in countries like Singapore, their educational scores may reflect the fact Confucian cultures cultivate character strengths like self-control and perseverance more intentionally. Cross laments that most behaviourally disturbed kids attend disadvantaged schools which are on average two to three years behind mainstream schools in academic standards, which she sees as one of the biggest failures in the Australian educational system.

There are growing moves for teachers to do more mental health training. A recent funding burst by the NSW government aimed to do just that, encouraging teachers to spot the early signs of serious mental illness. There is a greater therapeutic focus in schools.

There is a marked growth in disability provisions for mental health reasons, something with a clear class distinction. For example, one of the most exclusive schools in the country, SCEGGS Darlinghurst, has almost a quarter of the year on disability provisions, most for some variety of heightened anxiety disorders. A December 2021 Nine newspapers front page report identified that disability provisions were being used overwhelmingly by children in the most elite private schools. The provisions allow for extra time, rest breaks, sometimes teaching assistants and in many cases extra marks as compensation.

In lower socio-economic groups emotional disturbance may be expressed, especially among boys, through bad behaviour, whereas among the middle classes neuroses is more common. The greater medicalisation of middle-class distress, which adds greater legitimacy and even privileges through disability provisions, is widening the education and character divide.

Given temperament and performance under pressure are traditionally markets of character, it could be argued that these attributes are being undermined by the medicalisation of underperformance.

This is also a pointer that despite some of my focus on family structure in lower socio-economic groups, the potential decline in character traits is also growing among the wealthy. This is evidence that affluence can also undercut discipline. In a rich society it can be harder to postpone immediate pleasures for the future. The striving for success in a highly competitive society, one undergirded by ideas of meritocracy and achieved identities, is especially apparent in elite private and selective schools, which can only heighten performance anxieties.

Character, Virtue, and Self-reliance

Educationalist and former teacher Kevin Donnelly believes the decline in the study of the classics in favour of more practical learning means children are less exposed to the grand narratives of our civilisation, be it the importance of Christianity or the sacred quality of individual. An especially important aspect in discussing youth mental health is the paucity in idioms of suffering. Young people have fewer myths to set context to adversity. This may also explain the huge popularity of Harry Potter, a set of stories that is now arguably competitive to the Bible for upcoming generations. But the diminution of resources to make sense of adversity and suffering leaves space for further medicalisation of the human experience.

An aspect of psychologist Jordan Peterson's success is his ability to articulately communicate Biblical stories and Jungian concepts such as universal archetypes. Jung teaches that meaning in life comes not just in 'love and work' as Freud said, but is made intelligible through recurring cultural patterns, namely myths. This became his path not just to better understanding human psychology but also to acquiring peace and harmony. Myths shape our perception and help us contend with the chaos of existence to the protective cloak of responsibility, purpose and self-reliance. In his first book 'Maps of Meaning', Peterson refers to myths as 'the distilled essence of the stories we tell ourselves about the patterns of our behaviour'.

We live in times of great prosperity but lack purpose, at least at higher level. There can be a sterility to modern life as we accumulate ever larger amounts of wealth. A sense of the sacred, metaphysical is largely snuffed out, as is the place of ritual which often connects us to groups or spirituality. Traditional religions have become vestiges of the past and we are not sure how to revive ancient traditions for a modern, polyglot world. For the most part people who feel useful to others and have at least a small number of close relationships remain on kilter, what might be described as having 'projects and intimacy'. Some form of competency is essential for young people. For all the New Age spirituality, life does not have be terribly complicated.

Self-reliance implies a sufficiency that is now linked to both a stigmatised male archetype and a psychic impenetrability. It was American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson who coined the term almost two centuries ago. His writings form the cornerstone of an American brand of rugged individualism, reinventing oneself amid the frontier.

The term has also been picked up within positive psychology and has strong overlaps with resilience, being able to bounce back from adversity. Emerson also referred to having thoughts not dependent on the herd, an ambivalence towards materialism yet still being well connected to good friends and community.

The term resilience has become ubiquitous, used not just in psychology but in fields as disparate as fire rescue to engineering. It has also acquired political sensitivities with critics pointing to its connotation of isolated individualism and the devolving of responsibility for societal problems away from institutions and the state.

The ancient Greek and Roman republics identified a central political task being that of character formation. Classical economists like Adam Smith identified two qualities as those 'most useful to ourselves' in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: '[F]irst of all, superior reason and understanding, by which we are capable of discerning the remote consequences of our actions...and secondly, self-command, by which we are enabled to abstain from present pleasure or to endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure or to avoid a greater pain in some future time. In the union of those two qualities consists the virtue of prudence, of all the virtues that which is most useful to the individual.'

John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were preoccupied with the building of character because they believed being both good and free were essential if liberal democracies were to succeed. 'The most important point of excellence which any government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves' wrote Mill. American political scientist and conservative thinker James Wilson wrote 'For most social problems that deeply trouble us, the need is to explore, carefully and experimentally, ways of strengthening the formation of character among the very young.'

Prudence in particular is essential of financial planning for example. We typically discount the value of a day in the distant future in comparison to the present. Those who do this less are able to put money in a pension or savings account, closely associated with the climb from poverty to comfort. A 2009 Pew study discovered children of low-income parents who were above average savers had a 70 percent chance of moving off the lowest rungs of the income ladder, compared to 50 percent for the rest. The savings here may help in paying for educational expenses for example, but the mere propensity to do so signals the ethic of prudence. If a child's most obvious role models exhibit impulsive behaviours, it is much harder for a child to learn to defer gratification. It was Martin Seligman who said that 'poverty is a state of present mindedness.'

Self-reliance requires, a) a belief in an individual's capacity and agency to shape their own lives and the future, b) a belief that meaning in life is the product of responsibility and an acceptance that suffering is a part of living and not eradicable, c) the ability to defer gratification – there is no 'app' for self-reliance, and d) basic financial and economic literacy skills so that one is empowered to provide for themselves without relying upon government assistance.

Overcoming the loss of self-reliance requires ending the dependency feedback loop of a society which encourages safetyism, gratification from the smart phone, and the avoidance of all risk, which has the effect of creating psychological fragility and an inability to deal with the vagaries and challenges of life, which then creates more demand for even greater 'protections.

This goes against all of the psychological evidence which shows that the only way to overcome fragility and fear is to confront those things which are giving rise to those fears, rather than living in a perpetual safe-space.

The topic of youth mental health, and its apparent crisis, raises the question whether we are raising kids with the right skills to survive and thrive in the modern world. The development of such skills, which may have once been called character, is arguably the central task of any civilised society. Much has been said and written about the challenges of technology. There may well be a place to better regulate aspects of this technology.

British philosopher Avner Offer writes in the Challenge of Affluence that such novelty has never been cheaper and more available. But he also warns that prosperity speeds the flow of this novelty and it is occurring in parallel to the decline of what he calls commitment devices, the scaffolding that families, communities and social stigma used to provide in moderating the ravages of such disruption.

In parallel there are a multiplicity of trends such as positivity, the medicalisation of emotional distress, the disruption of early attachments and the decline of mitigating institutions such as community that have rendered a generation more vulnerable. There also appears to be some fundamental changes how upcoming generations communicate that affect qualities like empathy and the capacity to be tolerate solitude.

But the non-cognitive skills of character, particularly of persistence, prudence and the deferral of gratification are being undermined. In combination with a lesser capacity to make sense of suffering and adversity, future generations are ill equipped to cope with the avalanche of instant gratification vehicles that are perpetually accessible.

Institute of
Public Affairs