

Anxiety and depression: the rise of the twentysomething life crisis



Kat Brown, now 32, has finally conquered her demons Amit Lennon

Louise Chunn

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Anxiety and depression are affecting more young people than ever. According to a study by the Office for National Statistics, one in five 16 to 24-year-olds suffers psychological problems, while at British universities the demand for counselling services has gone up by about a third in the four years to 2013. To the surprise of many, the twentysomething age group is nearing the rates of anxiety and depression seen in early middle age, when a dip in mental health is to be expected. But during the “freedom years” of late adolescence and early adulthood? Whatever happened to the “best time of your life”?

There are a number of reasons why this might be happening now. Social media, so popular among this age group, can — along with all the sharing, liking, crazy pets, and never-ending selfies — make people feel inferior compared with their friends and peers. Many develop perfectionist tendencies, so if they fall short of the ideal achieved by everybody else (which, of course, is not true) they pile on the self-recrimination.

Where once parents largely stood back and let their young fly the nest at about the age of 18, these days parents and their over-18s stay far closer, with grown-up children often not becoming fully independent until their mid-to-late twenties. In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett, the American psychologist, controversially coined the term “emerging adulthood” to describe the period between the ages of 18 and 25 when adolescents slowly become more independent and explore various life possibilities, rather than being expected simply to “grow up”.

Critics say that this new demographic is disempowered, has problems with identity and an inability to look beyond their own needs. Alan Percy, the head of counselling at the University of Oxford, says: “Changed parenting styles may lead to closer and more positive relationships between parents and young adults, but they also give mixed messages. This sort of behaviour can make them feel more anxious about separating from their parents and facing the challenges and risks of the outside world.” He also believes that reliance on parents can make some young adults feel resentful and angry, as it highlights the fact that they have so little power over their lives.

It’s not just that young people now rarely marry young, live independently, and start families before 25. Our understanding of adolescence has changed in recent years, as advances in neuroscience show us that the teen brain doesn’t magically mature at 18. Brain development doesn’t cease until well into the twenties, much later than we had believed. Then there is the changed economic world into which this generation is being launched. University fees make them much more conscious of the need to earn a living but, in the meantime, the recession is clear in their memories. They don’t want simply to find a job but to get one that pays as well as, or more than, that of their peers (they share such details with each other), which is worthwhile not boring, and uses all their talents. In other words, their expectations are fairly unrealistic.

Young women were more likely than young men to be showing signs of distress, according to many sources. Eating disorders and self-harm are increasing; women’s self-esteem is under attack, as they compare their shapes and faces with digitally enhanced celebrities and their relationships with each other. However in the 20 to 24 age group, men are four times more likely than women to kill themselves, and suicide is the most common cause of death among men under 35. This week, Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister, announced a “zero suicide” ambition for the NHS, urging mental health services to provide better support to suicidal patients.

There is, however, a long road between feeling anxious about relationships or depressed about finding the perfect job, and ending your life. Many of the things that could improve a young person’s view of the world are simple lifestyle changes, such as these:

Be less sedentary

Being young and depressed can leave you not wanting to get out of bed in the morning. Getting to the gym, running, even going for a bike ride or a long walk, can all help with mental health too.

Endorphins released by exercise are sometimes described as the brain’s feelgood chemicals. Scientists are also intrigued by recent research at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, which found that physical activity purges the blood of a substance which accumulates during stress and can be harmful to the brain. As one of the researchers put it, “The well-trained muscle function is reminiscent of that of the kidney or the liver.” In other words, exercise detoxes harmful chemicals from the body and that can alleviate depression.

Don't skimp on sleep

For depression and anxiety, a simple response is to try to get some sleep. Young people often see sleep as a waste of time; what will they miss out on? Yet they are still at the stage of needing solid amounts of sleep: about nine hours is recommended for teens and young adults, and neuroscientists believe that teens run on a different circadian rhythm to older people, getting tired later but needing no less sleep.

Depression can cause insomnia but not getting enough sleep can also exacerbate low moods. To get to sleep you need to be somewhere quiet, dark and relatively warm, but also, don't take your devices: the latest research shows that back-lit reading makes it harder to fall asleep and affects daily rhythms of alertness. Just a few early nights can transform your negative view of the world.

Don't overuse social media

Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, is a powerful force for young people: it keeps them in touch with friends, spreads their networks and can expand their knowledge and experience.

But it can also stir up envy and paranoia and harm self-esteem. A study of 960 college students published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* has shown how Facebook can affect women's body image. "In examining the immediate consequences of Facebook use, we found that 20 minutes of use contributed to higher weight and shape concerns and anxiety compared to a control internet condition," it noted.

There is much academic debate over whether social media or even the internet is damaging to young minds: the truth is we don't know. But many psychologists will urge people to limit the screen time of their children, as it can become addictive. This is just as true of young adults, who check their phone, on average, 150 times per day.

As Percy says: "Despite being more connected in a virtual way [by social media], many students feel more isolated, as they believe they have to present a perfect image to others."

Make friends in the real world

A young person will be more true to themselves when they are physically present. As the psychologist Carl Pickhardt says, "An adolescent's internet identity is carefully crafted . . . to define self, publicise personal image, enhance social standing and attract attention, particularly of peers." When we are forced to be spontaneous, our true self is more evident but that can bring its own anxiety. As the psychotherapist Philippa Perry says, "In the long run, covering up your true self — knowing what to say and how to be with others — can seem so hard that it feels easier to be lonely than taking the risk of rejection. If we feel lonely and always keep part of ourselves hidden it may feel that at least that vulnerable part is safe."

Moderate your drinking

Self-medicating with alcohol may seem like it would help — or at least give you a break from your low moods or anxious thoughts. But alcohol is a depressant. Moderation is the key when it comes to alcohol and emotional problems, otherwise the hangover can be more than a headache, with days of low mood, even self-loathing. It's a similar story with recreational drugs: if they are feeling low or anxious, many young people feel that drugs such as Ecstasy, cocaine or amphetamines may lighten the load.

But the after-effects of the drugs can often lead to low moods or increased anxiety, ratcheting up the original reason for taking them. Most people who work in this area are definite about this: stay away from recreational drugs, particularly if you are suffering from depression or anxiety.

Avoid stimulants

Food is also important. People with anxiety are advised to avoid coffee, tea, cola, chocolate, anything stimulating. Aim to get closer to a Mediterranean diet, eating plenty of fruit, vegetables, protein and complex carbohydrates with nuts and olive oil rather than refined sugars, saturated fats and processed ready meals.

Make plans for your future

It may feel as if life is happening to you, but not having full autonomy doesn't mean you shouldn't be making plans. Ignore the empty brags of others, and try not to be sucked into relating everything to time — catastrophising because it's six months since your last exam, job interview, whatever. What matters is what is happening now.

The independent careers counsellor Dr Anne Wilson says graduates need to stop fruitlessly fretting and get organised. Challenge your assumptions about what kind of job you want by asking difficult questions: are these my own intentions or aspirations, or those that come from someone else; what is really important to me in a job? (money/ status/doing good/leaving time for other interests).

Practise mindfulness

They won't appeal to everyone but mindfulness techniques can help with many of the issues that drag young people down. There are numerous books (*Mindfulness* by Gill Hasson is bite-sized and practical; Jon Kabat-Zinn writes more about the philosophical basis of meditation), as well as popular apps such as Headspace and 7 Steps of Calm.

The principles behind it are particularly applicable to the way that many young people think. Rather than regretting the past or worrying about the future, you are encouraged to live in the moment, which has a calming, positive effect.

Seek professional help

As Becky Varley-Winter, a recent graduate now teaching at Cambridge University, wrote on my wellbeing site welldoing.org, if you feel overwhelmed by anxious feelings or low moods, “Talk to someone. Everyone will struggle at some point, even if they sail through university on clouds of joy. If you’re suffering, do not feel ashamed. Speak to yourself as if you are a tiny, wounded bird that you are nursing back to health.”

If you’re a student, go to the counselling service; if not, start with a conversation with your GP. You may be able to see a therapist on the NHS, though the wait is often long and the choice (largely cognitive behavioural therapy) is limited. If you decide to go private, some therapists and counsellors offer concessions.

If they can’t help you, they can direct you towards people who can. Crucially, don’t feel that no one cares but remember, you need to let them know you are in need.

Louise Chunn is founder of welldoing.org, a find-a-therapist directory and wellbeing site

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9 comments

 **Andrew Anthony**

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Lawrence

January 27, 2015 02:49

For what it’s worth, I’m in my twenties and have an undergraduate degree from a university which ranks among the top twenty worldwide, and am in the process of getting a postgraduate degree from a similarly ranked university. As a student, I’ve had to live with strangers in mouldy, rat-infested houses, in areas where few speak English and there’s very little sense of belonging. This might be tolerable if I thought it would lead to something better, but I don’t. Not one of the many organisations I’ve applied to has been willing to even offer me an unpaid internship, so it’s difficult to see how I can even begin to forge anything resembling a career. In reality, I’ll probably find myself working in a position that could be filled by someone straight out of school. As for relationships, they’re merely a fantasy. If there are any women my age who aren’t either entirely disinterested in commitment, or who haven’t already been swept up by older men who can offer greater security (money) than those my age, then I’m yet to meet any of them. The standard of living which my parents enjoy seems utterly unobtainable, and I’m increasingly inclined to give up hoping to ever match it.

hellolucky

January 27, 2015 13:56

@Lawrence What degree did you study? I studied Physics at a university ranked in the top 5 worldwide and now, coming up to three years after graduation, the vast majority (I'd say the figure sits comfortably around 90%) of the students on my course are either doing a funded PhD or have a graduate level job.

As horrible as it sounds, arts degrees are almost a waste of time in the job market these days. Yes if you study an arts subject at Oxbridge or somewhere equivalent the story is different, but other than that you'd be better off studying a STEM subject.

3  Recommend Reply**Lawrence**

January 27, 2015 16:24

@hellolucky @Lawrence Alas, it was an art's degree. I'm now studying law at one of the ancient universities, albeit not a law degree which would qualify me to become a solicitor or an advocate, due to the prohibitive cost of pursuing such a career. I would have studied a STEM subject if only I hadn't gone to a school where learning a 'proper' subject was made almost impossible by other pupils. Congratulations of all your success.

1  Recommend Reply**hellolucky**

January 27, 2015 17:13

@Lawrence @hellolucky Thank you - very decent of you to say so after my degree bashing. Two things:

1. Careers advice in this country is shockingly poor. It's generally 'what do you like/what are you good at' which isn't, frankly, what our children need to be told
2. Law is outrageously expensive to get into, which is a shame when we happily subsidize medicine, engineering etc. A friend studied a law course perhaps similar to yours and now can only pursue being a solicitor because he was left a generous inheritance by his grandfather.

Best of luck with your degree/legal life!

Recommend Reply

Tim Greening-Jackson

January 27, 2015 21:48

@Lawrence @hellolucky I'm afraid pursuing a law degree these days - unless you have family connections that can get you a pupillage or other position - is just as big a waste of money as an arts degree (there was an

excellent discussion of this on R4's Law In Action about a year ago). It's a tough old world out there at the moment, I'm afraid.

But trust me it does improve. When you first start out as a fresh graduate your degree is the only effective way that an employer can screen a large number of candidates. However, you will eventually find something and hopefully shine at it, at which point you are judged on your ability and track-record not the degree you hold.

One other point is I didn't find what I was good at until I was in my 30s, You will (hopefully) eventually find something that you enjoy and are good at. Good luck with your search.

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Misabel

January 27, 2015 20:57

This is going to sound trite but hang in there. I graduated from a fantastic, enjoyable but ultimately wholly useless arts degree (at a low-rated ex-Poly) and promptly spent the next 18 months on the dole. As did all my friends. I spent another few years in extremely low-paid, low security jobs before earning anything like a liveable wage. I distinctly remember feeling utterly disenfranchised and devoid of any confidence in the future for long periods of time. But the experience does start to add up eventually, and you'll likely find that as time goes on you do better, go further, get promotions and opportunities that your school leaver colleagues at this stage ultimately don't keep up with. That's certainly been my experience. Wishing you all the best.

2  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

christine warburton

January 27, 2015 22:16

@Lawrence Please say strong Lawrence! It is difficult for young people starting out in such a challenging world, but the impression that everyone else has a fabulous life with a wonderful job/girlfriend/whatever is so damaging and totally wrong.

The standard of living your parents enjoy probably wasn't their standard of living at your age. When I graduated I was so broke I couldn't buy any new clothes for two years - despite having two jobs - and every night out consisted of taking my drink with me (haha). But things do change. My very hard-learned advice is to make the a virtue of being young and an asset of the fact that you don't have the job/mortgage and commitments. Travel, make new friends, and enjoy this time that you have now, because you are obviously a genuine, intelligent, articulate guy, all the other stuff will come soon enough. When you're older (like me!) you'll

look back and wonder why you worried so much and why you didn't just work your main asset (your youth) for all it's worth! Good luck

(PS- the tip in the article about exercise is a good one).

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

hapax legomenon

January 26, 2015 23:18

People in the age range 18-30 have very good reasons for anxiety and depression. Traditional social, intellectual and religious structures are in meltdown. The cost of higher education is crippling. Jobs, let alone interesting jobs, are extremely hard to come by. Property ownership is increasingly out of the reach of people on ordinary salaries, or even those in relatively well-paid jobs. Materialist manipulation in the media, particularly through the sinister cult of advertising and celebrity, undermines human relationships, public virtue, social responsibility and personal happiness. It is no wonder that so many young people are desperate since these are the fruits of dechristianisation and associated civilisational collapse.

2  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Laura Giles

January 25, 2015 18:07

Mid-20's mental health crises is definitely a phenomenon I and others I know have experienced. I don't think social media was a factor for any of us, though I can absolutely understand how it could be for others.

There are several plausible reasons listed above and I'd also mention that the effects on self-worth and feelings of security that the growing expectation that young professionals (certainly within my profession and I know it's happening increasingly in others) undergo several years working temporary contracts before they can hope to land a full time, permanent role shouldn't be underestimated. Never being able to say with any degree of certainty where you're going to be in 6 months can be extraordinarily dispiriting and can seriously affect personal relationships - not to mention make even renting accommodation a difficult process. Being willing to "get on your bike" has its benefits for a while but there comes a time when you start to want to put down roots. Whilst I am OK now, having sought professional help and made changes to my lifestyle (most of which are listed above so definitely take Chunn's advice if you're struggling to cope!) there were times when I was utterly overwhelmed by the unknown that was my near future.

Perhaps this has always been the case for young people to some degree, but certainly if I look at older members of my own family and their circle of friends it seems like they all got jobs in their early 20s which they were able to stick at for as long as they wanted (some rising through the same organisation until retirement!) or to leave on their own terms - which has not been my, or many of my friends', experience.

Livifyre

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