

**We need to let unhappy children know they are not alone, writes Archbishop Justin Welby in the Guardian.**



It feels like something is beginning to shift. It was noticeable during the past few days as we marked World Mental Health Day and many of us shared our stories. The **Britain's Got Talent final was paused for a minute** and viewers were asked to talk to each other about their mental health.

Interrupting primetime Saturday night TV to think about mental health would have been unthinkable only a generation ago. Only recently has mental health been seen on a par with physical health. Yet, in the UK, **one in eight children and young people** are affected by mental health problems. During the Britain's Got Talent final, we were told there has been a 48% rise in anxiety and depression among British children in the past 15 years.

According to the **Children's Society**, almost a quarter of a million 10- to 15-year-olds are unhappy with their lives. They report children's happiness with life is at its lowest in a decade. From my own experience, and as a parent whose daughter has spoken eloquently about her depression, I know all too well the pain sufferers can feel, and the effect it can have on their family and those around them.

We, as a society, need to make an effort to understand the issues children and young people face. We need to start by listening to children and young people when they tell us about these issues, when they talk about the pressures on body image, their fears about crime and safety, and the stress of social media and worries about climate change. The bishop of Gloucester has led an **admirable campaign** on body image among young people. It's been a brilliant start, but more needs to be done.

In situations where children are affected by mental health issues, swift and early intervention and proper access to support and services can make all the difference. One of the things preventing children getting help is stigma. Although we have gone some way to breaking down the stigma around mental health, there is a long way to go, particularly with conditions where symptoms are perceived to be "frightening". Things have changed, but those suffering from mental illness can still feel ostracised, judged and misunderstood.

In the New Testament Jesus performs miracles, some of which involve healing. However, these miracles are about far more than just fixing symptoms. In meeting Christ, people are healed, yes, but they are also accepted. They are known and loved before God. Jesus not only heals people, but ensures that, as a result, they can be reintegrated into their community.

Exclusion is turned into inclusion. Fear becomes love and mercy. The darkness is brought into the light. Those who suffer are welcomed into society, taking their stories with them, to be witnesses of what the Gospel of John calls “abundant life”. Jesus calls us to a society where all are welcomed and valued, contributions are recognised, lives are transformed and relationships are built.

With 24/7 media and our online personas, there’s a perception that we should always be doing well. **Young people** may feel as if they should always be winning, always coming top of the class, always on exotic holidays with good-looking people. There is an expectation that we should always be happy.

Let’s try being honest about our human experiences and set more realistic expectations for our children’s lives. Let’s acknowledge how we feel when things don’t go our way: those moments we’ve all had when we feel lost or hopeless or alone.

I long for us to break down that isolation, so all children have someone they can talk to when times are hard.

Our children are infinitely important. They matter, and they should feel supported and heard. As a Christian, I wonder: what can we do to be Christ-like in our communities? How do we make sure young people with mental health issues are welcomed into the community, their stories honoured and their feelings and experiences recognised? What can we do so those who are struggling feel seen, accepted and loved? I see organisations like the Children’s Society, local churches, youth clubs, charities, sports clubs and many others working tirelessly across the country to tackle mental health issues. But there is so much more that each of us can do.

It is OK to acknowledge fear and struggle and to be scared. It is OK to ask for help, to deepen relationships of trust with others, to both give and receive compassion, support and understanding. My prayer today is that each child and young person might know they are loved and valued beyond measure. Nothing can change that. I’ve learned that reaching out to talk can be the first step back into the light.

To ensure young people are able to talk to someone, be it a friend, relative or a professional, we’ve all got to step up and be there for each other. We are not alone.

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