

In today's fast paced, frantic and stressful world, we can all find ourselves struggling every now and then when it comes to our mental health. But when it comes to our nation's young people we appear to be in the throes of an epidemic. Today's young minds face a tidal wave of unprecedented new challenges growing up in an age of social media and digital interconnectivity. They face a lifestyle that has become increasingly sedentary and solitary... And have begun to inherit all of the physical, psychological and emotional challenges that such a lifestyle represents. This is combined with increased pressure even from a young age when it comes to exams and assessment and the scary prospect of entering an ever-changing and capricious job market.

It's fair to say, without hyperbole, that we are in the midst of an adolescent mental health crisis. Let's take a look at...

The scope of the problem

The statistics show a worrying decline in the mental health of young people as young as five years of age. A [report](#) last year by NHS digital highlights some worrying statistics;

- Around 12% of young people aged 5-19 was found to have at least one mental disorder when assessed in 2017.
- Emotional disorders have become increasingly common in 5-15 year olds, rising from 4.3% in 1999 to 5.8% in 2017.
- Mental disorders in 5-15 year olds are also on the rise, increasing from 9.7% in 1999 to 11.2% in 2017.

In an age where we are all connected through digital means, it seems like today's youngsters are lonelier than ever. A reliance on digital devices has diminished meaningful social engagement while also making children vulnerable to cyberbullying and online predators. It seems as though the modern way of living is antithetical to keeping developing young minds healthy.

PE teachers to the rescue!

PE teachers, whether they realise it or not, hold the keys to a generation's mental wellbeing in their hands. PE has enormous potential for combatting the causes and symptoms of many of the psychological maladies today's youngsters face. Here we'll look at some of the ways in which regular participation in PE could help buck the increasing trend of plummeting mental health in today's children and young people.

Physical exercise is nature's most potent antidepressant

As any gym junkie knows, exercise is one of nature's most proven mood boosters. When we challenge our bodies through the kinds of kinaesthetic activities that take place in PE lessons our brains release greater levels of endorphins; our brains' natural feel good chemicals. Physical exercise in team sports also benefits the brain in several other ways. It facilitates neural growth, reduces inflammation and encourages new neural activity patterns in the brain which result in a feeling of calm and well being.

Needless to say, this can be a great stress buster for young people experiencing exam nerves while also helping to combat general anxiety and depression.

PE builds character and self worth

We live in an age where advertising and social media would have us believe that perfection is the norm. In such a climate is it any wonder that so many of today's young people feel low in self esteem and self-worth? In a recent survey by Bliss magazine [87% of teenage girls](#) admitted that they suffered from poor body image and almost a fifth had developed an eating disorder in response.

Engaging in regular physical exercise helps to keep young people in shape and imbues them with the skills to achieve and maintain a healthy weight but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Through their activities in PE they can learn the extent of their physical capabilities, learning and mastering new skills which can help them grow in confidence as they set and break new personal best records.

PE also builds self-awareness and self discipline which are integral in building character. As they accrue sporting and other athletic achievements they will grow in their awareness of their capabilities and keep striving to improve themselves. And when young people are more assured of their character, confidence and greater social skills are an inevitable consequence.

PE builds social skills and teamwork

Speaking of social skills, PE can help even retiring students to engage social skills in which they may be lacking and facilitate meaningful social engagement with their peers. Many of the activities young people experience in PE facilitate cooperative and respectful social interactions. These can help young people to become more assertive in communicating with others while opening up doors for friendships outside of their usual social group.

PE allows young people to share and celebrate one another's accomplishments both in team sports and individual athletic pursuits. This helps to create social harmony and build social skills that can prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation.

PE aids young people with ADHD

Many students with ADHD can find school a challenge on a number of levels. Likewise, teachers can find it difficult to properly plan their provision for students with ADHD as their behaviour can be so erratic and unpredictable. Moreover, parents of children with ADHD may be reticent to medicate them.

Fortunately, PE lessons can be extremely helpful for children with ADHD. The kinaesthetic activities in PE lessons immediately boosts the brain's production of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. This results in an increase in focus and attention as well as improved motivation, memory and mood. In this respect, PE lessons work in much the same way as ADHD medications like Ritalin yet with results which are completely natural.

PE helps children overcome trauma

Although it seems as though young people's mental health is declining across the board, there are some children who are even more challenged. Those who have experienced trauma can find themselves subject to depression, stress, mood swings and a range of other symptoms which can make every day at school a struggle. By focusing on their movements and the ways in which their bodies move, children can gain a level of focus which allows them to become "unstuck" mentally and overcome the freezing affect that can come with trauma and post traumatic stress.

As you can see, PE teachers are a force to be reckoned with in helping to upturn the downward statistical trend and boost the mental health of youngsters all over the country.