

What's Driving the Mental Health Crisis Amongst Children in Secular States?

News:

The number of children in mental health crisis in England has hit a record high according to analysis of NHS data by the mental health charity Young Minds that was published in August. The data revealed that the number of children and young people undergoing treatment or waiting to start care reached a new record with 466,230 open referrals in May to children and young people's mental health services. It also reported that there were more than 3,700 urgent referrals of under 18's in May – 3 times higher than the same month in 2019. In addition, in the year to March 2023, referrals to mental health crisis teams had increased by 46% compared to the previous year. Furthermore, a record 1.4 million children and young people in England sought NHS help for mental problems last year. In fact, according to NHS figures, the number of school-age children being referred to child and adolescent mental health services has undergone an “explosion” in the last 3 years, soaring by 79% since 2019. This is for problems such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicide. There has also been an 82% increase in admissions for eating disorders across 2 years from 2020 – 2022 for under 18's (NHS digital data). There is concern for a growing emergency in young people's mental health and that this mental health turmoil could become the “new normal” among under 18's.

Comment:

England is far from the only country suffering from this mental health crisis amongst children and the youth. There is a mental health emergency affecting children in secular states across the world. A study entitled, “National Trends in Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Youth 2011-2020”, found that over 10 years, the proportion of children ED visits for mental health reasons in America had doubled, including a 5-fold increase in suicide-related visits. In addition, according to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the rates of suspected suicides and attempted suicide by poisoning among children 10-12 increased by more than 70% between 2019-2021, and by around 50% for children between 13-15. In fact, in 2020, suicide was the second leading cause of death amongst children aged 10-14 (CDC), and nearly 20% of high school students in America report serious thoughts of suicide while nearly 1 in 10 have made an attempt to take their lives (National Alliance on Mental Illness). In Australia, suicide is the leading cause of death amongst Australians aged 15-24 (Australian government's Institute of Health and Welfare), while in Scotland, it was reported that in 2022, suicide was also the leading cause of death among children and young adults, accounting for 1 in 4 lives lost during 2011-2020.

Some have blamed the Covid pandemic for this mental health crisis amongst children. However, many academics have noted that the pandemic simply exacerbated existing mental health struggles, with the rates of suicide attempts amongst children rising even prior to Covid. For example, in America, the number of children aged 6-12 who visited children's hospitals for suicidal thoughts or self-harm more than doubled (115%) between 2016-2019 (Children's Hospital Association). This was before the pandemic hit. Furthermore, a paper published in the British Journal of Psychiatry in February 2021 stated that over 52,000 17-year-olds in Britain had attempted suicide at some point in their lives and over 170,000 had harmed themselves in the previous 12 months before Covid hit.

So what is driving this exponential growth in mental health problems amongst the young in secular states worldwide? The causes of mental health problems are multifactorial, including physical ill health. However, attention should surely be placed upon the beliefs,

values, lifestyle and system of the secular way of life which has undoubtedly been the major driving force behind this mental health crisis amongst the youth.

Firstly, secular states have increasingly marginalized religion within their societies leading to a spiritual void within individuals, as well as a lack of understanding what their true purpose in life is, and confusion and uncertainty in how to view and deal with problems in life. A human being has a natural sanctification instinct to worship a higher being Who gives them direction and answers to what this life is all about and how to live their lives in the best way. Any system that marginalizes or suppresses this instinct will naturally cause a sense of emptiness and mental turmoil in individuals. Furthermore, the absence of a clear direction in life sows the seeds for confusion and misery. Secondly, under the secular system, it is human beings that define what is success and the goals that individuals are expected to aspire for. Consequently, many unrealistic expectations are set for the youth based upon the flawed minds of human beings – whether it be standards of beauty, material possessions, popularity, wealth, educational achievement or lifestyle – which inevitably will cause stress, anxiety and depression if one is not able to live up to those expectations. Social media has of course magnified these unrealistic expectations upon the youth. Thirdly, secular liberal freedoms which encourage individuals to pursue their whims and desires have created hedonistic lifestyles leading to drug and alcohol addictions amongst many youth. They also exacerbate problems such as bullying by creating personalities who simply act on what makes them feel good or brings them some self-benefit. Furthermore, sexual liberal freedoms, have decimated the family structure, and caused a mountain of broken relationships, as well as the huge confusion that accompanies gender identity issues. All of this has undoubtedly caused great psychological turmoil amongst many youth. And finally, the capitalist secular system has generated immense economic hardships for individuals, a gulf of inequalities in wealth, and an inability amongst many to afford basic needs – including food and stable housing - which has fuelled anxiety and depression amongst children.

Laura Bunt, the chief executive of Young Minds, said that the figures related to the mental health crisis amongst the youth in England were “*indicative of a system that is broken.*” The system that is broken is the secular system. It has failed the youth and it has failed humanity. As Muslims, we also need to ask some serious questions about the direction that our youth are going, whether in the West or the Muslim lands. Adopting the secular liberal system holds nothing but the promise of a downward spiral for the mental health of our children. There is nothing that can save them from this devastating fate except the Islamic beliefs, values, lifestyle and system that alone carries the ability to create contentment, tranquillity and true happiness in the human being.

﴿وَالْعَصْرَ * إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ * إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ﴾

“By time, surely mankind is in loss, except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and advise each other to the truth, and advise each other to patience.” [Al-Asr: 1-3]

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

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