Episode 10: Coping Strategies for Adolescents

Coping Strategies for Adolescents

VOICEOVER
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SIAN PRIOR
Hello and welcome to, Up Close, coming to you from Melbourne University, Australia. I am Sian Prior. And today we are going to look at a serious social problem that is on the increase, particularly in western countries, and we’ll talk about some solutions.

According to mental health experts, depression is being experienced in epidemic proportions amongst young people in the west. At best, this might manifest itself in unhappiness or social isolation. At worst though, it can lead to eating disorders, self-harming or anti-social behaviour or even suicide. The causes of teenage depression are many and complex. But there are some effective ways of tackling this problem. And that is what we want to focus on today. So, we have brought together two experts in the subject, both based here at Melbourne University. Associate Professor Erica Frydenberg is a psychologist who has done a lot of work in the area of teenagers and coping strategies. And, Dr Katrina McFerran is a music therapy academic with ten years clinical and research experience of working with teenagers. Katrina and Erica, welcome to Up Close.

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Thank you.

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Thank you.

SIAN PRIOR
Erica, can we talk first about the problem. What is the evidence that teenagers in
western communities are struggling with depression? What are the signs?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Well, we do know that young people are depressed and the figures vary between one in five people and the range of ways that this is expressed is from everyday blues to extreme feelings of being down and an inability to cope. There is a lot of evidence now that young people are resorting to self-harm, substance abuse in a lot of our communities. You mentioned eating disorders, anorexia and bulimia. We are also conscious of obesity. A lot of these conditions are related to depression.

SIAN PRIOR
And are these young people who are complaining of feeling bad and they being diagnosed by professionals or is there some other way of ascertaining how many young people are suffering depression?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Well, I think teachers in classrooms know that there are generally several young people who are experiencing depression. I think the picture is very different across the communities. [In] rural communities, where young people are isolated, the prevalence is much higher. So, really, there is this awareness of depression and we really want to make people aware to the extent that they get help. But we want to make a shift from that awareness to what we do about depression and how we can cope.

SIAN PRIOR
What are young people saying about why they are feeling so unhappy?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
One is that they are concerned about getting on in the world. And that might mean their studies, or to be able to earn money, to be able to achieve some sort of lifestyle. So, those things are a concern. And if they are not available to them, they feel restricted and limited and that could cause some anxiety. The second area of concern is relationships. Those are to do with relationships with peers and with family. Now, we know in a lot of our western communities, families undergo a lot of stress for all sorts of reasons and family breakdown is only one of those reasons. But it is very prevalent. And the third area that comes up with young people, is what we have termed in our research, social issues, or social concerns. And they vary. I know, when I first started this research in the 1980s it was about fear of nuclear war, today it is about environment.

SIAN PRIOR
Katrina McFerran, you’ve done a lot of work with young Australian people, and, on the face of it we seem to be living in a wealthy, safe, cohesive society. And yet, from what Erica says, there is still a number of areas where there is the potential for young people to become anxious or unhappy. Does your experience mirror what Erica has told us about the causes of teenage depression?

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Yeah, in fact, I find those three categories really interesting. A study that we did recently with the Centre for Adolescent Health here in Melbourne, involved analysing the songs that young women with eating disorders had written. So these women often have depression associated with their disorder as well. And some of the main categories that came out, one of them was ‘future aspirations’, which was not as anticipated we thought as some of the more obvious issues about being in hospital and being confined and restricted. But these ideas about how they would get on in the world, despite the fact of their illness and despite everything that they were facing, was one of the greatest priorities for them. And in addition, their idea around relationships and in particular family relationships and their relationship with their mother. That was the second most popular category out of all of the lyrics that we written. And what is remarkable in my work and my research with adolescents is that we discovered that young people might be facing chronic illness, might be looking at perhaps even dying in response to their illness and yet the issues that they are most concerned around, forming their identity. Typical teenage issues and around relationships and about the future. The issues relating to their illness are really very secondary.

SIAN PRIOR
That is interesting. That surprises me, because I would have assumed that, there is so much social pressure, media influence, potentially making young women feel bad about their own bodies, I would have thought that would have been a major issue.

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Well, I guess it is really important to differentiate between young women who are experiencing pressures of identity, such as wanting to be more attractive in whatever way they determine, whether it is thinner or with bigger breasts or bigger lips or whatever it happens to be, and people with a mental illness, which is around anorexia or bulimia, once you have slipped into that life harming end of the spectrum, that is when you are seeing people focusing on normality and normal issues.

SIAN PRIOR
Erica Frydenberg, what about young men? It is often said that they are less socially skilled than young women, perhaps less likely to share confidences or admit vulnerability and seek emotional support from friends. Are those clichés true?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Really, when it comes to boys, they do tend to keep problems to themselves. That is one of the clear strategies that boys tend to use more than girls. Girls tend to turn to others, which is something that can be very good. It is a form of support. But it can also be a form of ventilation. But the boys do keep things to themselves and I am reminded of an interview that I did with a young boy for one of our research studies, where his parents had separated and he was with his father and he said that he thought his father was going to commit suicide. And, I had to take the questioning considerably further, ‘And have you talked about this with anybody?’ ‘No.’ And really to me that is the most vivid example of when the problems are the most worrisome, then young boys tend not to share it. The tougher the problem the less likely they are
SIAN PRIOR
Well, Erica, you’ve done a lot of work on developing strategies to inoculate young people against depression, give them coping skills so that they can help themselves to stay happy and healthy. And, in part it comes down to the power of positive thinking. Is that right?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Well, I think it is the power of positive thinking. But, that’s a little bit like, we used to be told, ‘pull your socks up!, keep smiling!’. That really isn’t enough. And that is why we have gone to the extent of developing these coping strategies, which then allow kids to develop their own picture of how they cope. It’s not an IQ test, so we don’t give them a score. It is what you do a lot, it is what you do a little. Do you like what you do? Does it work for you? In one situation it might work, in another it doesn’t. So, what we are really trying to do is give young people the language of coping. When you’ve got language, you can actually think about things, you can also communicate. So, that is what our coping strategies do. And then we develop these coping strategies and a lot of people have done that. To develop programs that are run in schools or are run in counselling contexts.

SIAN PRIOR
I am Sian Prior and you’re listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where our guests today are Associate Professor of Psychology, Erica Frydenberg an expert in teenagers and coping strategies and Music Therapy academic, Dr Katrina McFerran, both of them based here at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Well, Erica, you talked about the language of coping, and one of the buzzwords at the moment is this term ‘resilience’. What is it, exactly?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
The simplest expression, is like bungy jumping: the ability to bounce back. But, basically, how do we achieve resilience? Temperament does make a difference. The capacities you are born with do make a difference.

SIAN PRIOR
So, some people just wake up in the morning feeling better about the world, than other people.

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Yes. They’re more optimistic. They’re actually, in the longitudinal study in Australia, they’ve followed young people from birth to 20 plus years. The term that Margot Prior and her colleagues used was ‘engaging’. When you’ve got an ‘engaging infant’, an ‘engaging toddler’, an ‘engaging young person’, they’re likely to get on better in the world. They’re likely to have more friends, they’re likely to be able to deal better with people, so that sort of temperament predisposes you to doing okay. But along with that come a whole host of other factors. But the two most important ones are a supportive family [V] and definitions of family vary today, but it is a group of people that are intimately available to you for
support and perhaps your role models as well. And then the support of the
community and by community, we might mean small or people external to the family.
So, those are the three elements that the key researchers in the resilience area think
are the most important.

SIAN PRIOR
So, resilience, in part, can inoculate you against bad ways of dealing with stress.
Katrina McFerran, is it true that the period between childhood and adulthood, is a
time when young people are coping with all sorts of new stresses, having to learn to
take more responsibility for themselves and their own decisions. Everything from
what clothes to wear or what subjects to choose at school to what kind of sexual
activity they might be wanting to engage in, if any. Is this part of what leads to stress
and the need for coping strategies in young people?

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Yeah, there is a lot of parts of the identity that need to be worked out during
adolescence. It is a tough time for everybody. And for a number of years, psychology
looked at the whole period as being quite traumatic. But this movement into positive
psychology actually is proving to be more beneficial because we are looking at what
these resilient young people and older people; what traits they have. And when we
are talking about that, we recently did a study where we examined how young people
used music in that way to help them to cope. And again, the approach in the past,
was often to go, Oh!, and if people listened to heavy metal music, and if they
liked Metallica, you know, That's really bad and that leads to suicide and we
must stop our children. Assuming this causative relationship, where listening to
music makes people behave badly somehow. And this was a very popular
movement that went on in the States, particularly in the 1990s. But our research
chose to take this more positive approach, where we said to young people, what kind of music are you listening to, and how are you listening to it and when are you
listening to it? But, what music are you listening to when you are happy? And
then, how do you feel after you've listened to the music? Do you feel more
happy or less happy? And we ask them across, happy and sad and stressed and
anxious and what we found was that despite their music preferences so some
people were listening to Metallica, which is heavy metal, and some people were
listening to pop, and other people were listening to R&B, but if it was music of their
own preferences, they generally used it very effectively to manage their moods and
to feel better.

SIAN PRIOR
Is that partly because young people are listening to music is working out their
identity? What kind of music you listen to often informs what sorts of subcultures you
might want to affiliate with, and therefore, how you see yourself.

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Absolutely. That has traditionally been the role of music for young people. It is about
being friends with people who listen to the same music and wear the same clothes
and providing that community support that you're looking for. But an interesting
finding we had in our study was that with the increased accessibility to music in a very private way is that people can choose music now from the internet, download it into their MP3 player where they have thousands of tracks and so that public realm of music preferences is disappearing. The influence of peers in musical preferences in the questions that we asked, was much less than anticipated and much less than in previous studies. We are theorising that perhaps the privacy of music listening and music preferences for teenagers is changing the way that they are using music. Because you can disguise a piece of folk music in amongst your heavy metal selection. Or you can disguise your more strange choices in the typical sense in your little MP3 player and keep these things quite private. Whereas previously, you probably recall for yourself, going up to the record store and purchasing, it’s very public. People watch what CD you have and how you buy it. And that is a part of your, ‘I’m wearing black and I’m buying this kind of music’ or ‘I’m wearing a short skirt and I’m buying this kind of music’. It is all about your fashion statement and how you identify in adolescence. So, I wonder if perhaps we are starting to see a change in how people use music to represent themselves in terms of forming their identities.

SIAN PRIOR
So, it gives young people potentially a safe, private space to experiment with aspects of identity.

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Yeah. And if we can encourage them to do that in a positive way! V we did have a small but significant finding in our study, where there was a small cohort of young men who did prefer heavy metal music who were using it ineffectively. And for these young men they listened to it when they were angry or sad and they felt worse afterwards. I’d really like to emphasise that there were other people in the study who preferred heavy metal music and they used it to make themselves feel better. It wasn’t a relationship between the type of music. But for those few young men, there were some who were using it ineffectively. So, we really need to help those young men develop more effective practices to not make themselves feel worse through music.

SIAN PRIOR
So, in a sense, I guess what Katrina is talking about, Erica, is the difference between positive and negative coping strategies. And there are differences, I mean some people, find useful and effective and healthy ways of coping, but there are also negative ways of coping. What are the more negative coping strategies, that some young people engage in?

ERICA FRYDENBERG
There are negative or non-productive coping strategies that we find get people into trouble. The one that stands out in all our research is self-blame.

SIAN PRIOR
So, what kind of things are young people blaming themselves for or feeling guilty
ERIC A FRYDENBERG
When parents separate. It is quite classic for young people to think it is their fault.
So, when parents get sick, when parents separate, when something goes wrong with the team. It is the way you really construe the situation. The messages you give yourself. You can say to yourself, I'm hopeless, I'm not going to do this again. Or, I'm a dud, I'm a failure. Or, you can say, today I did my best, it didn't go down that well. I'm going to look at how I can make a difference or change what I do. Self-blame is a really problematic one. Worry: we know anxiety is a precursor to depression. And young people do worry. Girls much more so than boys. Although boys tend to internalise worry. So, we are trying to get young people to talk about how they worry, because often they worry to the point of being immobilised.

SIAN PRIOR
So, worry is taking up energy that could otherwise be used to solve the problem.

ERIC A FRYDENBERG
Absolutely. Now, we do point out that none of these strategies are in themselves always bad. Because if you do have an exam tomorrow and you've decided to party instead IV

SIAN PRIOR:
You've got something to worry about.

ERIC A FRYDENBERG
Absolutely. So, a certain degree of worry or concern that activates you, gets you to prepare for a performance is an okay thing.

SIAN PRIOR
Associate Professor of Erica Frydenberg is one of our guests here today on Melbourne University Up Close, along with Music Therapist, Dr Katrina McFerran. I'm Sian Prior, and you're listening to Melbourne University Up Close, where today we are discussing coping in adolescence. Katrina, can music help relieve worry?

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Well, I think a lot of young people use music to help them normalise what they are worrying about. So, traditionally, music designed for adolescents in the pop market is about adolescent issues. It is about breaking up in relationships. It is about having fights with friends. It is about looking cool, more often than not. And this is what most adolescents worry about. It is the perception of others. Because during your teenage years, you are trying to balance out, how other people perceive you in comparison to how you see yourself. So, you are constantly trying to get this feedback from everybody else to work out whether or not people see you the way that you want to be seen. So, music is one way that people try and develop a stronger sense and be seen in the way that they want to be seen. And some of the resilience literature looks at participating in community activities and music is one of those activities that they can help address worrying through being a part of something which is positive, which
is guided in some small way by adult structures but which allows young people to take control which can be an important way of adjusting to worry.

SIAN PRIOR
Katrina, some adolescents perhaps have more obvious reasons for having trouble coping than others. Teenagers living with disabilities for example. And I believe you’ve brought in an example for us, of a song, written by a young Australian man, who is living with a disability.

KATRINA MCFERRAN
Yeah, so Erica was talking before about ‘the boys’ and how they don’t tend to talk a lot. And often, young men who are going through very difficult situations do find it difficult to articulate or to verbalise what is going on. So, what we do in music therapy, which is the clinical work of using music, rather than looking at how people use music in everyday life, in music therapy we use that existing relationship between teenagers and music and we try and get them to use it to help them express themselves. So, the beautiful thing about music is it doesn’t always involve words. We can get boys on drums. And we can say, ‘come on, let’s just play.’ We call it improvisation. But it is about just playing and expressing feelings. And in a music therapy situation, it might be like, ‘right, let’s play angry. Now, let’s play sad. Now, let’s play happy.’ And young men, really adopt that approach very easily. And take a great deal of joy. And say that they get something from that. But the young man who we’ve got a song from today, chose to write a rap song in this instance. He’s a young man with muscular dystrophy. And he’s in a wheelchair. He has a mild intellectual disability. And he took the opportunity to address how he felt about himself and to look cool, what we call identity formation. He wrote a rap song, so, he relates to the rap genre. And the guys who walk around with a lot of jewellery and great cars and they listen to pumping beats and bass lines. And he wanted to be that. So for this moment, when we wrote this song, that’s what he did. He wrote about having fast cars and he wrote about people should take more notice of people don’t have everything. He chose to make a social statement. One of the topics that Erica brought up about what are the young people are worrying about, he was worrying about the disparity in the economic situation of different people and he wanted to say that he should have a good car too. And he should be able to be cool, like rappers such as Tupac.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, let’s have a listen.

[song is played]

SIAN PRIOR
That’s a rap song written by a young man called Axe. Who at the time of writing the song was 16 years old. And he was living with muscular dystrophy. Erica Frydenberg, we started our conversation today talking about a so-called epidemic of depression amongst young people in western societies. What about in other countries, I mean, a cynic might say, in countries like Australia, where most people
don't have to worry about being fed or being caught up in political or ethnic violence, there is time to think about yourself and get depressed, but in poorer countries or less politically stable ones, young people don't have time to get depressed because they're too busy trying to stay alive.

ERICA FRYDENBERG
I think it is true because we've done some cross-cultural studies. Certainly when we looked at Palestinian young people and Colombian young people, they may be concerned about military issues, but their depression isn't expressed in the same way as it is in our communities. There is also strong evidence that we develop resilience not through avoiding stress, but throughout experiencing stress. Young people who engage in pro-social activities, and I'm reminded of a 15 year study that was carried out in Israel and published in a book called Adolescent Happiness, where they looked at what people did throughout their schooling in terms of helping others and going into old peoples' homes and working with animals and so on, and the young people who were engaged in those sorts of pro-social coping

SIAN PRIOR
Helping other people, in other words. Taking your mind off yourself by helping others.

ERICA FRYDENBERG
Doing good, makes you feel good. And that is supported by so much research. And that is also what this positive psychology movement is showing. That it is not just about teaching coping strategies and it is not just about avoiding stress. It is really about working within our communities. That rap song also made me think, writing a song like that and making a social statement is empowering. It is also making the young person feel as if they are doing some social good. So, those sorts of things do make us feel better.

SIAN PRIOR
Well, let's hope that between the two of you, you've provided our listeners today with useful, practical information about coping strategies for young people and how we can tackle this epidemic of teenage depression. Many thanks to both of you for joining us today. I'm Sian Prior and my guests have been Dr Katrina McFerran, a music therapy academic with 10 years clinical and research experience of working with teenagers. And, Associate Professor of Psychology, Erica Frydenberg, an expert in the area of teenagers and coping strategies. Both are based here at the University of Melbourne.

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