

GREATERT EXPECTATIONS

Many parents are pushing their kids to be extraordinary, and social media and “perfect” peers are adding to that pressure. But kids need to know it’s okay to be average, experts say. **by SARAH CATHERALL**

Scarlett Kean seems to have the perfect life. Studying for a bachelor of creative enterprise at Unitec, the 19-year-old Aucklander is a talented artist and actor. In her teens, she excelled at a private school – ACG Parnell College – where she was also encouraged by her family to enrol in extracurricular activities.

Today, she has a part-time job at Auckland Museum, a partner and many friends. She lives with her close-knit family.

However, for the past five years, Kean has battled anxiety and feelings of self-doubt. They are often so intense that she feels she can’t breathe. She also has panic attacks.

“A lot of what anxiety is is putting imaginary pressure on myself. At school, I had really high expectations of myself and I was often very disappointed with my results.”

Kean feels a societal pressure to be

special or “extraordinary”, and she’s not alone. Counsellors and psychologists are increasingly concerned that our achievement-oriented society is putting undue pressure on young people, making them anxious and depressed. If they feel they’re

“They get constant little hits of dopamine, and fear and anxiety.”

not good at something, they’ll give up rather than persist.

Parents, the professionals say, contribute, along with a results-based education system and the pressure of a 24/7 online world. There are also concerns that young people aren’t being taught how to handle knock-backs and grief and, as a result of the positivity movement, are therefore expected

to always be upbeat, despite hard times.

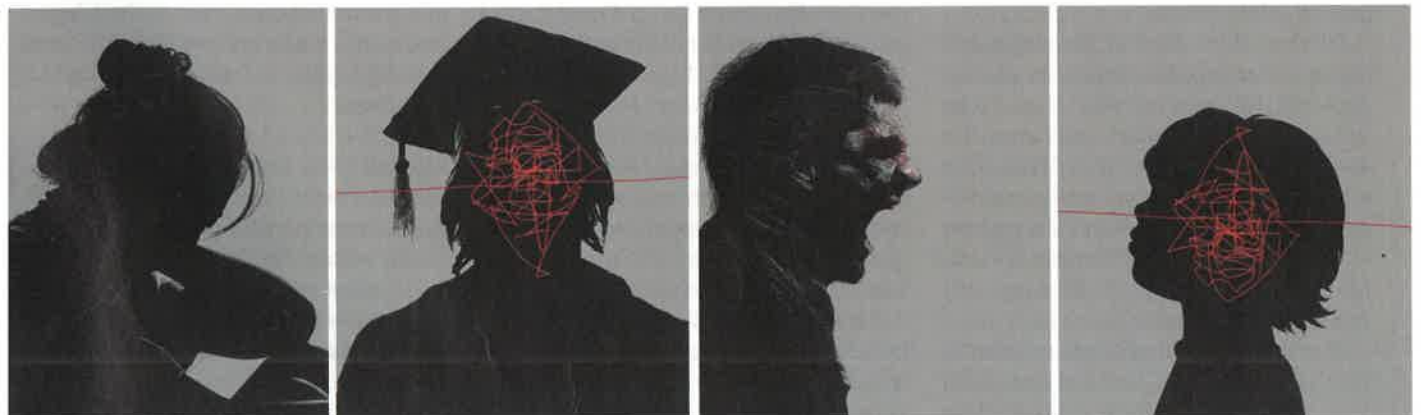
Life became difficult for Kean when she turned 14. Her severe anxiety lasted until her final year at high school. Other young women were going through the turbulence of adolescence, but she was comparing herself with her older sister, who seemed to have it all. Kean doesn’t blame her parents, who always encouraged but didn’t push her. She was affected by social media, especially the idealised images of seemingly perfect lives that her friends posted online.

EPIDEMIC OF TEEN ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

“Social media puts so much pressure on young girls to look beautiful and be smart, and that really affected how I viewed myself as a person. I would feel that if I wasn’t the kindest, most beautiful and most clever female, I wasn’t of value.”

It’s a point reiterated by US social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who told the *Listener*

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while in New Zealand last week that social media is contributing to an epidemic of anxiety and depression in teens, particularly girls.

"All kids are now being reinforced not by their parents or their teachers, but by their peers. They get constant little hits of dopamine, and fear and anxiety, and this is the cause of the problem, which is especially unhealthy to anyone, especially developing brains."

The co-author, with Greg Lukianoff, of bestseller *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt traces a spike in female anxiety back to 2009, when Facebook became mainstream.

If kids said they were too worried and didn't want to go to school, their parents were more likely to say, "You're not staying home."

"Social media is so much worse for girls, because they're more affected by likes, comments and social comparison. If that's with your friends, that's so much more painful than when compared with airbrushed models in magazines. If all your friends are gorgeous and they're having a great time, and your life isn't [that great], that's a recipe for depression."

New York-based Haidt says that Gen Z – those born since the mid-90s – have also been affected by overprotective parenting. Teens and those aged up to 23 have grown up in a world that has never been safer, but they haven't learnt how to cope with failure or how to be resilient.

But don't think of telling an overwrought young person to harden up. Haidt, who has been listed by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines among their respective rankings of the world's top 100 public intellectuals, recounts what befell a US university maths professor who dished out such medicine. The graduate student whom he told to "toughen up" after she complained about something promptly lodged a formal complaint.

Overparenting extends into adulthood. Now at college and entering the workforce, they're not drinking, going on dates

or learning to drive. "What are they doing instead? They're on [their] phones all day long. They're doing really, really badly," he told think-tank the New Zealand Initiative during his recent visit.

A study by Haidt in the US found 12% of first-year university students have a psychological disorder – specifically, depression and anxiety. Older teen girls have much higher



"Doctor Know" Gwendoline Smith: the bulk of pressure is coming from parents.

rates of self-harm, and younger teen girls, aged 10 to 14, have the fastest growing rates of it.

Females in their early twenties did not have the same self-harm data when his study was done, but he says they did not get social media until they were at university. "That's the key difference. Today, our mental-health centres on campus cannot keep up."

He estimates New Zealand is about three years behind US trends, and he advises schools to ban phones, and parents to keep their kids away from social media until they are at least 16. They should also limit screen time, although that could be buying a fight. A 2017 study of 1000 students aged 14-17 by Netsafe found a third spend four or more hours online in an average day, 40% use five or more social-media platforms and a quarter

would be "devastated" if they had no access to digital technologies for a month.

A large US study has found that kids as young as two are developing mental health problems from as little as an hour's screen time a day. Those spending closer to five hours are described as "zombie" children. The San Diego State University and University of Georgia researchers back calls for limiting screen time.

"The internet puts young people in contact all over the world, which is great in many ways, but in terms of social comparison, it could make them more depressed about who they are or give them unrealistic

"This is the happiest I have ever been. Being able to say, 'I like myself', is huge. I couldn't have done that a year ago."

standards about what is acceptable," says Haidt.

FEAR OF BEING JUDGED

As Kean approaches her third decade, she recognises that therapy has helped her to become the calmest she has ever been. She has been diagnosed with "social anxiety" and generalised anxiety. She worries what people think of her, battling a fear of being judged. "I overthink, and my heart will start to race, and I'll get pains in my stomach and often have a panic attack."

She gives credit to "Doctor Know" – her therapist, Auckland-based clinical psychologist Gwendoline Smith – whose guide, *The Book of Knowing*, she carries around with her, along with flashcards. "This is the happiest I have ever been. Being able to say, 'I like myself', is huge. I couldn't have done that a year ago."

In 2014, Smith launched a Tumblr page, The Poet. On the morning it went live, she was overwhelmed to find 11,000 questions and posts from young people. That prompted her to start a blog, Doctor Know, and publish a book this year that resulted from the blog.

Concerned that anxiety is on the rise among teens and young New Zealanders, the clinician points to a range of triggers:

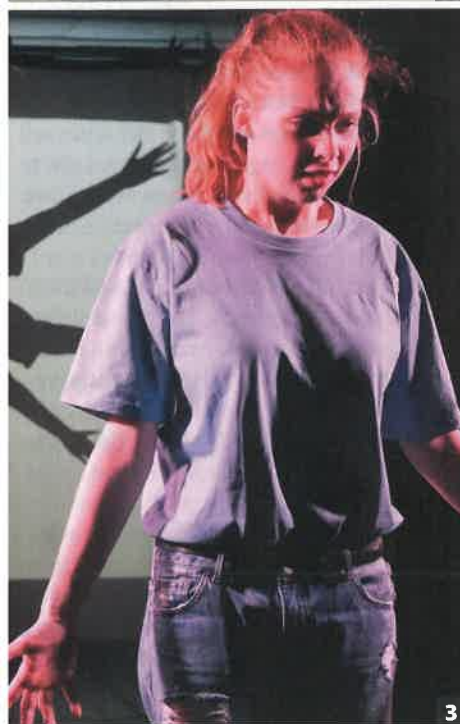
1. Scarlett Kean in 2017 with Connor Charlesworth. 2. In October 2017. 3. At the Auckland Showdown Awards a month later. 4. With, from left, Harry Heslop, Olivia Meyer and partner Kynan Robinson in December 2018.



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intense parenting, generalised anxiety in the population, increased school assessments, technology and social media. Social anxiety – a fear of being judged or negatively evaluated – is the third-biggest mental-health issue among youth.

“Kids have their screens on all day and all night. When they see the most popular group on Facebook and everyone is having so much fun, that makes them worry.”

Part of this stems from pressure on young people to be extraordinary. “In my experience, and through working with teachers, the bulk of this pressure appears to be coming from parents. If their children do not

perform at an ‘extraordinary level’, parents often blame the teachers for not bringing out the best in their child, or not teaching them adequately.”

Ease up, she advises parents, and accept a child’s capacity and intellectual acuity. “Not everyone has to be a surgeon, a lawyer or a scientist. Having a trade, earning a living and enjoying your family is a good life,” she says.

In her clinic, Smith specialises in treating patients with mood disorders who are aged 16 and over. She has been a psychologist for 38 years, but says she sees more patients with anxiety and depression now than at any other time. She says the former can be

a pathway to the latter. “If you catch anxiety early enough, you can stop it descending into depression.”

Her book is designed to help young people navigate their way through worrying times, and urges those with serious anxiety disorders to seek professional help. However, one of the biggest issues she sees in her young patients is catastrophising: blowing things out of proportion.

She gives young people tools to help them retain perspective, describing the problem as being “of epidemic proportions”. “The Kardashians are always saying, ‘Oh, my god.’ I had a young patient who kept saying, ‘Oh,

my god.”

She notes: “The most damaging aspect of catastrophising is the profound undermining of resilience. When someone believes a situation is impossible, they don’t even try to overcome it. I want you to understand that so much of your discomfort or ‘disease’ is to do with your perception of the world, not the reality of it.”

Smith cautions parents and schools not to be too protective of anxious kids. “That shrinks resilience. If you go back to [the eras of] Gen X or baby boomers, if kids said they were too worried and didn’t want to go to school, their parents were more likely to say, ‘You’re not staying home, you’re going

Our kids grow up thinking they need to be “exceptional”, but we should allow young people to be average.

to school.’ The literature shows us that by allowing kids to avoid anxiety, you create a bigger problem.”

HELP WITH ANXIETY

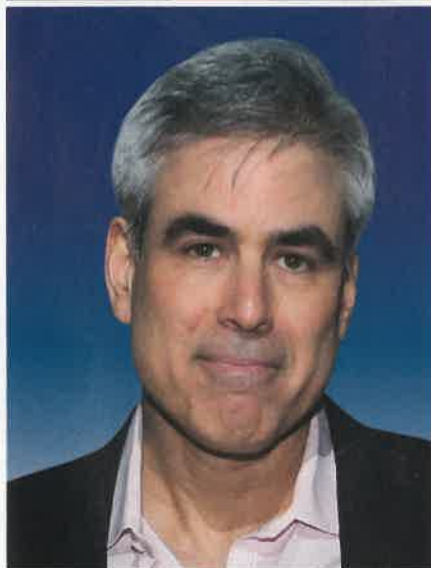
This point is backed up by school counsellors, who are dealing with a growing number of anxious and stressed students. Last year, three school counsellors with a combined 70 years’ experience in the field studied school counselling sessions.

In their report, completed last November and released exclusively to the *Listener*, they surveyed 11 secondary schools around the country. Based on 4646 counselling appointments involving 25 school counsellors, the results showed that anxiety was second only to family issues as the most important reason students sought help.

At two single-sex girls schools, anxiety was the No 1 reason students saw a counsellor, and their issues covered the gamut: phobias, panic disorders, perfectionism, social anxiety, post-traumatic stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalised anxiety.

In 2000, when Jean Andrews began school counselling at Taieri College in Mosgiel, she says kids were most likely to seek help for relationship problems. Today, they come to her with anxiety, cyber bullying and family issues.

She has seen a surge in anxiety levels in the past six years. Why? “Children face a lot more change in the world than they did, say,



From top, Kerry Gibson, Jonathan Haidt, Jean Andrews.

the size of your wallet and whether you have a perfect body or are a rugby star.

“We are not affirming that people are okay as they are. Young kids are worrying, ‘Am I good enough? Am I bright enough?’ There is performance-based loving from parents. Kids feel this pressure to achieve and to be seen to be achieving.”

Parents can encourage their kids to do their best, but Andrews, the South Island’s representative on the National Association of Counsellors, says “they should also let them know that, no matter what they do, you love them, anyway. And if they can be kind, caring people and good citizens, that’s actually enough. It’s not just about getting scholarships or so many credits at level one. Parents should really communicate that they love their kids unconditionally, and also model how to deal with stress themselves.”

Because we live in an achievement-oriented society, she says, “we need to move back to some core values. Every parent wants their kid to do their best, but it’s about developing the whole person in a more rounded way.”

This month, New Zealand teens move into a particularly hectic and stressful time – preparing for mock exams and school assessments. For older ones, there’s the pressure of deciding which university or tertiary courses to apply for. University open days begin this month.

EXCEPTIONALISM THE NORM

Our kids grow up thinking they need to be “exceptional”, says Kerry Gibson, a clinical psychologist at the University of Auckland, but we should allow young people to be average. “Excellence is used in so many contexts now and that carries a weight of unhealthy expectation through school and through life.

“They are expected to be exceptional in the arts or in sport, or to have exceptional lives in some way. The word “average” has negative connotations in New Zealand – but average is really where most people are and it can be challenging for young people who are expected to ‘stand out’ or ‘be someone’.”

Over recent months, there have been widespread concerns about the pressures on young people in competitive sports. Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) figures show an increasing number of 10- to 14-year-olds are getting hurt on the sports field, with a 60% rise in injuries among

20-30 years ago. There is pressure to succeed, and pressure via the media to be beautiful or perfect. In this country, you are valued for

this age group over a decade. ACC's head of injury prevention, Isaac Carlson, says it is concerning that kids under 12 are specialising in one sport, playing and training year-round.

"Coaches and parents believe they are doing the right thing, and that more – and earlier – training leads to higher chances of their little one making it big in the sporting world as an adult," Carlson says.

He disputes this, pointing to an Australasian College of Sport and Exercise Physicians (ACSEP) study that says early specialisation contributes to burnout, loss of motivation and potential mental-health problems in later life.

Carlson says: "Filling our kids' timetables with too much focused and intensive training can result, in the worst cases, in the complete loss of a love for sport."

This is a trend in America, where about 70% of kids in one study were found to have stopped playing organised sport by age 13, claiming "it's just not fun anymore". In the US, Haidt is trying to promote "free range Fridays" – he says kids need to have a day off just to roam, find their friends and play.

VERY HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Gibson's focus is on youth mental health and the pressures faced by this generation. With her research team, she has interviewed 200-plus young people about issues that affect their well-being and what support works best for them.

She says: "Young people live in a world where there are very high expectations that they should succeed in every area of their lives. They are told to behave responsibly, to make 'good choices' and, if they do this, they will do well in life. But, in fact, it is much harder for young people to live up to unrealistic expectations.

"They are facing significant pressure in comparison with previous generations. The pressure is more subtle, but it is real. When I think of my own youth, you just bumbled along and hoped it would all work out.

"There is a mismatch between what young people are told by society, by the media and sometimes by their parents is the 'ideal life' and what they actually experience. The other thing is that they are expected to be successful and fulfilled, and also to be happy all the time," says Gibson.

"Some of the jobs and pathways are really hard to get into. They are told they should prepare themselves for successful careers, but they face a more precarious job and financial

GWENDOLINE SMITH'S TIPS FOR PARENTS

- ✓ Get your teen breathing calmly before you start talking to them. A settled nervous system reduces panic. Have them raise their finger when they feel calm.
- ✓ Get them to clearly describe what they are anxious about.
- ✓ Acknowledge their distress but normalise it for them.
- ✓ Encourage them to realise that because they feel something, that does not make it a fact. Reassure them that something that might feel life-threatening is not necessarily so.

TIP FOR TEENS

- ✓ Feeling frustrated is a normal part of life. No one enjoys it but you can learn to tolerate it. Frustrating situations are annoying temporary obstacles.
- ✓ None of us is a mind reader. You don't know what other people are thinking and they don't know what you are thinking.
- ✓ Life is often unfair. Be prepared to not always get what you think you are owed.
- ✓ Not having a whole lot of prestige symbols – branded clothing, i-gadgets – does not make you a failure. As someone wise once said, comparison is the thief of joy.



future than their parents did. Young people talk about how their families and teachers expect so much of them and then they start to put pressure on themselves."

As a result of social media, young people are negotiating a much more complex world. However, unlike Haidt, Gibson is not anti social media, arguing that it allows youth to connect in new ways. Teens and young New Zealanders may have important online conversations through their networks, which often offer them support.

Haidt advocates limiting time on phones and social media but Gibson says it's not helpful for parents to tell kids to "put your phone away". "It's important to recognise that for many young people, looking at their phone may not be a sign that they are disengaging, but rather that they are looking for support from their online networks."

Haidt is trying to promote "free range Fridays" – he says kids need to have a day off just to roam, find their friends and play.

She agrees with him, though, that social media is making our teens and youth more anxious. "These days, social failures can be 'witnessed' by sometimes hundreds of people. Social media is also often an environment where people show off their 'best' self, so they post pictures of what looks like an amazing life. This can leave young people comparing themselves negatively with their peers, which can add to their anxieties about whether they are good enough."

The solution? Gibson says we need to encourage young people to talk more. Rather than blaming parental pressure, she points to the rise of neo-liberalism and the cult of individualism for the drive for excellence. "This broader societal shift has put too much emphasis on achievement and success. We need to return to some core values," she says.

Smith advises young people: "Remember, life is full of the good and the bad, no matter who you are. Forget the word 'deserve' – it does not apply. It's okay not to change the world, it's okay to do what you can, when you can and where you can. If what you achieve is a loving family, surrounded by lots of friends, helping people where you can and eating good food, life would not be so bad, would it?" ■