

HUMAN RESOURCES

The Dark Side of Innovation: The Youthful Struggle to Maintain Mental Well-Being

by David Salisbury



Between 2005 and 2017, the rate of adolescents reporting symptoms consistent with major depression jumped 52 percent. What factors are to blame for this increase, and what can be done?

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Each older generation loves to point out the flaws and weaknesses of each proceeding generation. The Greatest Generation who fought World War II and survived the Great Depression found the counterculture-era Boomers whiny, narcissistic, and over privileged.

Same with those very Boomers who grew up to find their Gen X children apathetic, lazy, and again, over privileged. And now Gen X's Millennial and Gen Z offspring suffer labels like "coddled," "too sensitive," and, big surprise, "over privileged."

Regardless of your opinion of the young, what's clear today is that maintaining good mental health is a priority for them. Unfortunately, many say they are suffering under the way of life in the digital age. Since 2005, rates of adolescents reporting symptoms major depression rose to a little over 50 percent, according to a study published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Abnormal Psychology, run by the American Psychological Association. That is the same time frame of social media's ascendancy and reports of increased cyberbullying and social media's unrealistic expectations causing distress among young people. It's also the same time as the tech industry's gradual boom that has made it one of the most lucrative and stressful industries. This workforce is made up of largely 20 and 30-something year olds. Unfortunately, that industry's young demographics are also reporting poor mental health, sometimes leading to suicide. What role does the information age play in the mental health of younger generations? And what can managers do to accommodate and nurture young people who are feeling these burdens?

The Tech / Suicide Mecca

Silicon Valley is quickly becoming the suicide capital of the world. In the last decade, suicide rates have grown four times higher at top tier high schools in Palo Alto than the national average. With the heavy loom of expected success in Silicon Valley and heavy posturing of the tech culture that sees their intellect and wealth as status symbols, children raised in such an environment might be falling victim to the unrealistic expectations of their surroundings.

A 2016 study identified the relationship between entrepreneurship and depression. 72% of sampled entrepreneurs reported concerns about their mental well-being and 49% reported having one or more lifetime mental health conditions. Young business people entering the tech world in search of notable success and without nuanced coping skills and emotional maturity are at larger risk of falling victim to stress-related mental illness. Suicides are also happening at an alarming rate in the startup community. A large amount

of suicides occur after a young individual's business fails. Their depression provokes them to commit suicide instead of asking for help, as the posturing and appearance of control is paramount in the hyper-alpha image driven tech world.

Social Media's Impact

Studies find a 63 percent increase in young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 reporting symptoms of depression between 2009 and 2017. It also showed significant increases in the rates of young adults who reported serious psychological distress and suicidal thoughts or suicide-related outcomes during similar time periods. Cultural trends in the last 10 years may have had a larger effect on mood disorders and suicide-related outcomes among younger generations compared with older generations. Whereas older generations suffered bullying mostly within limited reach of youth at school, youth today can suffer a non-stop assault through social media, extending the reach and impact of this bullying.

What Can Managers Do?

As Generation Z is now entering the workforce, it's important for older managers to understand the stresses and mental plight of new generations entering the workforce. Simply dubbing them "over privileged" is a privilege the older generation no longer gets to enjoy if they wish to have a productive, responsive workforce. According to the California Management Review article, "Are You Ready for Gen Z in the Workplace?" Gen Z is significantly more likely to report their mental health as fair or poor as compared to all other generations. They have the highest rate of diagnosed depression followed by anxiety. Only half feel they do enough to manage their stress, while 25% say they don't feel they do enough. 67% of Generation Z in the USA and 85% worldwide say that stress prevents them from taking on leadership responsibilities. Considering these statistics, companies may consider putting more resources into their health and wellness programs. Support groups and other interventions that focus on teaching general psychosocial skills have been found to increase overall well-being by up to 73%.

Outside of managers accommodating young people's mental struggles, it's also important for adults and authority figures to question if a young person needs to be a part of high stress worlds like tech or other demanding industries. I can tell you from personal experience that those worlds are not meant for everyone. I spent 6 years in the demands of the high-paying, but mentally-taxing San Francisco Bay Area tech world. I had a swollen bank account with access to anywhere in the world I wanted to go. However, tolerating the alpha posturing and massive egos of my co-workers, and the abuse of clients around the world demanding large results at whiplash speed, and knowing that my participation in the industry was contributing to the gentrification of my community and erosion of cultural relevance – the money was simply not worth it for someone like me. The spiritual cons far outweighed the financial pros. Having now worked in a more creative capacity, where knowledge is sought for enrichment rather than strictly a financial end, has been rejuvenating for my soul and a reminder that money indeed does not create happiness. It's important for a young person finding their path in life to understand that the gold at the end of a rainbow doesn't have to be actual gold, but more something that will be sustainable for richness within.



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