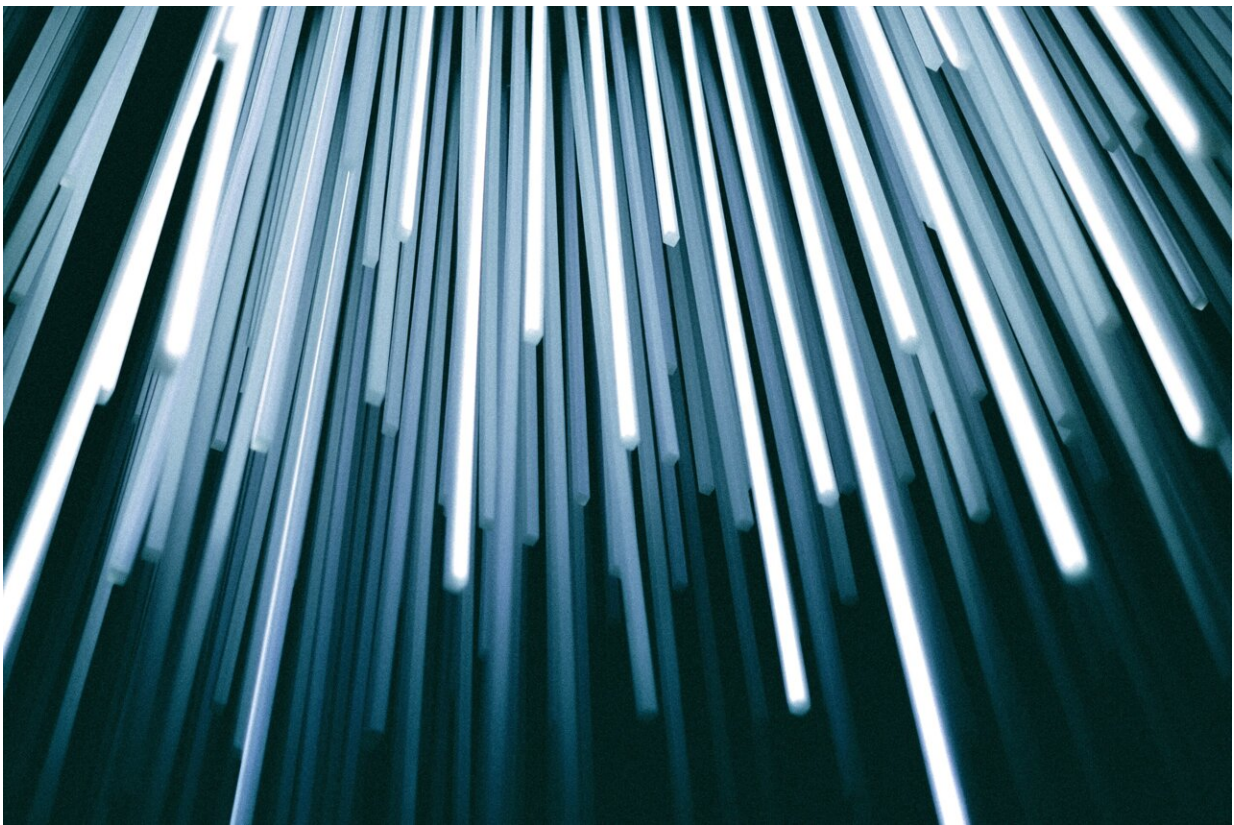# Overemphasis on safety means kids are becoming more anxious and less resilient, says psychologist

April 10 2023, by Simon Sherry

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

We are facing a mental health crisis. Teenagers and young adults are more depressed, suicidal, anxious and lonely than ever before.

Depression rates among teens have been increasing since the early 2000s. A 2018 national survey found that 13.3 percent of U.S. adolescents experienced a major depressive episode in the last year.

But it's not just teens—young adults are suffering too. A 2016 international survey of university counseling centers revealed 50 percent of university students sought help for feelings of anxiety and 41 percent for depression. Suicide rates are also increasing. The number of teenage girls in the U.S. who died by suicide nearly doubled between 2000 and 2015.

The mental health statistics for Canadian youth are similarly grim. In 2003, 24 percent of Canadians aged 15-30 self-reported that their mental health was either fair or poor (compared to very good or excellent). By 2019, that number had risen to 40 percent.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the mental health of Canadian youths. In 2020, 58 percent of Canadians aged 15-24 reported fair or poor mental health and nearly one in four hospitalizations for children and youth aged 5-24 were due to mental health conditions.

What has changed in the last decade to explain this rise in poor mental health among youth? Some psychologists point to the recent cultural emphasis on safety as a contributor.

Shift in children's safety

In previous decades, American and Canadian children enjoyed more freedom, even though there were rising crime rates. The crime wave in Canada rose steeply from the 60s through the 80s until it peaked in the early 1990s. Cable TV became widespread during the same period, meaning that news of crimes spread farther and quicker than ever before.

This surge spurred safety initiatives like sharing pictures of missing children on milk cartons and crime shows like America's Most Wanted. It's no wonder parents became increasingly fearful and protective.

Crime rates began to come down in the 1990s, but fear among parents remained. This is where the problem of being over cautious begins. The concept of safety started to extend beyond children's physical safety to emotional and psychological comfort. This denied children experiences they needed to learn and grow.

Parental overprotection has been shown to foster unhealthy coping mechanisms in children. Overprotected children are more likely to both internalize problems (as in anxiety and depression) and externalize them (as in delinquency, defiance or substance abuse).

Some psychologists propose that overprotection can morph into what they call "safetyism," which teaches kids negative thought patterns similar to those experienced by the anxious and depressed. Safetyism can over-prioritize a young person's safety to the exclusion of other practical and moral concerns.

It is natural to want to avoid problems, but avoiding things that bring us discomfort can reinforce a belief that we cannot handle certain issues and, over time, make us less capable.

Unhelpful thought patterns

Here are three unhealthy thought patterns to monitor in yourself and your children:

Identify negative filtering. Do not underestimate the positives of experiences like unsupervised play (joy, independence, problem-solving, risk-assessment, resilience) when considering the potential negative

consequences.

Be aware of dichotomous thinking. Do not fall into the good or bad trap. There's a world of possibility between one or the other. Considering people, ideas, places or situations as either good or evil (but never both or somewhere in between) fosters a polarizing "us vs. them" attitude and eliminates nuance.

Recognize emotional reasoning. Feeling "unsafe" (uncomfortable or anxious), does not mean you are actually physically unsafe. If you avoid all stress, you will never learn to overcome stressors or understand your full potential. Avoiding hurdles can make us think we are more weak or fragile than we are.

Painting the world as a place with dangers at every turn has created anxious youths who avoid activities they previously would have experimented with. Rising rates of loneliness and anxiety mean some youth are delaying getting a job, driving a car, having sex, drinking alcohol and dating. Research supports that overprotective parenting (such as "helicopter parenting") decreases adolescents' well-being, motivation, independence and ability to deal with problems in a healthy way.

Generational trends show that across all social and economic demographics, American teens are putting off activities they deem "adult" and don't crave adult freedom as previous generations did.

They spend less time unsupervised by parents because they're worried about what's out in the world, and they think they can't handle it. They don't date or have sex because they're worried about broken hearts, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. They don't drink alcohol because they're worried about drunkenly making mistakes and what people will think of them afterwards. They don't drive because they are

happy to rely on their parents for transportation.

While some of these are rational consequences to avoid, they shouldn't feel so overwhelming as to keep youths from transitioning into adulthood. Broken hearts teach you about what you want in a [romantic partner](link), young people can be taught about safe sex, alcohol can be drunk in moderate amounts and mistakes are healthy, human and normal. Teens shouldn't be so afraid of life that they no longer feel excited to live it.

Without opportunities to explore and learn their limits, youths risk internalizing a false sense of helplessness and becoming depressed and anxious.

Helpful thought patterns

Positive thought patterns must be developed within ourselves. That means giving ourselves, our teens and our children the opportunities needed to become independent, resilient and autonomous. And that means embracing negative experiences like frustration, conflict and boredom.

Here are some words of advice:

Mind your mind. Your thoughts are powerful. They dictate how you see the world, others and yourself, so foster positive, rational thought patterns.

Raise your voice. Encourage curiosity and productive disagreement. We will never learn to be open-minded or become well-rounded people if we do not challenge our own beliefs, listen to others' perspectives and recognize our potential to be wrong. Every aspect of our lives, including our relationships and jobs, depends on our ability to argue in an

effective, respectful and productive way without becoming overemotional.

Open your heart. Try to give others the benefit of the doubt because most people do not intend to do harm. Do not let fear dictate your thoughts and actions.

Trust yourself. Life will always throw curve balls and there will not always be an authority to defer to. Life is not safe or risk-free. The best protection is the knowledge that you can handle life's challenges.

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