Study: Youth now have more mental health issues

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In an Oct. 11, 2000 file photo Yale University students and others spend a fall afternoon on Yale University's Cross Campus in New Haven, Conn. In the background is the Sterling Memorial Library, the main library for the university. A new study has found that five times as many high school and college students are dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues than youth of the same age who were studied in the Great Depression era. (AP Photo/Bob Child/file)

(AP) -- A new study has found that five times as many high school and college students are dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues than youth of the same age who were studied in the Great Depression era.

The findings, culled from responses to a popular psychological questionnaire used as far back as 1938, confirm what counselors on campuses nationwide have long suspected as more students struggle with the stresses of school and life in general.

"It's another piece of the puzzle - that yes, this does seem to be a problem, that there are more young people who report anxiety and depression," says Jean Twenge, a San Diego State University psychology professor and the study's lead author. "The next question is: what do we do about it?"

Though the study, released Monday, does not provide a definitive correlation, Twenge and mental health professionals speculate that a popular culture increasingly focused on the external - from wealth to looks and status - has contributed to the uptick in mental health issues.

Pulling together the data for the study was no small task. Led by Twenge, researchers at five universities analyzed the responses of 77,576 high school or college students who, from 1938 through 2007, took the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, or MMPI. The results will be published in a future issue of the Clinical Psychology Review.

Overall, an average of five times as many students in 2007 surpassed thresholds in one or more mental health categories, compared with those who did so in 1938. A few individual categories increased at an even greater rate - with six times as many scoring high in two areas:

- "hypomania," a measure of anxiety and unrealistic optimism (from 5 percent of students in 1938 to 31 percent in 2007)

- and depression (from 1 percent to 6 percent).

Twenge said the most current numbers may even be low given all the students taking antidepressants and other psychotropic medications, which help alleviate symptoms the survey asks about.

The study also showed increases in "psychopathic deviation," which is loosely related to psychopathic behavior in a much milder form and is

defined as having trouble with authority and feeling as though the rules don't apply to you. The percentage of young people who scored high in that category increased from 5 percent in 1938 to 24 percent in 2007.

Twenge previously documented the influence of pop culture pressures on young people's mental health in her 2006 book "Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled - and More Miserable Than Ever Before." Several studies also have captured the growing interest in being rich, with 77 percent of those questioned for UCLA's 2008 national survey of college freshmen saying it was "essential" or "very important" to be financially well off.

Experts say such high expectations are a recipe for disappointment. Meanwhile, they also note some well-meaning but overprotective parents have left their children with few real-world coping skills, whether that means doing their own budget or confronting professors on their own.

"If you don't have these skills, then it's very normal to become anxious," says Dr. Elizabeth Alderman, an adolescent medicine specialist at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City who hopes the new study will be a wake-up call to those parents.

Students themselves point to everything from pressure to succeed - self-imposed and otherwise - to a fast-paced world that's only sped up by the technology they love so much.

Sarah Ann Slater, a 21-year-old junior at the University of Miami, says she feels pressure to be financially successful, even when she doesn't want to.

"The unrealistic feelings that are ingrained in us from a young age - that we need to have massive amounts of money to be considered a success - not only lead us to a higher likelihood of feeling inadequate, anxious or

depressed, but also make us think that the only value in getting an education is to make a lot of money, which is the wrong way to look at it," says Slater, an international studies major who plans to go to graduate school overseas.

The study is not without its skeptics, among them Richard Shadick, a psychologist who directs the counseling center at Pace University in New York. He says, for instance, that the sample data weren't necessarily representative of all college students. (Many who answered the MMPI questionnaire were students in introductory psychology courses at four-year institutions.)

Shadick says his own experience leaves little doubt more students are seeking mental health services. But he and others think that may be due in part to heightened awareness of such services. Twenge notes the MMPI isn't given only to those who seek services.

Others, meanwhile, say the research helps advance the conversation with hard numbers.

"It actually provides some support to the observations," says Scott Hunter, director of pediatric neuropsychology at the University of Chicago's Comer Children's Hospital. Before his current post, Hunter was at the University of Virginia, where his work included counseling a growing number of students with mental health concerns.

While even Twenge concedes more research is needed to pinpoint a cause, Hunter says the study "also helps us understand what some of the reasons behind it might be." He notes Twenge's inclusion of data showing that factors such as materialism among young people have had a similar upswing. She also noted that divorce rates for their parents have gone up, which may lead to less stability.

Amid it all, Hunter says this latest generation has been raised in a "you can do anything atmosphere." And that, he says, "sets up a lot of false expectation" that inevitably leads to distress for some.

It's also meant heartache for parents.

"I don't remember it being this hard," says a mother from northern New Jersey, whose 15-year-old daughter is being treated for depression. She asked not to be identified to respect her daughter's privacy.

"We all wanted to be popular, but there wasn't this emphasis on being perfect and being super skinny," she says. "In addition, it's 'How much do your parents make?'

"I'd like to think that's not relevant, but I can't imagine that doesn't play a role."

More information: Twenge's site: http://www.jeantwenge.com/

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