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**Presence Over Perfection: Understanding Anxiety in the  
Tech-driven Society  
BACHELOR THESIS**

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Tech-driven Society  
BACHELOR THESIS**

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## Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor's thesis is my own work and has not been published in part or elsewhere. All used literature and other sources are attributed and cited in References. Since I am not a native speaker, I used AI powered tools to correct my grammar.

My name: Kristína Moncoľová

Signature: 

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## Abstrakt

Bakalárska práca sa zameriava na rastúcu úzkosť medzi mladými ľuďmi v rôznych krajinách, najmä v anglofónnych krajinách, mnohých európskych štátoch a vyspelom západnom svete. Skúma príčiny mentálnej epidémie, ktorá postihuje Generáciu Z (narodenú v rokoch 1997-2012), a porovnáva údaje zo Spojených štátov amerických a Slovenska. Bakalárska práca skúma, ako politické, kultúrne a ekonomické kontexty ovplyvňujú problémy mentálneho zdravia, najmä úzkosť. Sleduje históriu úzkosti, vyzdvihuje rozdiel medzi strachom a úzkosťou a skúma, prečo ľudia zažívajú obavy a kedy a prečo tieto obavy prerastajú do úzkostnej poruchy. Okrem toho táto práca zahŕňa rozhovory s psychiatrami, psychoterapeutmi a psychologičkami zo Slovenska, aby poskytla praktické pohľady. Jej úlohou je zistiť, či je Generácia Z najúzkostlivejšou generáciou v histórii.

*Kľúčové slová: úzkosť, strach, duševné zdravie, generácia Z, sociálne siete, komunita, spiritualita, blízkosť, inklúzia*

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### Abstract

The bachelor thesis focuses on the rising anxiety among young people across various countries, particularly within the Anglosphere, many European nations, and the developed Western world. It explores the causes behind the mental health epidemic affecting Generation Z (born 1997-2012), comparing data from the USA and Slovakia. The bachelor thesis examines how political, cultural, and economic contexts influence mental health issues, especially anxiety. It traces the history of anxiety, highlighting the distinction between fear and anxiety, and investigates why individuals experience worry and when and why these concerns develop into more pervasive anxiety. Furthermore, this work includes interviews with psychiatrists, psychotherapists and psychologists from Slovakia to provide further practical insights. Finally, it seeks to determine whether Generation Z is the most anxious generation in history.

*Keywords: anxiety, fear, mental health, generation Z, social media, community, spirituality, closeness, inclusion*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Frank Furedi (2018) in his book *How Fear Works, Culture of Fear in the 21st Century* highlights that the emotion of fear has always been present in people's minds, but what is changing is the perception of fear in different historical ages and cultures. Fear was considered something anti-heroic during war times because people needed to stop fearing death in order to be willing to go to war with the risk of dying. Lately, as the world has progressed, so has the concept of fear, which has become less stigmatized, allowing people to feel fear, for instance fear from the future is nowadays very common. Fear of death is one of the most common fears throughout the centuries. Fear can disappear when the cause of fear disappears, but the fear of death can never fully disappear, as the cause will always be there. It can only be understood and perceived as a different emotion or accepted. Fear always has a clear cause, but anxiety does not need to have a clear cause. Anxiety is a prolonged state of worrying about a future threat that may not even exist.

Anxiety disorder is defined either by immense fear without a clear cause or by fear of very common things that are not dangerous when anxiety affects the everyday functioning of the individual in a negative sense (Hašto, 2024). While fear is useful because it can save individuals from dangerous and life-threatening situations, anxiety disorder is not useful because it takes away the joy of everyday life and makes things that are not dangerous or do not exist seem like extreme threats. Being anxious is like living in a continuous state of threat, feeling fear all or most of the time, being in a state of emergency all the time or most of the time, while a state of emergency is not needed. Anxiety can cause panic attacks, depression, and even death from despair, such as self-inflicted death from alcoholism, suicide, drugs, etc. This death could have been prevented if the individual's mental health were not in such poor condition. "In the USA by 2014, for the first time, more people in the group of white adults aged 45-54 were dying of drugs, alcohol, and suicide than from heart disease and by 2016, more Americans were dying each year from drug overdoses than died during the entire Vietnam War, more Americans now die deaths of despair every two weeks than died during eighteen years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq." (Sandel, 2021, p. 187).

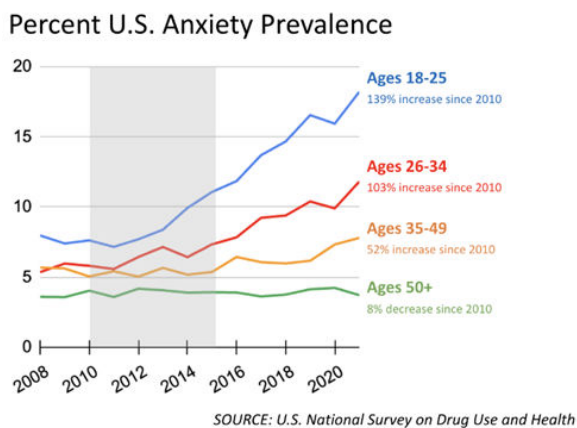
Nevertheless, anxiety can sometimes be an adequate reaction to a very dangerous or tragic situation (Ballx, 2025). Fear and anxiety are normal human emotions; the problem arises when an individual's anxiety prevents them from daily functioning and has a negative

influence on their everyday life. This is a key factor when diagnosing anxiety disorder (Ballx, 2025). The cause of these emotions can be accurate, while high intensity should be treated with the help of psychiatrists or psychotherapists. Fear and anxiety at low or moderate intensity are not problematic but can be healthy reactions to tragedy. For instance, it is adequate for Ukrainians to struggle with anxiety during the war in Ukraine; it is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

“Since 1980, anxiety has been a disorder in psychiatric classifications” (Crocq, 2015). Even ancient philosophy dealt with the problem of anxiety and its prevention (Crocq, 2022). Anxiety has always existed alongside fear, but there is also a difference in society's perception of anxiety and the growing amount of anxiety in today's society. The modern world is more focused on mental disorders, which has led to more awareness about them. However, when mental disorders become a main topic in society, they can paradoxically cause more mental illness than they prevent. People can become more anxious when surrounded by discussions of anxiety and anxious people. Feelings are contagious, and negative feelings are more contagious than positive feelings (Haidt, 2024).

Generation Z (born 1996-2012) is statistically the most anxious generation, and the greatest increase in anxiety occurred after 2010, when technology and social media became commonplace (Haidt, 2024). Surveys claim that the quality of mental health is worsening every year, especially for Generation Z (Haidt, 2024). There is an atmosphere in society that acknowledges that young people today are more anxious compared to young people in the past. The purpose of this work is to determine what has caused this atmosphere.

Graph 1:



## 2. HYPOTHESIS

There are three main reasons why generation Z has become the anxious generation: 1. The great deterioration of local community, the loss of community 2. Overprotective parenthood, the decline of play-based childhood 3. Phone-based childhood.

### 3. Causes of anxiety

#### 3.1 The Culture of Fear

This fearful atmosphere in which we now live is called The Culture of Fear, which is one of the causes of the rising anxiety disorder. To understand the epidemic of mental illness, especially anxiety, it is necessary to understand how fear works and the current culture that is unfortunately based on fear, since anxiety disorder is a form of extreme fear that negatively affects an individual's daily functioning. Fear is widespread in today's world, and sadly, courage is often replaced by cowardice (Furedi, 2018). But why do people fear? Fear is an emotion that is mostly connected to the future. Additionally, fear is an emotion that is often tied to things that an individual has zero influence over. We fear things that we cannot control or predict, and things we cannot change are the scariest. Slovak psychiatrist Ballx (2025), who works as a psychotherapist, has also patients who are afraid they will lose what they currently have. In the 21st century, it is common to describe a situation with average or low risk as life-threatening.

Young people today are surrounded by beliefs that emotional tensions, which are typical during puberty and growing up, are stressful events. They are told that these stressors are so difficult to cope with that young people, and even children, cannot handle them (Furedi, 2018). When people are told they cannot accomplish something, it creates too much pressure, and especially in such a vulnerable age, they are not trusted to manage on their own, they are underrated, they get help without asking for it. This can lead to demotivation and, eventually, anxiety. In the past, people were not overprotected, and their mental health outcomes were better. "Yet it is through dealing with such emotional upheavals that young people learn to manage risks and gain an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Instead of being encouraged to develop aspirations for independence, many youngsters are subject to influences that promote childish behaviour. This is the unintended outcome of parenting practices that rely on levels of support and supervision more suited for much younger children but are now encouraged even in higher education settings" (Furedi, 2018 p. 195 ).

Vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic became a source of fear and polarization. Although scientists had no doubts about the safety of vaccines, some immoral individuals

sought personal profit by spreading misinformation about vaccines and their possible (fake) dangers. Even though it is a very rational decision to listen to experts rather than random people on social media, people are not always rational. They often make decisions based on emotions, and fear is a very strong emotion. In this age of post-truth and the Culture of Fear, fear can unfortunately drive people away from beneficial situations, and in the worst possible outcome, it can kill them. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccine scepticism was not as widespread. Since the pandemic, anxiety levels have risen (NCZI, 2023).

People in the 21st century are bombarded by the media through news, newspapers, social media, and so on with messages about safety, criminals, and threats. The high volume of bad news in the media creates the illusion that the world is getting worse and more dangerous, when in reality, the world is becoming safer (Brooks, 2024). But even before globalization and media, murderers existed; they just weren't reported on in every news outlet or newspaper.

Additionally, another consequence of The Culture of Fear is the phenomenon of eliminating risk and zero harm. Society has become obsessed with safety and now considers it a primary moral value. "Personal insecurities expressed through self-harming, food disorders, concern about body image, and fears about relationships have become public safety issues" (Furedi, 2018 p. 212 ). The impossible mission of constantly trying to eliminate something that cannot be eliminated can have a very negative impact on mental health and lead to anxiety. "Paradoxically, the achievement of unprecedented levels of physical safety coincides with a heightened sense of insecurity, since it continually draws attention to safety as an absent condition, reinforcing the sense of insecurity" (Furedi, 2018, p. 222). According to Furedi (2018), the elimination of risk is now mentioned almost everywhere, including meeting with doctors, pharmacies, universities, and workplaces. "Though the safety utopia outlined by the advocates of zero harm often comes across as a form of cultural fantasy, this objective is vigorously pursued by numerous institutions and campaign groups, which regard the word 'accident' as an expression of secular blasphemy" (Furedi, 2018, p. 220). This belief that "all harm is preventable" creates an atmosphere where people who have experienced accidents are blamed and labelled as irresponsible. Since 2014, the UK passed a law stating that when a child visits an emergency room, their information is logged in a national database set up to identify potential abuse victims. Not only is society obsessed with physical safety, but it also

applies this obsession to emotional safety, believing that emotional injuries can damage people for life, when in fact emotional injury is limited only by imagination (Furedi, 2018). The Culture of Fear rejects acceptable and normal distress, making people think that everything unpleasant that happens to them is damaging to their emotions and health and marks them for life.

Furedi (2018) describes his experience while writing his PhD research paper. As part of his research, he went to Kenya for a year and conducted interviews with people he did not know personally, often in remote villages in the Rift Valley of Kenya, where it was not possible to stay in touch with the outside world. Nowadays, an ethics committee would ban such interviews due to the risk of traveling to an unknown country and interacting with unknown people. "Their attempt to turn safety into an ethical value compromises the freedom to explore, and in some cases, the quality of research" (Furedi, 2018, p. 207). Furedi (2018) correctly claims that people had fears before, but of their ability to ask the right questions and normal, small amounts of stress. Nowadays, there are certainly many academic papers written without such valuable first-hand experience, due to strict ethics committee rules. "The freedom to pursue scientific experiments and innovate is often restrained by the imperative of safety and concern with side effects" (Furedi, 2018, p. 230). The University of Leicester has even created a manual for students titled "How Can I Be Safe While Interviewing People?"

When every common activity involving human interaction includes a safety warning, complete with emergency contact numbers in case someone feels unsafe, it can create the perception that the situation is dangerous (Furedi, 2018). For example, in Western countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia, meetings with doctors and pharmacists sometimes involve a third person for safety reasons, which creates a sense that even a doctor's and pharmacies appointment could be dangerous (Furedi, 2018). An example from my own experience is the orientation week at Tilburg University, where the booklet with program included a number to call in case of sexual harassment or harassment in general. These warnings can create the impression that sexual harassment is expected, making the university feel unsafe.

For instance, the Slovak political party *Progresívne Slovensko* (Progressive Slovakia) held a public discussion about violence against women, titled “No More Victims.” This is an example of the impossible elimination of risk, because, while it would be great if we could guarantee a world with no victims of violence or domestic violence, it is not possible. We can only ensure the lowest number of victims, but sadly, it is impossible to eliminate all victims of violence in the world. No one has the power to secure this; the planet is too large, and there are too many people. But the choice of the catchy title is a mirror of our society, it reflects on the culture of fear. They have chosen this title because the elimination of risk and achieving a perfect safety is now a popular trend. The utopian and idealistic clickbait headline of the discussion shows how people search for something that cannot be found and consequently they become anxious about it, it is the utopian and idealistic ambitions for perfectness including perfectness in zero risks that actually leads us towards the anxious life, in some point of the life there comes a frustration from not achieving this type of goals. Of course, everybody would appreciate if there was no other woman victim, but the doable solution is to have the lowest number of women victims, it is not possible to secure safety every women living on this planet, it is even not possible to secure it to every woman in Slovakia, we need to realize that we are not omnipotent in order to become less anxious.

The Culture of Fear causes people to be more afraid, even though its goal is to eliminate risks and create perfect safety. Young people in the past were not surrounded by ethics committees and could experience more things, thus learning more. One of the causes of rising anxiety is society's obsession with safety, which leads to stress and anxiety. Society in the 21st century has become obsessed with safety, considering it a primary moral value (Furedi, 2018). This obsession creates an atmosphere where only overprotective parenting is seen as moral. Overprotective parenting does not prepare children for adult life and can cause anxiety in adulthood. A child's curiosity should not be suppressed by parents (Ballx, 2025).

It is not surprising that statistics about anxiety and mental health are worsening in this chaotic atmosphere, where common everyday matters have become objects of fear and risk. The atmosphere in today's society is a vast Culture of Fear (Furedi, 2018). It is very stressful to live in a culture of fear, in an environment where activities that have been

common throughout history are now considered dangerous or immoral. It is no wonder that people are becoming more anxious; they have more triggers for anxiety.

### 3.2 Meritocracy

Not only can the culture of fear cause anxieties, but it can also be due to the culture of meritocracy. Sandel (2021) in his book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good* correctly points out the consequences of living in the age of meritocracy. Meritocracy is a very harmful philosophy of life that says: everything successful in life is just the result of effort and talent. This short-sighted point of view can indeed cause anxieties, since success is mostly about happiness and privilege. The starting point in life, where we are born, is a very important factor which we cannot choose. Success is never a result of just effort or just talent; it is an interplay of circumstances that often comes together with hard work and putting in effort, but people first need to be enabled to try. There is a huge difference between whether a child is born into a rich family or a poor family, whether the child is born into a supportive family or an abusive one. The things that matter most are not determined by us, so success is never fully determined by the person. There is always a bit of privilege, and usually a lot of privilege. As a result, people who were not lucky enough to have the privileges in life or be wealthy enough might feel shame and blame themselves for not being successful in life. "It is doubtful that even a perfect meritocracy would be satisfying, either morally or politically" (Sandel, 2021 p. 28). There is nothing moral about rewarding those who have talent, since having or lacking talent is not really our own doing. Society tends to reward and punish people for things that are not their decisions, but rather the consequences of their life from the starting point they could not choose. We cannot choose where we are born, but according to meritocracy, everybody can reach success by putting in effort, while they miss the very important fact that it matters where you come from and it will always affect your possibilities. People born into generational poverty cannot be compared to or expected to meet the same demands as people born into middle class or rich families. However, despite its unfairness, these expectations still exist. Meritocracy does not help anyone; rather, it is harmful to the people who had less luck and privilege in their lives, which leads to anxieties and other mental illnesses. The pressure for ambition and success is huge, and it can sometimes be counterproductive. Meritocracy divides society into winners and losers, while "among the winners, it generates hubris; among the

losers, humiliation and resentment” (Sandel, 2021 p. 28). Humiliation is a very powerful negative emotion. The brain reacts to humiliation the same way it reacts when our life is under physical threat (Hicks, 2011). Winners gain more self-confidence and will think that their success is only caused by their effort and nothing else, while, as a consequence, winners will look down upon losers. “Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule. For the more we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility.” (Sandel, 2021 p. 29). Gratitude and humility are preventative factors of mental health. People who end up as "losers" in a meritocratic society might have anxieties or depression because they may start to think that their failure is their own fault and that they lack the talent and drive to succeed (Sandel, 2021). “Humans have developed all kinds of strategies to mask our inner feelings of unworthiness, from medicating ourselves with drugs and alcohol to self-deception, to starting wars to reclaim lost dignity” (Sandel, 2021 p. 188 ). The majority of young people in Slovakia contacts the crisis helpline IPČKO, because they are afraid of failure, failure in front of their surroundings, but mainly failure in front of themselves (Marošová, 2025).

### 3.3 Social Inequalities

The anxiety of Generation Z is, among other things, connected with the rise of social inequalities (Pietraš, 2016). People are becoming more and more insecure because of the social decline. Western society is divided into two groups of people based on privilege and luck: one group consists of those who are able to enjoy the benefits of globalization, and the other group consists of those who have not done anything wrong compared to the first group, but are unsuccessful and socially declining. Not only is the second group more vulnerable to being part of the anxious generation, since living in a world where you feel your failure and social decline makes it very hard not to be anxious and to avoid mental illnesses, but the second group is also more vulnerable to voting for radical populist political parties that promise to solve their career success and social prestige, which, in the end, not only contributes to the poor mental health of young people, but also threatens democracy. “The hard reality is that Trump was elected by tapping a wellspring of anxieties, frustrations,

and legitimate grievances to which the mainstream parties had no compelling answer” (Sandel, 2021, p. 21). The second group of people faces constant pressure from failure, since nowadays the economic conditions are not ideal. People have trouble finding jobs and affording their own living without their parents because of the high prices and fewer available jobs (Pietraš, 2016).

### 3.4 Negative and Anxious Atmosphere in Society

Parents are often convinced that their children will have a worse life than they did, and young people are also often aware of and afraid of this fact (Zlámlová, 2022). Young people nowadays have more problems with stable living, finding a stable job, and for the generation before, these things were easier; it was easier for them to secure themselves and their families. When it is expected of young people to have a worse life than their parents did, how can they feel happy? It is terrible to live with the existential fear of the future. Politicians gain from this existential fear of young people because those who are afraid and sad are the easiest to manipulate. The quality of democracy can be judged by the number of happy people in a particular country.

### 3.5 Main Causes

Though, there are three main reasons why generation Z have become the anxious generation: 1. The great deterioration of local community, the loss of community 2. Overprotective parenthood, the decline of play-based childhood 3. Phone-based childhood.

#### **1. The Great Deterioration of Local Community, the Loss of Community**

“Many social and cultural psychologists believe that anxieties about personal safety are the outcome of the process of individuation” (Furedi, 2018 p. 211). Young people that were part of club such as volleyball or dance with the leadership of experienced adult who leads the teenagers in a right way has shown to be a very helpful factor when it comes to well-being, even the teenagers who experienced a lot of bad things in childhood and then became part of such a club, it significantly helped them, they became part of community (Hašto, 2024). Community is one of the most important factors in human life and helps prevent anxiety (Rausch, 2024). In communities, there is a high level of trust, the same or similar identity, and often rituals that make people realize that they share common values and can rely on each other (Kaplan & Bryk, 2024). Communities usually hold on and do not fall apart

because high trust evokes in people commitment and responsibility toward their community (Haidt, 2024). But this is not the type of commitment that is done out of duty; this type of commitment is done out of will and love, which is part of strong friendship, and strong friendship is one of the best cures for anxiety.

An appropriate example is religious communities. Religious and conservative children tend to be happier than secular, liberal children (Rausch, 2024). “Kids growing up in strong religious communities appear to be among the least affected by the screen-saturation of American childhood, as documented by Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch. They are more likely to spend time in person with friends or trusted community members and neighbours, and they are less likely to spend time on screens. This way of life makes them generally happier than children from non-religious communities” (Kaplan & Bryk, 2024).

Communities effectively prevent drug addiction, screen addiction, and loneliness. Such is the power of good relationships in life, which are fulfilled by a high level of trust. With the decline of communities, the mental health crisis began to rise (Rausch, 2024).

Furthermore, part of belonging to a community consists of socialization outside the house, socialization with peers. Nathan Kellerman (2001), in her article “Transmission of Holocaust Trauma – An Integrative View,” claims that the children of survivors of the Holocaust tend to inherit this trauma from their parents, while some children who are doing well in socialization outside the house, who are part of a group, part of a peer group, part of a community, do not tend to inherit the trauma from their parents, because being part of a community is able to protect them from anxiety that consists of the rumination of their parent’s trauma. Young people need to be in contact (in person, not online) with their social group, with their peer group (Marošová, 2025). The feeling of belonging somewhere is essential for everyone. While food is needed for good physical health, the need to belong somewhere is needed for good mental health. Being part of a community means belonging somewhere. It is a form of closeness needed to survive. One of the things that scares people the most is being excluded. That is why, in Ash’s experiment, people said the wrong answer, even though they were aware of the right answer, because everybody else said the wrong answer, and those people wanted to belong somewhere and did not want to be excluded. So, they adapted to others, even though they were aware that they would claim an incorrect answer (LibreTexts Project). Being part of a community is such a powerful feeling

that it can save lives.

Nowadays, people are very self-centered and forget to help others, forget to sacrifice something for others, and have lost trust in others (Bellová, 2024b). These people live in the assumption that there is no one in this world that you can rely on besides yourself; *everybody in this world will hurt you, so just focus on yourself and your success* (Bellová, 2024b). While this way of thinking sounds like prevention of anxiety and unhappiness, it is actually the opposite. People need functional relationships in life to be happy. When people cannot trust anyone, they never experience the beauty of friendship, the beauty of love, and it is no surprise that they feel lonely and have problems with mental health. Who would be happy in a world where there is no one you can rely on?

Corporations benefit from the loneliness and vulnerability of mentally injured people, for instance, through applications and ads promoting new forms of spirituality, whose profit is based on supporting self-centred thinking, presenting themselves as modern religion while they have forgotten the uncomfortable parts of religion, such as humility, self-denial, penance, and the willingness to sacrifice something for someone or something, such as one's comfort (Bellová, 2024b).

We live in such comfort that even a little discomfort is unbearable for us. In this age of comfort and cheap dopamine, people are not willing to sacrifice something for someone or to work hard on something, which only makes their mental health worse (Bellová, 2024b). When young people are fighting against patriarchy, traditional values, or climate change, they might be, in reality, fighting against themselves, using this as a cover-up for their own mental issues (Bellová, 2024b). Liberal women's lives consist of social media with algorithms of Instagram profiles, which tell them that nothing is their fault, nothing is in their hands in this patriarchal world, and that everything is the fault of patriarchy and sexism. There are advices such as "your body has nothing to do with unhealthy food and lack of movement, but this ugly, sexist, patriarchal world is the only one to blame" (Bellová, 2024a). For instance, when there is a popular narrative that "maternity is very difficult and often times not happy," you start to doubt yourself when you are happy during maternity. These women consequently think they have almost no control over their success in life because they are convinced that everything wrong in their life is because of the patriarchal social construct, and they can only be angry at it, because the social media profiles often advise

them of this, which only triggers a mental health crisis (Bellová, 2024a). This brings anxiety to people who otherwise would not suffer from it. While conservative women think they have more control over their life, they consider traditional values such as marriage and family as automatic and are, in general, happier (Bellová, 2024a).

Suicides and mental health crises do not usually happen to people who can find support in other people. Healthy relationships in life are one possibility of how to prevent mental health difficulties. Healthy relationships are foundational within communities, especially within religious communities.

## **2. Overprotective Parenthood, the Decline of Play-based Childhood**

There are two basic behavioural inhibition systems: Discover mode is when you are excited about new experiences and people and see them as opportunities, while defend mode is when you are afraid of new experiences and people and see them as threats (Haidt, 2024). Jonathan Haidt (2024) gives the example of trees that, without wind, live shorter lives than those that experience a little wind. Children are not fragile, but anti-fragile, and they also need “little wind” in life.

Over the years, the environment for children, like playgrounds and kindergartens, has formed into extra safe spaces where there is no risk for small injuries or rejection from the sports team. But those little risks, like bruises while getting off the playground or being expelled from the team in sports, are needed to be experienced in order to manage risks in adult life. Safe space means that we can disagree with each other respectfully, but in nowadays society it has been changed to the narrative that claims “I do not deserve to be disagreed with” (Haidt, 2024). Safetyism is a term claiming that people should always feel comfortable and safe; however, this is not possible, and the desire to live in this type of world, to raise children in this type of world, only mentally ruins people. Nowadays, a lot of children are raised in safetyism, which does not prepare them for real life, since adults or even teenagers and children cannot feel safe for their whole life. There are some situations in which they feel uncomfortable or unsafe (Haidt, 2024). These over-safe spaces are, ironically, harmful. Playgrounds for children that eliminate all the risks, and also, play without adults is not really happening anymore, while children need to experience play without adults. With safetyism, we have blocked the smooth transition from childhood to adulthood. Schools with extra safe environments are not able to prepare children for real

life and its struggles.

The year when you are allowed to be home alone and go outside alone is getting higher and higher, while the Generation X (born 1965–1980) was able to play outside without parents and enjoyed it, and now they are happy about it. However, Generation Z is not allowed to play outside alone, because they are terrified of sexual predators on the street, even though the number of sexual predators outside was much higher during the youth of Generation X than Generation Z. Sexual predators are now online, where children are not protected from them; social media is full of sexual predators, not streets.

The loss of communities has been followed by a loss of trust. Parents are now afraid to let their children play alone in the street since they do not know and do not trust their neighbours, news are full of tragedies, and cars started to be part of the street in large numbers. All of these factors contributed to the situation where the street was not a safe place anymore for parents to let their children just play there without adult supervision. Parents became overprotective, which led to the loss of free play (Murray, 2024).

According to a survey from Great Britain from the year 2016, three-quarters of children spend less time outdoors (i.e., in parks, woods, and playgrounds) than prisoners serving their sentences (Bellová 2024a). This is a very unfortunate fact, because children need a play-based childhood, including play in the street with neighbours' children, with no adult supervision (Haidt, 2024). Children learn that their friends live in a close, measurable distance and also that they can experiment during free play and experience a little risk with free play (Murray 2024). Risks and small injuries, a small amount of discomfort in free play, prepare children for adult life, which is usually full of problems, to handle those problems better. With the modern age came the decline of free play, which was one of the factors that contributed to the 2010 global mental health crisis (Haidt, 2024).

An experiment, which consisted of stopping traffic for one afternoon in the street to allow children to just play with each other on the street, was not only beneficial for the children who played safely in the street, but also for their parents to build strong friendships or good relationships with their own neighbourhood. This experiment also revealed the fact that children did not even know that their classmates were also their neighbours. The traffic-free street brings community life and play-based childhood back to life (Murray, 2024).

Consequently, one of the steps to prevent the mental health crisis of young people is that

architects and politicians ought to think of traffic-free, family-friendly streets with the purpose of allowing children to play and be part of the neighbourhood community.

### **3. Phone-based Childhood**

“Community values, attitudes, and expectations provide a cultural context for the articulation of individual fears” (Furedi, 2018, p. 6). The environment in which a person functions is crucial to their appropriate or inappropriate functioning. When we look at the statistics of rising anxiety, especially among people aged 18-25 (graph in the introduction), we can see that there might be something wrong in those environments. Jonathan Haidt (2024) claims that the main mistake in community values, attitudes, and expectations is social media and the continuous presence of our smartphones, social media is connected with negative aspects such as addiction, sleep deprivation, bullying, sexual abuse, and unattainable beauty standards.

Jonathan Haidt compares phone-based childhood and teens devoting their lives to social media as if they were living on Mars. The reason for this comparison is that children and teens are not developed enough to be able to use social media and similar platforms. Not only are they unable to understand social media, for instance, understanding the power of filters and face-tuning, but also these years are crucial for spending life on Earth, with real people, not with virtual people, in order to properly develop their brains and become adults able to handle critical situations. It is compared to Mars because social media are like a different planet. Social media are not real life; they are just cherry-picked life moments, which are often fake because of Photoshop. Also, someone smiling in a picture with a beautiful face does not mean they have a perfect life. The person with the smile can be unhappy, but these photos create the illusion of a perfect life. Children and teens are not able to see that this is just an illusion, that these people do not look perfect and do not live perfectly because they only see a perfect Instagram feed. Perfect Instagram feed are exposed to them when they are unprepared due to their low age, and it leads to hours of comparison with unattainable beauty and life standards which eventually leads to anxiety.

The things that are supposed to be learned from real life and role models they should see through their eyes are instead seen online, which makes them anxious, depressed, and lonely. Generation Z is the first generation that has lived their formative and crucial years of

childhood and puberty with phones. With phones came anxiety. Of course, people face different crises like war and climate change, but these crises are part of human history and have been around for generations, yet other generations were not as depressed (Haidt, 2024).

Social media is purposefully designed to be addictive. The owners do not care about the mental health of their users; they care about the time spent on social media because the more time people spend on social media, the more money they earn. This is the same as with cigarettes and alcohol, but with those, we were at least able to ban them for children. Social media accounts, however, are available from the age of 13, but the only thing you need to do is give the social media your date of birth, so millions of children have been using social media with fake birth years, including me since I was 6. We have mostly managed to let adults do whatever they want and protect children from the things that adults are allowed to do, such as casinos, driving, smoking, drinking alcohol. We need to protect children from social media and video games too. Phones are not needed for children; moreover, they are harmful to them.

The rate of major depression in teens (ages 12-17) has risen by 145% for girls and 161% for boys since 2010 (Haidt, 2024). The increase in anxiety, depression, suicide rates, and emergency room visits for self-harm has risen in almost all countries simultaneously. This phenomenon cannot be attributed to any other factor than phone-based childhood, as it cannot be explained by anything else. Why would such an increase happen in numerous countries at the same time with the digital age? Generations before had more wars and more poverty, but less depressions.

During puberty, a very vulnerable stage of life, teenagers are with their phones instead of with their friends. It is proven that puberty is a sensitive and vulnerable phase of life, just like early childhood. One of the problems of early childhood is when a mother, during play with her child, looks into her phone and not into the eyes of the child. Children are sensitive and perceptive to this and they perceive a lack of physical presence from their mothers, which negatively impacts the development of the child. Children need to play and be engaged in play to develop their brains well. People are made that way. Real play is needed,

and when play-based childhood is switched to phone-based childhood, it has disastrous consequences, such as higher depression and suicide rates for teens (Haidt, 2024).

Society has failed by overprotecting children in the real world and under protecting them in the virtual world” (Haidt, 2024). When children are non-stop scrolling through their Instagram feed, they view multiple pieces of information in one minute, something that was not possible in the past. Children needed to function in the real world because functioning in the virtual world did not exist.

Nowadays, when children are learning to function according to the standards of the virtual world, which are not real, they do not become prepared for real-life problems since they do not begin to deal with them. Children spend multiple hours on social media, alone viewing millions of posts, so it is no wonder they feel lonely (Haidt, 2024).

It is also a dilemma for parents since it is very hard for them to ban children from social media and phones because everyone else at school uses them. Also, since children become addicted to them, they behave aggressively when they lose access to social media. It is easier to end a relationship just by clicking one button than to end something eye-to-eye. Since you can end a relationship so easily, you do not have as much motivation to invest in a relationship (Haidt, 2024).

Children have a slow-growth childhood in order to learn cultural skills: how to function in the world, how to function in civilization. When cultural learning is learned through technology like social media or video games, it fails in the real world. It damages their brain and coping mechanisms. They become lonely and succumb to the illusion of the “perfect virtual world,” where they do not find role models in real life but on social media, often influencers with questionable values. It is very important to find role models in real life to see life in a more realistic way. The role models they find between the ages of 9 and 15 influence them for the rest of their lives. They should learn how to recognize facial emotions through real facial reactions; instead, they are learning which emoji to use to best describe their emotions (Haidt, 2024).

When children do not play, they do not learn conflict resolution, which they will need later in life. Phone-based childhood does not prepare children for the challenges they will inevitably face in the real world. Only play-based childhood will prepare them for that.

Jonathan Haidt (2024) has four supporting points about real-world social interactions and relationships that are very needed for proper development and were typical for humans for millions of years before the age of smartphones:

1. “They are **embodied**; we use our bodies to communicate. We are conscious of the bodies of others, and we respond to the bodies of others consciously and unconsciously.
2. They are **synchronous**; they happen at the same time, with subtle cues about timing and turn-taking.
3. They involve primarily **one-to-one** or **one-to-several communication**, with only one interaction happening at a given moment.
4. They take place within communities that have a **high bar for entry and exit**, so people are strongly motivated to invest in relationships and repair rifts when they happen”. (p. 9)

While virtual world interactions are characterized by:

1. “They are **disembodied**; no physical presence is needed, just language. Partners could be (and already are) artificial intelligences.
2. They are heavily **asynchronous**, happening via text-based posts and comments (except for video calls).
3. They involve a substantial number of **one-to-many communications**, broadcasting to a potentially vast audience. Multiple interactions can be happening in parallel.
4. They take place within communities that have a **low bar for entry and exit**. People can block others (ending a relationship with one click) or just quit when they are not pleased. Communities tend to be short-lived, and relationships are often disposable”. (pp. 9-10)

2010 is the year when the age of smartphones became a reality (Haidt, 2024). This affected children, but also parents, who were distracted by phones when their children were talking to them. Parents just ignored their children and continuously stared at their phones, ignoring a child is a predisposition for worse mental health in the future (Haidt, 2024). For instance, at a public swimming pool in Germany, there was a sign with the inscription: “Those parents who stare into their phones instead of paying attention to their children will be dismissed from the public swimming pool” (Matějčková, 2024). One sign of overprotective parenthood was that children could not go outside alone to play. As a consequence, they stayed inside and were on their phones or tablets all the time, which easily catches children’s attention and is addictive (Haidt, 2024). Combining these two factors, children lose their desire to play and spend time outside because they replace this natural desire with technology inside the house, since this technology is made to be addictive, children should be protected from it (Haidt, 2024).

The digital age brought with it a phenomenon called “always elsewhere,” which was defined accurately by sociologist Sherry Turkle (Matějčková, 2024). “Always elsewhere” means that we have one real life and a second life located in our smartphones. Smartphones influence the way we think because nowadays we think about two lives: our real life and our virtual life (or rather the cherry-picked representation of life) on our smartphones, with our communication there, our number of likes and comments on our posts (Matějčková, 2024). For instance, we live under the assumption that we should always be available for our email, even when we are not at work (Matějčková, 2024). While living with this assumption, there is one essential thing forgotten: the need to recognize the difference between work and relaxation and the ability to separate the two in order to function well at work but also in personal life (Matějčková, 2024). This important factor needed in our lives is often mistakenly labeled as “work-life balance.” This term is highly problematic because work is also a part of life. The two are not separate things. Furthermore, work can be an enjoyable part of life. What is crucial is to not forget to relax and to distinguish between work and relaxation (Matějčková, 2024). Consequently, this digitalized way of life, “always elsewhere,” makes us live two lives at the same time: the real one (physical) and the virtual one in parallel (Matějčková, 2024). It is a problem when we live two lives at once because

we forget that social media does not represent real life. Furthermore, we are never fully present in reality when we always have our virtual life in our thoughts (Matějčková, 2024).

For well-being, it is good to be able to be fully present in reality, in the current moment, but smartphones have taken away this precious ability from most people (Haidt, 2024).

Communication through messages is asynchronous, since we do not see the person.

Consequently, we never know what kind of emotion they are struggling with in the current moment when we text them, which creates more misunderstandings and less closeness (Haidt, 2024).

Also, during socialization or spending time with friends and family, we are often in our minds in our virtual world (Matějčková, 2024). We think about our way of life not through the consequences in reality, but through the consequences of Instagram posts.

When we go somewhere, we ask ourselves questions like, “Will there be a place for nice photos to post on Instagram?” or “How will the food in the restaurant look in the photo to post it on an Instagram story?” (Matějčková, 2024).

In the Wolf Sharing Food Market located in Brussels, there is a decorative sign that says, “I eat for my Instagram”. Especially young people ask themselves these questions instead of just enjoying the quality food and beautiful places. This way of thinking is very scary and causes loneliness. The majority of young people today are not able to spend time with their friends without also thinking about their second virtual world (Matějčková, 2024).

Before social media, children were not afraid of the fact that their mistakes would be forever remembered and posted on social media, but now they are (Matějčková, 2024).

Making mistakes during childhood is a predisposition for becoming a more resilient adult in stressful situations and problems in life (Haidt, 2024). Before social media, young girls’ looks were not evaluated by the number of strangers during the process of building

self-confidence (Matějčková, 2024). “Adolescence for girls often comes with a certain insecurity about their appearance, anxiety, vulnerability, and perfectionism. We all know this. However, it is extremely challenging to grow up in a world full of Instagram influencers, TikTok filters, online porn, online psychological tests (Diagnose Yourself with Autism), and advertisements for ADHD medication” (Bellová, 2024a). Children, especially girls, are threatened by social media because of the unattainable fake beauty standards, but also sexual predators on the internet (Matějčková, 2024).

“Closeness,” the horizontal dimension, describes the social space present in every society, since everyone has someone they feel close to and someone more distant from them. That is why AI can never replace people because “Closeness” is unique to people and it is something that cannot be explained or learned; it can only be felt. “Hierarchy” means that someone is a higher person in society—above us—and someone is below us. Hierarchy is defined by the social status of the person, and very often, people are just born into a family higher on the rank. “Divinity” is coming out of the page because there are strong moral emotions such as disgust, moral evaluation, and awe. We judge people according to our moral emotions. The name “Divinity” is because often the punishments and rewards for our moral behaviour are connected to God and religion, such as heaven or hell. Shame plays a role in this because everybody wants to belong somewhere and no one wants to be or feel ashamed. We act to look good in society. There is spiritual harm in phone-based life because people are slowly starting to stop spending time with “Closeness” (Haidt, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic taught us the importance of closeness and the difference between online and in-person interactions. For instance, attending a wedding or funeral through Zoom is not the same as attending in person. The same thing happens with chatting and talking. Communication online can often be misunderstood because there is a missing emotion and closeness. We do not know how the person we are chatting with currently feels. We cannot know that in real life either, but at least we have more chances to estimate the situation correctly since we see their face. For instance, we can write to someone who is crying without being aware of it.

Consequently, one of the steps to preventing the mental health crisis that young people currently face is growing up without a phone. The phone-based childhood needs to be replaced by play-based childhood.

#### **Four foundational harms of social media according to Jonathan Haidt (2024)**

1. **Social deprivation.** The lives of children and teenagers have moved online, and they have lost close friends. They do not meet as often; instead, they spend time on social media rather than in real life, which brings feelings of loneliness and social deprivation. Relationships through social media cannot prepare people for real-life

relationships. “The availability of porn teaches them how to do oral sex before their first kiss.”

2. **Sleep deprivation.** Sleeping is very important, especially during puberty. It is essential for teenagers to function well and be able to concentrate in order to achieve positive results in school the next day. When teenagers have phones with them in bed and are looking at the screens, the body will not produce melatonin because the phone screen signals that it is still day. Sleep deprivation can cause depression, anxiety, and difficulty focusing.
3. **Attention fragmentation.** When teenagers have phones in their pockets, they are distracted by them and are never able to fully focus. Even when they do not have phones in their pockets, if other classmates do, they are distracted by them. When there is a phone in the room, everyone is distracted by it.
4. **Addiction.** Addiction means that nothing else feels enjoyable enough except for the thing a person is addicted to. People are addicted to their phones, to social media, and to Instagram, and like any other addiction, it harms other areas of life, such as school and friendships, eventually leading to depression and no satisfaction.

### 3.6 Why Social Media Harms More Girls Than Boys

Girls experience higher standards when it comes to beauty than boys. Instagram, thanks to Face tune, Photoshop, and filters, can create the illusion of perfect bodies and faces, which are not real and not achievable in real life. However, 13-year-old girls are not able to realize that this is just an illusion and can face multiple anxieties due to the millions of perfect bodies and lives they see on their screens, including anorexia (Haidt, 2024). Being exposed to these illusions daily causes anxiety and insecurity, it is an enormous amount of comparison that comes from imbalance within oneself, this is also one of the consequences of society focused on success and performance (Marošová, 2025).

Social media is a perfect tool when it comes to harming someone through other people.

Girls spread gossip about others to humiliate one girl by texting people close to her, causing her to lose those close relationships. Girls engage in this form of harassment more than boys, often targeting other girls. Harmful messages can be non-stop, while bullying in school stops when the school day ends (Haidt, 2024).

Girls are more likely to express their emotions and share their struggles, disorders. Being happy is contagious, so is being unhappy. Furthermore, being unhappy is more contagious than being happy. When girls share their anxieties on social media, they might influence others to also have them. These are illnesses that people think they suffer from, while they have just seen them on social media and do not actually suffer from them (Haidt, 2024).

Girls are often subject to sexual harassment; boys blackmail them into sending nudes and can use these photos against them. Boys blackmail the girls for the nudes and then exchange the nude photos for alcohol. Girls suffer more also because of the misogynistic culture: when girls send nudes, they are considered by society as whores, while boys face no judgments. On social media, girls experience sexual harassment from boys and men, while boys do not experience as much sexual harassment online (Haidt, 2024).

### 3.7 What is Happening to Boys

Boys spend more time playing video games and watching porn than spending time on social media. What happened to boys is that their childhood has been transformed online into video games. They do not really experience a real, risky childhood; they just played video games and stopped playing outside with friends. This, of course, did not prepare them for real life, and thanks to the social construct that focuses more on boys to be the ones who will financially secure their family, they have a feeling that they have no chance of a successful life (Haidt, 2024).

A lot of them started to live in isolation, in their rooms, with just the computer and them, in order to avoid the struggles of real life. People with this way of life are called hikikomori. A lot of jobs that require physical strength and were considered “typical for boys” are not as needed anymore. As a consequence, many boys leave high school and cannot find a job. They feel demotivated to handle life, find a job, and secure themselves, or alternatively, secure the family, as it is expected of them. They just stay with their parents, with the feeling that they are useless and not able to take care of themselves. There is also a second group who is satisfied with never separating from their parents and just continue playing video games with zero responsibility, almost never leaving their own room (Haidt, 2024).

The accessibility of pornography has made them satisfy their needs without the risks in real life. It takes courage to ask a girl out, and thanks to pornography, they do not even try.

People, through internet access, got access to everything very easily, and paradoxically, that made them depressed. People are not supposed to have everything easily; they need to learn to gain something with some risks and discomfort in order to see the goal in their life. When they get everything in one small device without any effort, no wonder they do not manage it and become anxious, especially when everything is done in one second, there is no process of waiting for something, thus no looking forward to something. (Haidt 2024).

#### 4. Situation in Slovakia

Young people contact the Slovak Crisis Helpline IPČKO with the fear of danger, they do not feel safe, they are struggling with existential fears (Marošová, 2025). One of the reasons of existential fear is war in Ukraine.

While in the USA the main problem with parenting is overprotective parenthood that cannot fully prepare children for life, because they have supervision from their parents all the time. Small problems need to be handled at a young age in order to handle big problems at an older age (Haidt, 2024). In Slovakia there is a bigger problem of parents being unavailable to their children because both parents need to work long hours in order to financially secure their family (Šuba, 2024). Both of these extremes often have consequences in the form of anxiety or depression. A healthy balance is needed in parenting and parental supervision because children living in an environment where they almost never see their parents because they are at work experience trauma from emotional neglect, but the other extreme of parents always being with their children leaves children with trauma from emotional neglect as well (Ballx, 2025). Children cannot have extreme availability, but they also cannot have extreme non-availability. When a child is not allowed to explore the outside world, the child learns that the outside world is dangerous (Hašto, 2024).

There is no typical anti-anxiety environment that would guarantee that a child never ends up in a psychiatric clinic. Since there is no generalization of children hospitalized at Slovak psychiatric clinics, surprisingly, they can come from both rich and poor families. They can also come from families with or without a history of mental disorders. A safe and supportive family environment can be a preventative factor, but there is no certainty in it, only a greater probability (Šuba 2024).

However, a supportive family is a guarantee that a child's problems will be solved earlier and on time. It is expected that a functioning and supportive family will not feel stigma around mental illness. There are various environments that children with anxiety come from. A financially sufficient family is no guarantee for good mental health, but there is an assumption that children who come from a functioning family will have their problems revealed and solved sooner because parents are more interested in their children. In a functioning family, there are fewer prejudices toward mental disorders (Šuba 2024).

In Bratislava, every second marriage is divorced. The divorce of parents always leaves negative marks on the child, but it is not always the worst solution because if the child is supposed to live in an environment filled with disagreements or abuse, divorce does not automatically mean something harmful (Šuba, 2024). Every child is different; someone can have anxiety from something that would do nothing to another child.

At the Slovak psychiatric clinic in Bratislava, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, the most cases are of adolescent girls (15-18 years old) who come with anxieties, self-harm, and suicide attempts. There is less space for children and adolescents to come, fewer psychiatrists, and more patients. Every child reacts to treatment differently.

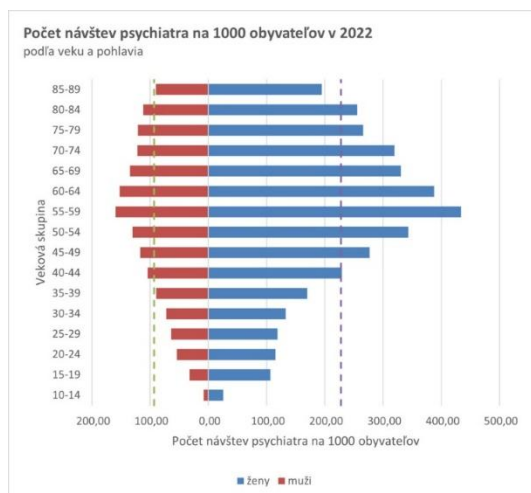
Social media is a stress factor for children, but they do not know how to cut them off (Šuba 2024).

Children with mental disorders such as autism, ADHD, and Asperger's are more often bullied and misunderstood. Even though there is awareness about these disorders, it does not help stop bullying (Šuba 2024).

Graph 2:



Graph 3:



## 5. Prevention of anxiety

Sleep schedule, eating habits and physical activity, movement with the combination of things that can evoke joy can serve as preventative factor (Marošová, 2025). Slovak crisis helpline IPČKO is spreading awareness, explaining to young people, children and also to the parents of a child that to go to psychotherapy is not a shame, which is one of the effective form of prevention (Marošová, 2025).

Psychologist and art therapist Mária Melicherová (2024) recommends to parents with a child who is suffering from anxiety to overcome their anxiety together. It is important that the child learns to bear his anxiety with the support of their parents. This means that the family will not avoid the places or things that the child is afraid of, but together, with a supportive approach, they will do the thing the child is anxious about and go to those places. It is also helpful when the anxiety is personified to the child as a demon who is not telling the child the right thing, and parents should tell their child something like, "Even though your negative feelings right now are real and I see them and understand them, these feelings come from an evil witch, and you do not have to listen to her." Sentences like these help children to overcome anxiety. Anxiety in a child often comes from unprocessed fears and traumas of their parents. Children are very perceptive towards their parents, noticing how they act when they are afraid, whether they are able to overcome their fear or not, and consequently, repeat their behaviour.

The Culture of Fear needs to be changed to the Culture of Courage. Courage, along with other virtues such as reasoning, judgment, prudence, and fortitude, offers an effective replacement for the Culture of Fear (Furedi, 2018). Educating young people in these important values can bring us new generations of self-confident individuals who are able to adopt a more balanced and optimistic attitude toward the future. We need to understand that not everything is in our hands and sometimes accept some measure of risk, as perfection is not possible when it comes to everything, including zero risk and harm. When we understand that we cannot control everything, we can feel the freedom inside us, inside our hearts. Courage can help us progress, including reducing our anxiety levels. Courage teaches us new things and can lead us to beautiful experiences. There is always a little bit of risk in everything, and there is no such thing as perfection in this world. The sooner we accept that fact, the better the chance for humility. "The culture of fear does not simply

make us unnecessarily apprehensive and scared; it also restrains people from exercising their agency and realizing their potential, as well as encroaching on and curbing our freedom” (Furedi, 2018, p.249). The elimination of risks has become a trend, which is very frustrating. We cannot live with zero risks in our life. The elimination of risks as the main goal in life is very counterproductive since it is impossible to achieve, and it also causes more fear and less courage. In a world where you cannot do anything risky, you stop living. In the perception of the world, to avoid all possible danger equals avoiding life. Everything in life has some amount of risk, including walking on the street. Society’s obsession with safety is harmful and can cause anxiety, as everything is perceived as a risk or danger.

Meritocracy should be replaced with inclusion. Stigmas around mental health can be overcome by inclusion, inclusion is beneficial solution for the whole society (Ballx, 2025).

“The key is to make the society realize that the people with mental illness are not automatically qualitatively worse and the people with no mental illness are not automatically qualitatively better. It is the same as with physical illnesses” (Ballx, 2025).

Society for All (SOFA) is a form of prevention in the Czech Republic. “We strengthen mental health, not only for children - we thematise well-being and try to make it as important for society as education itself. Because only a child who is well and safe can reach their full potential” (Society for All). Society for All, originally named the Czech Professional Society for Inclusive Education, is a good example of helping those in need with its focus on mental health and inclusive education. Inclusivity is one of the most important factors when it comes to the prevention of anxiety. When people feel included, they automatically feel better. It is a basic human need to belong somewhere, to feel included in society. Society for All is a non-profit organization that was established in 2011 with its main focus on the mental health and well-being of children. Their work focuses on offering a wide range of support in the form of consultations, courses, seminars, and conferences throughout the Czech Republic. They implement the professional principles of good mental health that work abroad and, following that, adapt them to the Czech Republic. They monitor upcoming laws in the fields of education, social care, and healthcare and always provide expert opinions, recommendations, and critiques when necessary. They also support organizations with similar purposes. Cooperation is key to a better society. Society for All is led by women

named Felcmanová Lenka, Benešová Dana, and Laurenčíková Klára. Their main achievements include the reform of inclusivity in 2016, the creation of the expert centre for Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and educating 4,387 people about inclusive education for all.

Building healthy relationships in life and strong friendship in person are key factors for a good or better mental health. Social media are taking away our closeness with people. "Social media are an illusion of relationship" (Ballx, 2025). People feel better when they are surrounded by the people they love. The closeness is needed to be experienced in person in order to reach the feeling of belonging somewhere and being loved.

Anxiety cannot become a trend (Šuba, 2024). "As The Atlantic's Derek Thompson noted recently, more than 5,500 podcasts now have the word trauma in their title" (Brooks, 2024). When people see ruined mental health everywhere they look, it compels them to be more negative and to feel bad about themselves for not having experienced anything traumatic. This is a paradox because, in reality, things are not as negative as the majority of people perceive them. In reality, there has been progress. Many things have changed for the better, but people are not feeling better; instead, they are feeling worse. "GDP is growing, inflation is plummeting, income inequality seems to be dropping, real wages are rising, unemployment is low, and the stock market is reaching new peaks. And yet many people are convinced that the economy is rotten" (Brooks, 2024). Feelings are contagious; unhappiness is more contagious than happiness. That is why it is dangerous to have words such as anxiety, trauma, and depression almost everywhere. When someone has an Instagram or TikTok feed full of depression, they can become anxious too, just because everyone around them is anxious. This happens not only with anxiety but also with other conditions that are popular on social media. People think they are sick like others they see regularly on their screens, even though they are not actually sick (Haidt, 2024). However, if people are really feeling depressed or not well, they should know that the visit of psychologist or psychiatrist is not shameful, but a form of appropriate help (Marošová, 2025).

We need to speak up and take action to bring childhood back to earth and stop children from growing up on Mars. We need to speak up, as many people likely share the same

concerns about phone-based childhood and are also confused but remain quiet about it. However, if many people speak up, something will change. We also need to connect with others who have children or who are close to children, to speak up together. We need to unite in order to defeat the collective problem (Haidt 2024).

We need collective action to stop the collective problem. When one parent does not give their child a phone, but everyone at the school owns one, the child will feel envious and, furthermore, sometimes face bullying. But if no one gave a phone to their child, no child would feel excluded. When more parents stop giving phones to their children, children will begin to socialize with each other. We need parents to agree that it is normal for children not to own a phone. Governments can make laws that will force tech companies to truly verify people's ages. Governments hold the power, and often the obligation, to resolve problems that require collective action (Haidt 2024).

### **What Governments and Tech Companies Can Do Now According to Jonathan Haidt (2024)**

#### **1. Assert a duty of care**

To protect children from strangers who might be dangerous, companies should give anyone below 18 the maximum privacy protection possible. Even though it is most beneficial for companies to have their posts seen by the maximum number of people, it is most beneficial for children to have their posts seen by the minimum number of people. The privacy of under aged is very important and should be respected by a code applied to all children on social media, to protect them from ads, algorithms that are designed to make them addictive, and dangerous strangers.

#### **2. Raise the age of internet adulthood to 16**

The minimum age for social media is currently 13, which is very low, and it would be better if it were at least 16 and truly enforced. While 16- and 17-year-olds are still minors, if an age-appropriate design code exists, it should still apply to them. We cannot forget that their brains are still developing, and they do not deserve to be bombarded by an algorithm with manipulative methods designed to make them addictive. Algorithm is a lot to fight against when you are an adult. We should protect children from algorithms .

3. **Facilitate age verification**
4. **Encourage phone-free schools**
5. **Stop punishing parents for giving children real-life freedom**
6. **Encourage more play in schools**
7. **Design and zone public spaces with children in mind**

To make streets safer for children, it is important for children to learn responsibility, such as by going alone to school, to the shop, or hanging out with friends. They will feel useful and responsible, which will help them handle the challenges of adult life.

8. **More Vocational Education, Apprenticeships, and Youth Development Programs**

These also teach children to be responsible and help them find meaning in life. It is important for children and adolescents to feel useful, and they will never feel useful if we do not give them any responsibility and trust. That is why it hurts so much when society holds the opinion that young people are living in worse times compared to those in the past. By making this statement, we do not give young people the trust they need to do well in life.

### **What Schools Can Do Now According to Jonathan Haidt (2024)**

1. **Phone-free schools**
2. **Playful schools**
3. **The Let Grow Project**

It is an assignment that asks students from kindergarten to middle school to accomplish tasks like 'walk the dog' or 'prepare a meal.' The students discuss the project with their parents, and both agree on the task to be done. (Haidt, 2024).

4. **Better recess and playgrounds**

Better playgrounds include fewer rules and more risks, such as they can fall down without hurting themselves. Children need a little risk in childhood to be able to cope with the risks of adult life.

## 5. Re-engage boys

Boys do not feel successful enough in school. More vocational training and CTE programs should be offered to engage boys. Increasing interest in caring professions, which are now mostly considered female, is also important. Jobs that require physical strength and are typically considered for boys are slowly disappearing.

### **What Parents Can Do Now According to Jonathan Haidt (2024)**

In today's world, where people are quick to anger and slow to forgive, and in the world full of social media, where everybody is judged so quickly by multiple people, it is very hard to be a parent.

“When the relationship bond is not fulfilled during the first three years of life, the child will face anxieties in their later life” (Hašto, 2024).

**1. More and better experience in real world** (youth exchanges, gap year, experiencing new things...)

**2. Less and better experience on screens** (more education, less scrolling)

#### 5.1 Shared Sacredness

When people with common interests, such as faith, a football game, or a concert, come together and do one thing at the same time, it brings them joy. People in church praying together, fans at a concert singing together, or singing the anthem at the end of a football game. With these kinds of activities, we feel connected; we appreciate the same interests. But when our whole life moves online, we lose these activities, and doing them on the phone can never replace them in real life, because social media is disembodied. By doing everything on phones, we lose connection; we lose these activities that are part of happiness. This can contribute to anxious generations (Haidt, 2024).

#### **Embodiment**

This highlights the importance of the first points. These rituals and activities must be done in person; they sometimes require the same movement, and it feels different to do them together in person rather than through platforms like Zoom. Haidt (2024) gives the example of weddings or funerals through Zoom, you lose everything when you see it just through the

screen. It is different to see the video of something and be somewhere; virtual reality and screens will never bring us the feeling of being there in reality. It is also very important to eat together; things like regular family lunches with no phones can improve mental health.

### **Stillness, Silence, Focus**

A life dominated by phones makes it hard for people to be truly engaged with others when they're together, and to be at peace with themselves when they're alone. The mind needs to be calm, needs to feel and see the presence, be in quiet, be with others, be with themselves, and be in the present. While phones give so many stimuli at once to our minds, our minds never rest, and then once burn out (Haidt, 2024).

### **Transcending the Self**

We need to realize that we are part of networks in a more independent world; we are just a part of the ecosystem, realizing our temporariness in this world. While social media motivates people to be materialistic and judgmental, spiritual practices do the opposite, which is why they are so important (Haidt, 2024).

### **Be Slow to Anger, Quick to Forgive**

Not only are we quick to anger and slow to forgive, but we are also hypocrites by judging others quickly while forgetting to judge ourselves. We can quickly justify our own behaviour, while slowly justifying the other's behaviour. It is easy to see the mistakes in others; what is truly precious is to see the mistakes in ourselves. Society will be friendly and less anxious when we are generous with each other. Fewer people will feel lonely and judged in this world, and they might find understanding in others even though they have made a mistake (Haidt, 2024).

### **Find Awe in Nature**

People are so obsessed with phones that they often go around very beautiful nature and do not even notice. Furthermore, when we see something nice in nature, our first instinct is to take a picture with the purpose of posting it somewhere on social media, while we forget to enjoy the current moment. It is important that people find their way back to nature and are able to perceive what is around them without the need to hold the phone in their hands. It can be very relaxing and enjoyable when we truly perceive the beauty of nature. Jonathan Haidt (2024) gave his students a homework assignment to walk through a nice place in

nature without a phone and just try to see the world around them. The students really enjoyed it and did it more times than their homework because they started to like it. When you find something in life that makes your life worth it, your mental health improves. Some students chose places they had visited regularly but had never noticed the beauty of the place because they were busy looking into the screens of their phones which gave them negative stimuli full of comparison and the illusion of a perfect life and made them forget to look around and enjoy the current moment. We all have a God-shaped hole in ourselves, a hole full of emptiness, because we are striving to find something meaningful for us to replace the emptiness. Phones can be very good at attracting out emptiness, but they fill it with so many objects at the same time that the mind simply cannot exist with that.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The methodology used was an overview of literature and interviews with experts. The first objective of my work was to read a book by Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (2024). I can conclude that the interviews with experts confirmed Haidt's theory that one of the biggest causes of rising anxiety is social media, smartphones. Also, the importance of being part of a community as a preventative factor of mental health was confirmed. The only thing that was not confirmed, and which is the difference between the USA and Slovakia, is overprotective parenting, since in Slovakia there are only a small number of overprotective parents. There are more parents who need to work most of their time in order to secure their family's economic situation and are more focused on their career than on their children (Šuba, 2024).

In both Slovakia and the USA, anxiety, suicides, and self-harm are rising, especially for Generation Z (born in 1997–2012).

Answers to rising anxieties can also be found in the book by Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good* (2021), and by Furedi, *How Fear Works: The Culture of Fear in the 21st Century* (2018). Since the causes of rising anxiety also lie in the culture that is based on fear, a society rooted in fear considers courage as something irresponsible and dangerous, which triggers anxiety in people due to an excessive amount of fear in society. Fear is more likely to be transferred into anxiety in a culture based on fear, while fear is less likely to be transferred into anxiety in a culture based on courage. Meritocracy polarizes society into winners and losers, viewing winners and losers in black and white, while people who end up as losers might become anxious and feel shame.

### 6.1 LIMITATIONS

The methodology of research on statistics of diagnosed mental illnesses cannot fully represent the people who are struggling with their mental health and are not feeling well, since the research is limited to the number of people who have been diagnosed with mental illness. The problem with this is that not all of the people who are struggling with mental illness are diagnosed (Hašto, 2024). Not all of the people who are struggling search for help and visit specialists, psychiatrists or psychologists. The reasons are multiple; for instance,

they feel shame, they search for drugs or alcohol instead of searching for adequate help, or they feel so bad that they are mentally unable to seek help, etc. We can only guess whether anxiety is rising or if in the past people with anxiety did not seek help.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE WORK

To summarize, the focus of the Bachelor Thesis was to find out the causes behind the current rise in anxiety in the statistics and worsening mental health according to the statistics. The role of social media and the decline in face-to-face meetings has been shown to have a significant influence on mental health and might trigger anxiety. Furthermore, the culture of fear that we live in today is also a factor contributing to the higher number of anxiety cases in the statistics. Today's society is based on fear, which has provoked society to act in an impossible way of eliminating all potential risks that might exist; this is called *safetyism*. Awareness about mental health is improving, and the stigmatization that was once common toward mental issues is fading, which has led many people to seek psychotherapy, as they are no longer afraid to ask for help.

While in the USA, most parents are very overprotective and almost never let their child out of their sight, in Slovakia, most parents do not dedicate time to their children and often lose sight of them. Finally, in both the USA and Slovakia, the statistics of diagnosed anxiety are growing. Even though awareness about mental health is improving, mental health is worsening across societies. Since no society before us has lived with smartphones and social media, this seems to be the biggest cause of anxiety and depression. A play-based childhood has been replaced by a phone-based childhood, which negatively influences children for their whole life. We need to give children back the play-based childhood they deserve and need for their effective development.

When it comes to child psychiatric healthcare in Slovakia (from birth to 364 days after reaching 18 years old), there are still things that need to be improved. For instance, the resocialization centre for people with mental illnesses who were treated at psychiatric clinics, which should help them adapt back into society smoothly, in Slovakia exists only one that is for eating disorders. Definitely more of these centres should exist, also for other mental illnesses. There is also a need for systematic help for people struggling with drug or alcohol addiction. The psychiatric clinics are full; they can only handle the most emergency cases and do not have space to treat people with other disorders such as autism or ADHD because the clinics are overcrowded with individuals exhibiting suicidal behaviour and attempts. There are not enough psychiatric clinics, and psychiatrists are lacking. There are more patients than doctors (Šuba, 2024).

## 8. RESUMÉ

Záverom možno zhodnotiť, že mentálne zdravie mladých ľudí sa zhoršuje, aspoň podľa štatistík. Avšak, vzhľadom nato, že mladí ľudia a dnešné deti vyrastajú so smartfónmi, čo okrem generácie Z (narodená v rokoch 1997-2012) ešte žiadna iná generácia nezažila, a generácia Z má aj najviac psychických problémov v porovnaní s ostatnými generáciami, čo znamená, že sociálne siete a doba technológii nám spôsobuje úzkosť. Úzkosti stúpajú, táto bakalárska práca odhalila, že scrollovanie na instagrame môže naše mentálne zdravie ovplyvniť negatívne ešte viac, ako sme si mohli myslieť. Sociálne siete nás robia zraniteľnejšími a krehkejšími (Šuba, 2024). Taktiež je v dnešnej spoločnosti strach z budúcnosti viac prítomný, ako bol prítomný v minulosti (Furedi, 2018).

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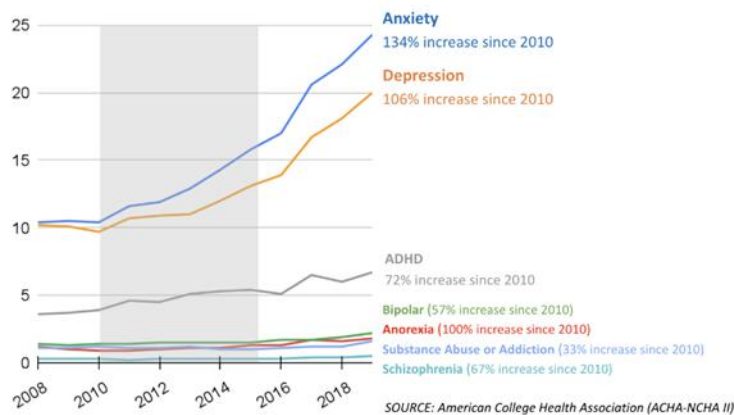
## 10. Appendices

### Four interviews with experts

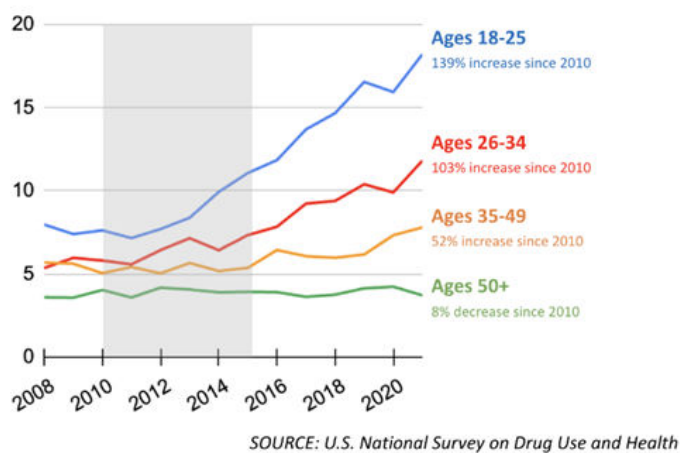
#### Interview with Slovak psychiatrist Ján Ballx

1. When you look at these graphs from the USA, do you see any similarities or differences when you compare them to Slovakia? Are anxiety levels also rising in Slovakia ?

Percent of U.S. Undergraduates Diagnosed with a Mental Illness



Percent U.S. Anxiety Prevalence



The respondent directed me to the following website:

[https://www.nczisk.sk/Documents/aktuality/tlacove\\_spravy/2023/TS\\_NCZI\\_Dusevne\\_zdravie\\_Slovakov\\_sa\\_zhorsuje\\_02112023.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawH6JUNleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHeDsby5\\_xyFZiLzdOsq-t\\_qoluyMtvvJff5WK7pAubPBvXh4gGhVm\\_tCPg\\_aem\\_qVTVUTX-OINrLA55IFxH8w](https://www.nczisk.sk/Documents/aktuality/tlacove_spravy/2023/TS_NCZI_Dusevne_zdravie_Slovakov_sa_zhorsuje_02112023.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawH6JUNleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHeDsby5_xyFZiLzdOsq-t_qoluyMtvvJff5WK7pAubPBvXh4gGhVm_tCPg_aem_qVTVUTX-OINrLA55IFxH8w)

**2. Are there any differences comparing the mental health of young people in Slovakia during the communist regime and after the Velvet revolution? Do we see any changes related to the Velvet Revolution ?**

I cannot judge this precisely, since I started to work at the psychiatric clinic in the 1990s. But it is changing, we have more patients now than we had in 1990s. Some people that were living under communism for long time were harder coping with the destruction of the regime, which might have caused them some mental illness.

**3. What are the causes of anxiety in young people?**

Anxiety itself is a normal emotion, every person should sometimes have an anxiety. When it reaches high intensity, it can disturb human functioning. The anxiety depends from stimulus when the stimulus is adequate then the intensive anxiety is understandable, in some extreme danger. Anxiety can be defined as a fear with no clear reason. Anxiety can have many causes. Anxiety can have unconscious causes, suppressed emotions, type of learned reaction, post-traumatic reaction, fetal development and first three years of life with not appropriate attachments/relationships. The reactions, communication and emotional stability of mother and her surroundings (mother is reacting towards her environment) is crucial from her pregnancy till her child reaches three years, attachment can also be influenced by genetics, disturbed attachment can cause anxiety too. Disturbing of pre-natal, post-natal development can cause anxiety in later years, the sooner disturbing is done, the bigger consequences for the future it has.

**4. How much do relationships at school and in the family, the community/environment young people belong to, the atmosphere in society influence anxiety ?**

It seems to me that today's children are more influenced by their peers as they were before. The school means the whole world for the children, when something wrong is happening to them at the school, child feels that his whole world is falling apart, it feels for the child as worldwide catastrophe. Child cannot separate school from his life outside school, even adults have the problem to separate the job, when there is some bullying happening, from outside job life. Supporting parents are strong protective factor for the child, but even the

child from the most harmonic family with the experience of some physical, mental, sexual abuse in the school, this kind of experience still leaves the lasting marks on him.

#### **5. How much do social networks and the era of technology influence anxiety?**

I am convinced that social networks have a big influence on the anxiety. However, I am not a researcher in this concrete topic and I do not have a concrete data on this topic. I agree with Haidt that this is a main cause of increasing anxieties. When I am doing therapy, I see that anxieties come from broken relationships and social networks create an illusion of relationships, satisfied relationships must include contact in-person. Madro, from Slovak crisis helpline called IPČKO, has done a research and it was seen even in the season before Covid pandemic that social networks are causing anxieties to young people.

#### **6. Jonathan Haidt, in his book *Anxious Generation*, claims that among the causes of anxiety in young people in the USA are less time spent without parental supervision, an overly protective parenting style and culture (societal atmosphere), and less time spent playing, play-based childhood is replaced for phone-based childhood. Do you agree with him ?**

Too much of overprotectiveness can have the same effect as trauma.

I cure adult, so the generation that was growing up with tablets and phones have not yet come to my ambulance, but I am sure it has negative effect on child's development. For example, people from IT business and hackers are my patients and there is seen certain modification in them, they are more vulnerable and less able to understand how relationships works, or the people are less focused on their relationships. Relationships are very important and people are connected to relationships and other people, people are influenced by other people, by politics and geo-politics; all of these elements influence how are people feeling. The whole society and culture influences our feelings.

#### **7. Is there any diagnosis that occurs the most in your ambulance ?**

There occurs various diagnosis. Anxiety, depression, mania, behavioural disorders and addictions are often occurring. Statistics of diagnosis are often distorted, diagnosis are not what bothers people, the diagnosis are form of communication of what people bothers. I

am not so focused on the diagnosis, for the most part diagnosis are more essential for the research. One person can also suffer from multiple diagnostic symptoms.

### **8. Does the war in Ukraine have an impact on anxiety?**

Yes. It depends on the sensitivity of an individual. There are protective factors, but also factors that make people more vulnerable.

### **9. What role do parents and family play in the treatment of children?**

This is very individual and complicated. It is helpful that parents can notice and understand the functioning of their child and be able to be flexible and adapt towards the child's attachment needs. The healthy amount of frustration is important for child development, the parents can have few of moments of not satisfying the needs of their child, it also helps. But the needs of attachment and relationship with parents is important for the child to be felt. For instance, I was often examining the people with dementia, 70% of children who have the parents suffering from dementia has a depression syndrome and a majority of them needs to take anti-depressives. Even adult can have a depression as a reaction on his parent get sick from dementia. This can be also applied in partners, friend relationships, this can even work with neighbours. Even the behaviour of politicians can cause depression to some people. It is all about how people that surround us and our environment behave, that is why the family and parents play the important role during the treatment of their child.

### **10. Can the economic situation have influence on anxieties of young people ?**

Definitely. Today it is an underrated and often forgotten factor, it is often forgotten how much can our economic situation influence how we feel. Big problem is being poor. However, being very rich can also make people feel bad. Poor people often face discrimination even in psychiatric health care, poor people are often diagnosed with the diagnosis that are in society more judged. Middle class or rich people can secure better healthcare, consequently the stigmatized diagnoses are often not diagnosed to them. The higher unemployment means higher number of anxieties and depression. Regional differences and environmental issues also plays a big role, they can evoke also disorders of intellect.

**11. Can the popular current narrative that today's generation will feel worse during their youth than felt their parents during their youth influence mental health in a negative way?**

Of course, if I am told that I will feel bad, I will start to save energy and prepare on it. This narrative can cause depression, because one part of depression consists of protective mechanism; saving energy, the brain is created in a way that when the person feels bad or he knows that he will feel bad in the future, he starts to save his energy. When someone tells the people that they will feel bad it definitely negatively affects their mental health and well-being. I also have a feeling that this generation and children are not so well on it as we were, the world is changing, climate change is happening, and technologies are everywhere. We are constantly living under the fake threat. Covid 19 pandemic and its management significantly and negatively marked the mental health of children and young people. Sometimes are people doing well, but are afraid that they will lose it and are unhappy because of the fear of losing what they have. The economic situation rapidly got better and some people remember how it was before, so they are afraid that they are going to lose what they have, which can paradoxically create the defence mechanism that they will forget about the wrong times that they lived through.

**12. What stigmas still exist around children's mental health and how can they be overcome?**

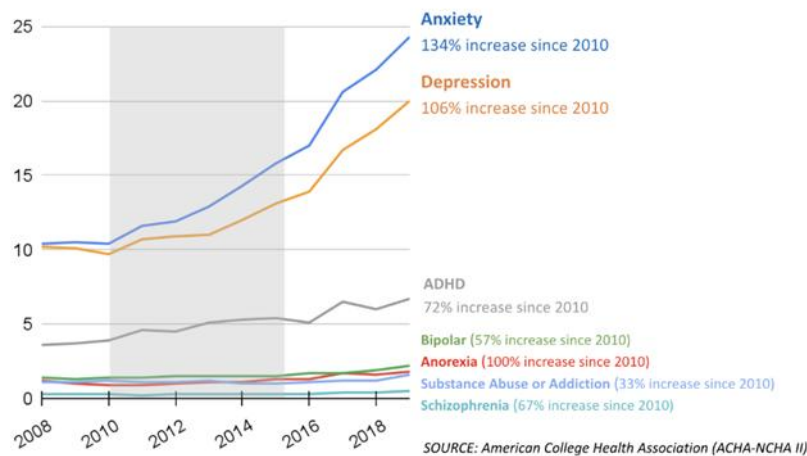
The awareness is getting better. But there still exist the most stigmatized diagnoses which exclude the person with that diagnose from the society and it is important to spread awareness about them. The key is to make the society realize that the people with mental illness are not automatically qualitatively worse and the people with no mental illness are not automatically qualitatively better. It is the same as with physical illnesses.

By inclusion those stigmas can be overcome, inclusion is beneficial for the whole society, it is the protective factor for the whole community, consequently inclusion positively affects mental health. Unfortunately, inequality and the stigma surrounding mental health continue to harm individuals in society. People with stigmatized mental illnesses are often victims of exclusion and bullying.

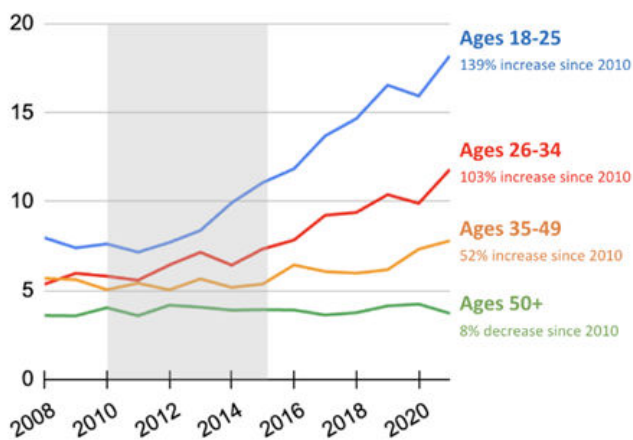
## Interview with Slovak psychiatrist Jozef Hašto

1. When you look at these graphs from the USA, do you see any similarities or differences when you compare them to Slovakia? Are anxiety levels also rising in Slovakia ?

Percent of U.S. Undergraduates Diagnosed with a Mental Illness



Percent U.S. Anxiety Prevalence



In these graphs, there is a problem in methodology. When there is statistical evaluation of diagnosed anxiety disorders or depression, of every mental disorder, there are taken into account only the cases that were diagnosed through health system and the statistical office then evaluates it, it can cause that the resulting increase does not guarantee that the mental illnesses indeed increased. It can also mean that the psychological help is more available and more people are able to seek for help and be diagnosed afterwards. The

number of anxieties can be the same in society, but more people are able to see the doctors and get the appropriate help, which can cause increase in the statistics. The people that were not in the past years in the statistics might have existed with anxieties without the help in healthcare. The diagnosed people are the ones we know about, but there might be the same amount of people suffering from anxiety in the past, but the awareness about mental health was not so high, so people did not seek for help. In Slovakia, there is also more diagnosed cases comparing to the past. The fact that the curve is rising means that more of them are being detected.

In Slovakia, during the Covid times, the symptoms of anxiety increased, but increased to those people that were already suffering with anxiety disorder, so their anxiety disorder got worse during Covid times. This fact will mirror in the statistics, that anxiety symptoms and symptoms of depression have increased. Covid brought to those people uncertainty, confusion, insecurity, the fact that they knew that they can die on Covid 19, that Covid 19 can cause them breathing problems. On some people, it had negative effect that the social contact was restricted, there exists a type of people whose mental well-being depends on their social contacts, those people need in physical presence the people who they trust, love. The same example of increasing symptoms is seen in clinic in Berlin.

Fear and anxiety are not disorders in themselves. It is natural that healthy person can experience in some specific situations fear or anxiety, it does not mean that it is disorder, it is normal reaction. It becomes a diagnoses when a person is verified by certain criteria, when the person is subjectively suffering, when the symptoms are worsening the human functioning, daily life (work, social contact, ...), managing different important things in life. The research done in Germany revealed that approximately 14% of the population over the course of their life suffer from anxiety disorder.

## **2. Are there any data comparing the mental health of young people in Slovakia during the communist regime and after the Velvet Revolution? Do we see any changes related to the Velvet Revolution ?**

Such data does not exist. Diagnosed mental illness have increased, but that again can be connected to the culture where it is okay to find a psychiatric help. More people now are able to realize that they are dealing with difficulties and that it is possible to look for help.

The stigma in Slovakia about mental health is starting to completely disappear, which is a positive sign, because people have less hesitations to look for help when they are not feeling well.

### **3. What are the main causes of anxiety among young people?**

Significant moment that causes anxiety and huge fear is when a child is during his first years of life exposed to such experience when he cannot fully rely on his parents. When mother is sometimes available and sometimes not available, when mother sometimes reacts appropriately, sometimes not appropriately and frustrated. From those moments of uncertainty in childhood, the feeling of uncertainty remains also in the adulthood. These people are very uncertain in their relationships, they are experiencing strong feeling that the other person is not reliable. This is called insecure attachment and is a cause of many mental illnesses including anxiety.

### **4. How much influence do school and family relationships, the community/environment young people belong to, the atmosphere in society, social status of the family, and regional differences have on anxiety ?**

The first years of life, how the family is functioning has a significant influence on a child that how sensitive will be his emotionality, his reactivity, his fear, his anxiety. When the child is experiencing a lot of insecurity in relationships, excessive critique, punishments, not fulfilling when it would be natural to fulfil the child's needs then it can bring the unstableness to his later years. Because the things that we experience during our childhood very significantly influence our adulthood.

Bullying in school has a very negative impact on mental health. Sometimes the teacher ignores the fact of bullying or even sometimes the teacher bullies the pupil too. Bullying is very unpleasant and difficult stress factor. The children that are somehow different in behaviour or appearance from others are usually the victim of bullying. When the pupil is fearful, the bullies tend to bully more, because they take an advantage of the fear they see.

Violence and aggressive language in society, for instance on the street, in the pubs is another negative factor. Aggressive language is in Slovakia current in politics for instance the current prime minister Fico uses aggressive language, which also contributes to the

worsen mental health. It also legitimises the aggressivity in society. Those people who tend to be aggressive have legitimization in themselves that sounds: when the prime minister can be aggressive and threaten to other people, so can I. This is the current social aspect.

Economic aspect of the family is also very important, if there is a factor of not managing of daily life because of finances, it influences the child and his behaviour in the future and can also contribute to the mental illness. For instance, when the mother does not have money, the father is gambler or left family, the mother is worrying and has an adequate reason for worrying, but the child is living in emotional deficiency, since mother is not able to give full attention to the child because of her existential worries. When the child does not feel during communication with his mother protection, support, reliance, empathy, benevolence, kindness, it has negative impact on the development of a child which can lead to anxiety disorder.

Some regions in Slovakia with higher unemployment, Roma settlements who live in unsatisfactory premises with no canalization, water, understandably in such circumstances it is impossible for the family to function well, it is impossible to function in a way that is beneficial towards the development of a child.

However, there is no guarantee that the rich family will automatically secure an appropriate development and attachment to the child. The neglecting, abuse of a child also occurs in rich families.

##### **5. How much influence do social networks and the age of technology, that we now currently are living, have on anxiety ?**

Social Networks can be on one hand very useful and on the other hand big burden. People post on social media positive aspects of life, something they are proud of, like photos from holidays or party. This can cause an illusion to other people seeing the post from happy moments of life, it can look for them like the very happy life and can bring them the feeling that they are worse on it. This principle can support the feelings of envy. Some people tend to show off, make themselves more significant as they really are, which can cause to the viewers the feelings of inferiority and insufficiency.

Hate and propagation of violence on social media can be very hurtful, especially for the young people during puberty, who are looking for their position in society, in themselves and are not fully confident yet which makes them more vulnerable.

Social Networks can replace in-person meetings by online meeting, but online meeting does not have the same quality and amount of closeness as in-person meeting has. For young people, especially during puberty is extremely important to meet in person, to belong to certain group, certain community with common interest. It has shown, that the club with atmosphere of solidarity that is led by well-experienced adult who can guide the young people such as dancing, playing volleyball has a very positive impact on mental health of young people. It can even be beneficial for the teenagers who has experienced a lot of evil in childhood, but they became a part of such club during puberty which significantly helped them. Even in school can be such a collective of peers that can be helpful.

#### **6. Is there any difference in worsen mental health between boys and girls ?**

Anxiety disorders are twice as high for girls. There is no clear cause of it.

#### **7. In the book *Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt claims that among the causes of anxiety in young people in the USA are the loss of religion and spirituality (with the possibility of feeling human closeness), can religion worsen the mental health ? children play less, less time spent without parental supervision, an excessively protective approach to parenting, do we see overprotective parenting also in Slovakia ?**

The importance of being part of certain community that fulfils the basic function of the people to belong somewhere, the feeling that they are not alone, lonely, that there is someone who loves them, can be fulfilled as well for the atheists. The importance of community and feeling of belonging is important, not the religion itself. When the religion community gives to the person the feeling of belonging, it contributes positively to his mental health, however the religion community is only an example, the feeling of belonging can be also provided in atheist's communities. Problem is that religion communities depends on the quality of the community leaders, there exists parish priests who ban common things to people, some religious people can imagine the God as a threat, as someone who always sees them and are afraid of him, there cases in Church of sexual abuse

and mental abuse. Religion communities are prosperous when they are functioning well and are based on reciprocity, love, support. A lot of people have a feeling that religion brings structure in their life and values that they can rely on.

The overprotective parents are only the part of parents in Slovakia, it is not such a huge trend in Slovakia as it is in the USA. Parents cannot be generalized. Some parents are excessively worried about their child and wants to protect their child from every evil that exists, which gives the message to the child that only when the child is in physical closeness with his parent and not visiting and discovering the outside world, only under these circumstances the child is safe. Which as a consequence can lead to the child later convincing himself about the outside world being always dangerous, only home is safe for him and the child will learn that they need to give up the curiosity about outside world. Functioning parents will allow to his child to discover the world around him, to have friends and meet with them etc. There is a danger that child will become a part of a wrong collective during puberty and will follow the wrong idols and adapt themselves towards some criminals, some parents are afraid of this.

**8. Is it true that: today's teenagers are dealing too much with their sexual identity and orientation which has negative impact on their mental health ?**

The teenagers have always been dealing with this issue, but social media made it more popular. Every person during his life is dealing with the question about his own sexual identity and orientation. This fact is more generally known in public, since the society is getting more and more liberal, it used to be more hidden before.

When there is a political pressure against LGBTQ community, those people either live secretly their life or are struggling with interpersonal conflict and fighting with themselves against their natural sexual orientation. It makes me angry when some politicians are taking an advantage of this topic, because they know that a lot of people are afraid of LGBTQ community, and politicians create the pseudo-problem of it. It is normal that person can choose his own sexual identity, his own sexual orientation.

**Interview with MUDr. Ján Šuba, MPH,**

**Head of Clinic of Child Psychiatry**

**National Institute of Children's Diseases**

**1. From what environment do children who use child psychiatry services come?**

There is no simple answer to this. From every environment, it cannot be generalized. Children with various mental disorders (anxiety disorders, depression, psychoses, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, behavioural disorders, emotional disorders...) come for examination, including those who come from economically secure, high-quality, functional families that have achieved a certain social status, who have no apparent relational or family pathology and whose parents are competent. But the economic success of parents does not automatically mean that these children are without emotional and behavioural issues. More often, these parents are busy with work and may lack time for their children, focusing more on their career, economic security of the family. Children with behavioural and emotional disorders tend to come more often from dysfunctional families. For example, the issue of addictive substances (most commonly THC) is widespread in society, and it doesn't matter what environment the children come from. In a functional family, there is an assumption that parents have a better relationship with their children, they care more about them. In a loving and caring family, the children's needs are perceived, and problems are recognized earlier. In such a family, it is assumed that many issues will be addressed early on, and there are fewer prejudices against using the services of professionals, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

**2. Does parental divorce affect children coming to psychiatry, are there more children from divorced families?**

Parental divorce is a significant event in a child's life. It changes many parameters of the child's life, affects their emotional life, and often their economic status. But the impact on the occurrence of mental disorders cannot be clearly confirmed. Of course, parental divorce destabilizes all children in some way. It can decompensate an existing, yet undiagnosed mental disorder. But this cannot be generalized. For example, in Bratislava, almost every second marriage ends in divorce. Parental divorce can be difficult for sensitive, fragile

children or children predisposed to some of the broad spectrum of childhood mental disorders, anxious children, children with traits of ASD. Psychiatric help is needed for children from complete families, incomplete families, divorced families, and blended families. A whole chapter could be written about divorce. But there is also an opposite perspective. If a child has to live in a complicated family environment full of arguments, conflicts, and lack of attention, lack of love, it is better if the child lives in peace in a divorced family. Also, the way these children function cannot be generalized, for example, some children cope quite well with so-called shared parenting, while others have problems with it. It is always about the parents and their personalities, how they were able to accept the separation from their partner, how much they can agree, cooperate, and how much their children are a priority. Where there is cooperation and children are a priority, divorce does not automatically mean a negative situation.

### **3. What are the most common problems children come with?**

Recently, we have been focusing more on adolescents. Over the last 7 years, every day come anxious, depressed, self-harming adolescent girls, who come either with a suppressed or actual suicide attempt, accounting for 70%. In the past, the structure of patients changed over time, and in the past, we were able to focus diagnostically on a much broader spectrum. Today, we only address acute problems, the waiting list for autism spectrum disorder diagnosis is overloaded, and we can hospitalize only a relatively small number of these children. The acute cases overwhelm this clinic, especially girls between 15-18 years old, who are somehow dissatisfied, unhappy, anxious, and self-harming, or even with a suicide attempt.

### **4. Do social networks and mobile phones have an impact on children's mental health?**

Of course, this is a huge change in human society, a change that has never occurred in the last 50 years, as it has developed over the last 10-15 years. These technologies have overwhelmed us, limited us. They often limited human communication to online contact. This is no longer a generation of children who frequently interact with their peers in person. These are children who spend a lot of time on social networks, electronic games, and scrolling through Instagram. I believe that the destabilization of mental health due to technology is not only experienced by children and adolescents but also young adults and

adults. My peer is just as likely to become addicted to their mobile phone, social network, as children are. The tendency to expect some form of sharing is addictive. We know that bullying, slander, and comparison occur on social networks, which stresses the children, but they cannot break free from this vicious cycle. So, this is also something we deal with: since children and adolescents no longer meet in person, bullying now happens distantly—online. Even with online bullying, adolescent girls come to our clinic. Many theories confirm the addictive principle of social networks, leading to addictive behaviour, which means that we tend to increase the time spent on social networks. Time flies quickly when spent on social networks. Rapid stimulus, quick switching of objects on social networks changes our neural settings. It interferes with the functioning of the CNS more than we can imagine.

#### **5. Do children/teenagers come to you with drug or alcohol problems?**

Alcohol is a traditional problem in Slovakia. Its negative role does not decrease. Young people come, but they do not come spontaneously or ask for help themselves. Their parents or surroundings ask for help. It must be said that the healthcare system in Slovakia has long not been adequate for young people dealing with alcohol and psychoactive substance problems. Since the COVID-19 period, the number of adolescent girls with anxious, suicidal behaviour has significantly increased, overwhelming our clinic, and some of them also have drug problems. However, systematic help for young people who have contact with any psychoactive substance does not exist. The capacity for increased treatment, diagnosis, and resocialization does not exist, despite being promised nearly 10 years ago. Society and the system do not care or address this. Today, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is common in middle schools, and no one makes a big deal about it. Slovakia is an average country in terms of psychoactive substance abuse. The structure of what is currently being abused is changing, there is significantly less abuse of opioids, which were often fatal 10-12 years ago, but THC, HHC are very popular and systematically recreationally abused. Methamphetamine is also among the popular drugs, a stimulant. Nothing is being done about this problem, and it has been neglected for years.

## **6. Do you notice bullying or lack of friends at school in the children who come to you?**

### **What could schools improve?**

Yes, there are various types of children. For example, introverted, fragile, overly sensitive, and neurotic children, children with traits of autism spectrum disorders, and mentally not well-composed children can all be victims of bullying. Children with autism spectrum disorders (Asperger syndrome, highly functional autism) often face misunderstanding from their classmates at school, are more frequently targets of bullying, and usually have significantly fewer friends. Even though awareness is relatively good today and children are well-informed about mental health and psychological disorders, it does not prevent misunderstanding or rude behaviour from their peers and classmates.

## **7. How long does the treatment process take for children? What is its success rate? Is there a most common age group of children that come to you the most?**

Of course, there cannot be a uniform treatment for disorders in childhood. It depends on the specific disorder and the diagnosed condition (reactive disorders related to stress and frustration, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, etc.). It is always crucial whether the depressive disorder stems from an internal characteristic or is reactive, meaning it is more influenced by the child's environment. Many mental disorders are fully treatable. However, there are also conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, where the essence is related to changes in neurodevelopment that appear relatively early and should be diagnosed in time. Children should receive a specific educational approach as well as treatment; for example, Asperger's syndrome is usually diagnosed around the age of 7, with more severe cases diagnosed somewhat earlier. This is followed by psychosocial rehabilitation and treatment of comorbid (co-occurring) disorders. Children with autism spectrum disorders should be diagnosed by the age of 3, as their symptoms are quite evident, and we must be sufficiently sensitive even to subtle signs, ensuring early diagnosis. Treatment, however, cannot change the core features of autism, as these are permanent characteristics. But we can positively influence the subsequent comorbid anxiety and depression, which must be treated early. These children need a specific approach. Progress has been made in this area, primarily driven by the parents of children with ASD. There is a network of facilities that help these children, and the educational system for this group is fairly developed.

The treatment process always depends on the diagnosis, on what is being treated, for example, whether it is an anxiety disorder, depression, schizophrenia, autism, etc. Nevertheless, it is individual because each person is different, and we cannot precisely say how long the treatment will last. The duration of both pharmacological and psychotherapeutic treatment is individual. More severe affective disorders (mood disorders; depression, mania, bipolar disorder, etc.) require long-term treatment, similar to psychosis and schizophrenia, where treatment is often lifelong. However, if schizophrenia is diagnosed before the age of 12, the impact is generally more severe (a greater effect on neurodevelopment, socialization, achieving appropriate education, etc.) than when it appears at the age of 30. In other words, the earlier schizophrenia occurs, the more serious are the consequences. Children with ADHD who were not identified in preschool are usually diagnosed in the early years of primary school. In adolescence, behavioural disorders are more common, and dysfunctional upbringing becomes apparent. During adolescence, more severe mood disorders (depressive disorders, bipolar disorder) often appear. Between the ages of 17 and 18, the highest number of schizophrenia diagnoses occur, which fortunately is not as frequent in childhood as in adulthood. Childhood schizophrenia accounts for only 1% of 1% of all schizophrenia cases. In the developmental period of young people, reactive problems such as stress, trauma, and sexual issues can occur. Anxiety disorders: from the preschool period until the 18th year of life (up to 364 days), they are present and treated under our clinic.

#### **8. Is reintegrative socialization taking place for children after their stay in psychiatry?**

Well, it would be appropriate for certain mental disorders. Unfortunately, despite this, the Western Slovak region does not have any rehabilitation facilities (not only one rehabilitation bed) and the only outpatient facility that exists in Slovakia is within our clinic which is designated for patients with eating disorders, most commonly adolescent girls with anorexia nervosa. There should be many more outpatient facilities, and they should be specialized in a broader range of disorders than just eating disorders. There is also no fully functional network of psychological counselling centres, where in the past there was cooperation between psychologists and psychiatrists. There are huge gaps in this area as well.

### **9. Is there a main trigger for depression?**

Depression, according to classical psychiatry, is divided into reactive and endogenous states: Reactive depression is triggered by external factors, identifiable stressors such as the loss of a loved one, trauma, or immense stress. Of course, there is also depression triggered more by internal factors, which can be traced, for example, to a family predisposition to depression. These people, predisposed to depression, are more vulnerable, fragile, and react to ordinary stress and frustration with the development of depression. So sometimes it is impossible to identify the main trigger for depression. However, most people with depression experience it during adolescence. The triggers are varied and numerous. Young people have to fit into society, socialize, perform, and function in their social environment of peers and classmates. Common triggers at that time are conflicts, bullying, trauma, academic pressure, disappointment from first love, etc. Adolescence brings young people many new situations and a lot of stress, burden.

### **10. What role does the strength of the community play in mental health issues, do children come to you who lack a community?**

It often happens that even healthy children lack a community. Children today no longer experience socialization in person, "outside," without their parents; their contacts are often not personal, and they don't have to "physically" stand their ground and "earn" their place in the group, as children had to in the past. These missing factors make children more fragile and sensitive, and later create a fragile and sensitive society, which in the past was more robust.

### **11. What role do parents and family have in the treatment of a child?**

The role of parents is always crucial. In dysfunctional families, the issue is primarily a family matter, where parents can even be a causal factor in their children's problems. For all other disorders, cooperation with the family is key; our role is education, meeting, and talking with parents during outpatient interventions so that the family understands, for example, that I am dealing with a child with ADHD, which limits their ability to actively concentrate. We need to clarify to them what routine and educational principles are suitable for the specific patient, which are very individual. The role of the family is both alpha and omega in

the treatment process. There are parents who are overly protective, who do not let their children out of their protective wings and do not allow their children to behave spontaneously or fully socialize, but there are also many parents, even more of them, who are absent due to the economic security of the family, where children are left to fend for themselves and consciously let their child out of their protective wings. Both extremes are a mistake.

## **12. What are the preventive factors in the family regarding children's mental health?**

A loving family, loving, sufficiently good parents. Not parents who try to be perfect, because this only leads them to become hyper-protective. Parents often think that it is enough to materially secure their children to make them happy, but this is not necessary or a guarantee of their happiness. The key is to teach children the ability to withstand frustration, raising them in such a spirit. A common mistake today is the attempt to provide children with all the pleasures they desire immediately, without waiting, which does not teach children patience or the fact that in life, sometimes you have to wait for something, that they can look forward to something for a longer time. With this type of upbringing, children do not even know what it is to look forward to something, because with immediate gratification, they do not have the time to enjoy it. This did not happen in the past; it is typical of today's generation of parents and grandparents, but it harms children when parents immediately fulfil their excessive demands, as it doesn't prepare them for life, where they won't get everything they want right away.

Children often lately demand material goods and can't be patient, which is probably a result of a deficit in their relationship with their parents. In a functional family, children do not demand material goods stubbornly or even aggressively. Sometimes it happens that the father and mother have different parenting styles, which harms the children, such as trying to hyper-compensate for a lack of time with material things. These tendencies exist in both divorced and non-divorced parents. For example, a single mother cannot afford to give her daughter everything she asks for due to economic reasons, but a financially secure father excessively subsidizes his daughter and buys her everything she wants.

Recently, I examined a 14-year-old girl in the emergency room who had destroyed the apartment and was threatening her mother. She broke her mother's laptop and was

brought to the hospital with police assistance. No "true" medical diagnosis could be made for the girl. The child's condition more likely reflected insufficient upbringing and a lack of boundaries. Of course, a similar case could also be a manifestation of an emotional disorder or another, more serious mental disorder.

### **13. Does the COVID-19 pandemic still have an effect on the mental health of children?**

Certainly. The children who were in the adaptation and socialization process during the pandemic (birth years 2008-2010) are now coming in. A sudden change in their routine, lockdowns, lack of direct social contact, online education, fear for themselves and their loved ones. The fear related to COVID 19, and the fear tied to the economic situation. Recently, there's also fear about ecological disasters, nuclear war. All of this has impacted both the youth and even adults. It has left a mark, and people subconsciously feel that the situation is very complicated and uncertain. Everything that happened during the pandemic mostly affects the most vulnerable group, which is children and adolescents.

### **14. What stigmas still exist around children's mental health and how can they be overcome?**

Stigmas vary, but they are becoming less and less each day. Very often, young people come to us with a subjectively perceived mental disorder and they don't feel stigmatized. On the contrary, sometimes it's become fashionable to get an assessment from a psychiatrist, and some even feel good being hospitalized in our clinic. But our task is to return children and adolescents back to their usual environment, to their family, school, and community. In the clinic, patients are protected, and they are in a safe environment, but we, just like their parents, need to make sure we don't behave hyper protectively. A safe environment is fundamental for therapeutic interventions. Our goal is to support self-healing processes and healthy detachment from us.

### **15. In what ways can parents improve?**

In everything. A functional family and parenting are huge protective forces for children. Meaningful, clear boundaries, love, understanding, interest, and time dedicated to them. It is very important for children to receive time and attention, something that many parents today fail to provide.

**16. Are there any data showing how the number of children and adolescents with mental health problems has changed in recent years?**

The number of patients with anxiety disorders has significantly increased, and anxious-depressive disorder is often diagnosed, along with suicidal activity, threats of self-harm or suicide. Many factors contribute to these changes, one of them is the “contagiousness” of self-harm, self-injury, and suicidal tendencies. Children and adolescents also know how to manipulate their parents' fear effectively, exchange information about how they are experiencing things, but also use it as a way to manipulate and blackmail their parents. A significant portion of adolescent patients being hospitalized consists of those threatening suicide.

Young people take longer to find a goal and purpose in their lives. The search for meaning in life during adolescence has never been easy, but it has never brought as much stress, self-harm, and suicide threats as it does now. No generation has had it easy, but today the sources of stress are different. Physiological and pathological symptoms of the disease mix together. Children and adolescents, unlike in the past, now come in highly educated about psychiatric diagnoses. They tend to simulate or exaggerate their symptoms. These mixed states present an ongoing challenge for specialists.

## Interview with Expert Advisor at IPČKO Zuzana Juraneková

### 1. Does current political situation at Slovakia influence the mental health of young people?

We indeed perceive that since the Covid 19 pandemic, the condition of mental health is getting significantly worse. Young people during Covid 19 pandemic, stayed “imprisoned” in not normal situation, when they were disabled to fulfil their developmental needs and tasks in their natural environment through interactions that they would have in the world with no pandemic and no quarantine. The consequences of Covid 19 pandemics are still current, they are even burdened by other challenging factors that we have met as a society, such as war in the Ukraine, environmental crisis, energy crisis, worse economic situation, terrorist attack at Tepláreň, during which two young people lost their lives. Since this terrorist attack we face strong polarization and tension in society. The polarization but also the aggressive narrative in the society “US vs THEM”, feeling of insecurity, fear from the future. In the families the conflict, tensions, misunderstandings, condemnation occurs based on the political preferences. This all has influence on the young people, because they are in the most difficult development stage, when there is not enough of coping mechanisms developed yet, while adults have already evolved the coping mechanisms in order to deal with difficult situations. Young people do not have yet evolved the center that is responsible for dealing with the possible consequences of their actions, they cannot fully think in advance to estimate the consequences of their deeds. Consequently, young people solve the difficult situation impulsively, radically and even fatal. Not only we can see that the mental health of young people is getting worse, but also the statistics show that since the last two years, young people have more suicide attempts than before. The radicalization goes hand in hand with this fact. The radicalization of young people is a result of them experiencing frustration and being misunderstood. The system of the help does not work, because even when young people seek help, it does not work for them, they are experiencing not functioning institutions for them. Sometimes the adults are hypocrite and hide the unpleasant things, the adults are not support for the teenagers, consequently teenagers solve their problems through social media, write about their problems publically on social media, which often leads them to extremist and ideologists, young people tend to believe the ideologist on social media that gives them easy (fake) solutions to their

complicated problems. The narrative that legitimises the violence does not make us feel safe in the society. The majority of young people after multiple violence acts including the terrorist attack at Tepláreň, lost the inner feelings of certainty and safety.

## **2. Does the war in Ukraine influence the mental health of young people?**

Since the war in Ukraine started, we have been experiencing very high growth of requests for help. Including young people who were struggling with fear because of the war being so close to Slovakia. Young people were perceiving that they were supposed to sit in school and deal with common everyday matters, while their peers at Ukraine are exposed towards violence. Also the polarization about the war in Ukraine in society and families has the influence on worse condition of mental health of young people. The public narrative that is scaring people that the war can also be in Slovakia.

## **3. With what kind of problems does young people contact you the most?**

The statistics: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xZzCC-mbjDKhebRfpkEKfgbc847vg1wB/view?usp=sharing>

Since 2012, since IPČKO was established the most frequent topic is the feeling of loneliness, which is not connected with being physically alone, but they feel huge feeling of loneliness despite the fact that they are surrounded by people. The cause of this feeling of loneliness is pressure on the achievements that they experience in all of their relationships. For instance, they are afraid to fail in front of their parents, they have a feeling that they need to be the perfect child, that they need to fulfil all of their parent's expectations, they are afraid that they will not be good enough. They are not afraid of the punishment; they are afraid of being disappointment to their parents. In the school they also feel the academic pressure to be perfect, but also to be perfect in front of their peers in school, to be included and belong to some peer group. Belong to the peer group is their most important and natural development need. They are willing to risk, to do everything in order to be part of the peer group. They have a feeling that they need to pretend something in order to be part of their peer group, in order to be good enough for their group. This pressure to be perfect is also felt in their partners' relations. This brings them the feeling of loneliness, they are searching for themselves, they do not know who they are, they feel that they cannot be their true self,

because everywhere they go, they must fulfil the expectations of the others. This is extremely exhausting for them, it leads to burnout, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts. Or coping mechanism that they have learned is to pretend to be someone else in front of their surroundings, but this is still extremely exhausting for them.

Young people are contacting us because of the pressure on the achievements, stress, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, suicidal attempts, issue with peers and family relationships, radicalization, online bullying, hate, body shaming, etc.

#### **4. Does social media influence mental health of young people?**

Certainly yes. It has a connection with their development. They are not fully developed to use social media. They do not realise that the things they see during scrolling through social media are just some consciously chosen fragments from the life of people they follow. Only with one hour of scrolling they are exposed to several dozens of multiple contents, posts. These posts represent the perfect bodies, perfect lives, perfect relationships, smiled and happy people. If they are exposed to this illusion of perfection for an hour, it makes them realise that they do not have such perfect life. In their age they are really not able to evaluate the fact that the person has posted his picture consciously and chose consciously, probably the most beautiful one from that day and that even this person with this perfect picture posted experiences huge amount of different and difficult, sad situations, situations when this person does not look attractive, when he has got a conflict with someone, but he will not post these dark moments of his life on social media. Social media also causes them the pressure to be perfect. Young people during scrolling social media are always exposed to unrealistic perfectness, for instance unachievable perfect beauty standards, way of life. This fact very influences their self-value, self-confidence in a negative way. Despite the fact that the purpose of social media is to keep us in touch, in reality it makes young people to feel lonelier. Because of social media, young people doubt themselves and their sufficiency more. Of course, the social media has some benefits. But the impact on worse mental health is huge. The trend of misogyny and hate has now become popular on social media, which are focused mainly on boys, this significantly influences their attitude and relationships towards women and makes them more radicalized.

## **5. What are the preventative factors regarding the mental health of young people?**

Young people certainly need safe environment, to be heard, seen, respected with their opinions. Young people often write to us that they have a feeling that no one is listening to them, no one is taking them seriously, no one cares about their opinion. They need to participate in school life. They need low-threshold, attractive, the language close to them, the principle that is typical for them kind of support that uses anonymity; people can seek for help anonymously. In Slovakia, there is a lack of school psychologists. We need places that would secure young people to spend their free time meaningfully, they need to belong into a community. Young people need human interest, ask them daily about their needs and concerns. Our experience says that young people have very often feeling of being not heard, they have a feeling that no one cares about them. Since the beginning of their life it is needed to work with them, to learn them about emotions, to care about and ask about what they feel. The family needs to pay attention towards the emotion of a child, to build resistance and robustness from an early age. They need to see even during their childhood that problems are part of life and can be solved, and that they can be solved together. They need society to be even more open towards the topic of mental health and its care. To normalize the feeling that we can feel however and that it is normal to ask for help. To not only talk about mental health during intervention but also through the awareness preventative campaigns.

## **6. What stigmas still exist around children's mental health and how can they be overcome?**

The stigmas vary, there is high amount of stigma. The stigmas are affecting even the people who contact us.

“That people who visit psychologist are weak”. “Mental problems are not real problems; they can be managed alone”. “This is only trend of today's age, the older generation did not have any mental issues, and even when they had they went to work”. ----stigmas

The intergenerational differences remain when it comes to stigma. The visit of psychologist is still by some people perceived as a failure and shame. While this point of view is more

perceived by an older generation. The older generation has lived an age when the mental issues were not talked about and psychotherapy was marked as something for crazy people.

Today's inspiration are young people who are able to perceive the topic of mental health as important. Most of the young people today do not have problems to talk about mental health and their mental health.

There is a lot of myth connected to self-harm; that it is just seeking attention, trend, they want to impress. But in reality, self-harm is done when there is current mental pain, it is for them the unhealthy coping mechanism of huge mental pain. The children that self-harm are without help and support of showing different solutions to their problems, to the tension they currently feel. By self-harm, they try to solve the situation as best as they can. It is connected with their development.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, there has been a progress in stigmas around mental health. The topic of mental health was discussed more and the awareness was spread including awareness campaigns.

## **7. What are the main factors contributing to the deterioration of young people's mental health in Slovakia, and how can they be effectively addressed?**

The things that I already mentioned above- pressure on achievements, not enough of support, hard situations that we have lived as a society, polarization, consequences of Covid 19 pandemics that will last a lot of years till we cope with them.

In Slovakia, there is problem with not enough of mental health specialists. There is approximately 30 child psychiatrists, 800 school psychologists for ten thousands of children; for one school psychologist per one school year is approximately 900 children, there are long waiting lists when it comes to psychologist and psychiatric health care. Consequently, that is why young people need low-threshold and anonymous form of help. Young people often do not have support from their family and for visiting a specialist, they need a parent permission. If young people come from the family with not enough of support, they cannot visit the experts and stay with their pains alone with no support.

We need system solution, higher number of experts, make the healthcare of mental health better and more accessible to the young people, as a society create a space that is safe;

where young people will be and will feel heard, supported, change the pressure of performance-oriented period.

There is such a myth present in our society that “young people do not want to talk”. When we visit schools and talk with young people, we see that young people really enjoys talks, including the talks about difficult topics. This is a reflection that young people do not have enough of occasions to talk about it. When we ask the children what would they like to say to the adults, their answer is more occasions to talk. Occasions when they do not deal with academic learning but with their mental health and its related topics. Young people want to talk about how are they doing in life. They know what they need, but they need to be heard about their needs. When they are not heard, they become frustrated from it. This frustration can lead to multiple tragedies that we have witnessed even in the past few days.