GUIDELINE

Journal of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors

Biophilia, the Healing Power of Nature

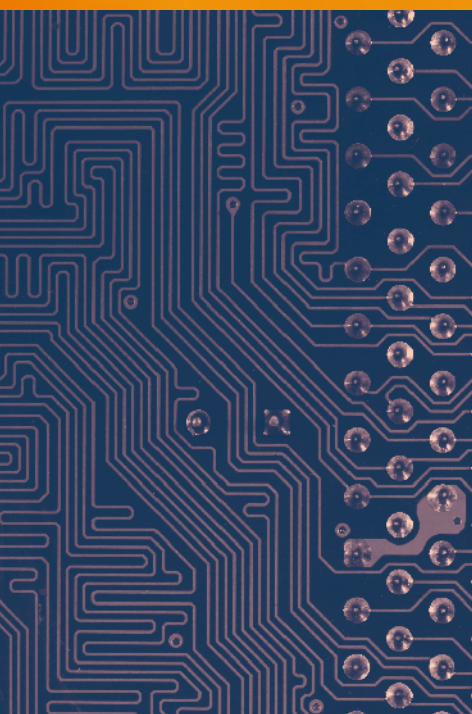*Inside:*

- **Guidance Circulars compared**
- **Constant Confession**
- **Self-Injury**

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Cover photo: L to R: Aideen Lyster, FET Guidance Counsellor, City of Dublin ETB and IGC FET subcommittee convenor; Senator Mary Seery Kearney (Fine Gael); Catríona Rodgers, IGC President, and Colette Twomey, IGC Vice President /FET Guidance Counsellor, Cork ETB. See report on page 6.

In this issue:

Copy Deadline

The deadline for the next issue of Guideline Journal is
7 April 2025

Articles (which may be edited) and advertisements should be with the editor before that date.

Guideline is published three times a year (October, March and May) by the Institute of Guidance Counsellors. Contributions and advertisements are welcome. The Editors reserve the right to amend or abridge any contribution accepted for publication. Items for inclusion should preferably be sent in MS Word by email to the address below. Typeset articles or advertisements are best sent in high resolution PDF.

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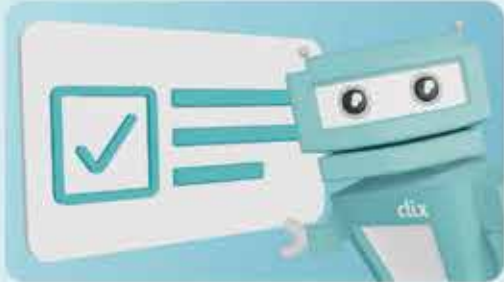
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WE DON'T TALK ABOUT THEM.

FRED TUITE

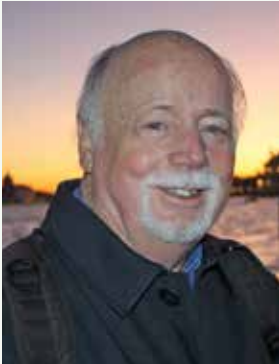Friends of ours became grandparents a few years ago. All went well for the first few months, but then the daughter-in-law decided that they should have no more involvement in the life of their grandchild. No reason was given, but ever since then they have been excluded from the life of their grandchild. Their suffering has been immense, like a bereavement, but with the additional twist that the person is living but they can't have anything to do with them. It has affected their life, happiness and health. In another family I know of, one of the sons made a marriage of which the mother disapproved. So, he and the mother never spoke for years, despite living next door to each other. Even as she declined in health and mobility, it was the other siblings who took care of her. But, when she died, he was there prominently at the funeral, having ignored her when she was alive.

These are but two examples of family estrangement – the cutting off, by others, of members of a family. It is the subject of a fascinating book by Irish psychotherapist, Karl Melvin, *Navigating Family Estrangement*, published recently. While the book is aimed at professionals (including Guidance Counsellors) and those working with clients, it is also equally aimed at those going through estrangement and coping with the challenges which that brings. Because of the overwhelming sensation of rejection an estranged person feels, many estranged persons carry a huge sense of shame, isolation and loneliness. So, when a client comes to you with this, they will need a huge amount of support. You cannot always solve the difficulty, but you can listen, affirm and support. Melvin gives a definition of estrangement as, "a complete cut-off of communications between the estranged parties". This estrangement is maintained intentionally by at least one party. The parties know how to contact each other, and at least one of the parties claims that this cut-off is justified.

He examines the psychological impact, which can include anger and resentment, rumination, shock and devastation, depression, shame, sadness, loss and grief. It can lead to relationship issues like avoidance and withdrawal, patterns of conflict, and relationship choices. Other challenges include ongoing engagement with the estranged parties, controlling personal information (especially on social media), explaining one's situation to others, maintaining life duties and, pressures to reconcile.

But, as he points out, whether reconciliation is possible, or suitable, depends very much on the clients and the situation.

Melvin also explores the ethical and practical issues and the biases that may be there for both client and therapist, and how these need to be addressed. He then sets out a model of dealing with it, by asking Who are the estranged parties and their backgrounds? What is the estrangement type (physical, emotional, cyclical or inherited)? Then, by discovering the nature of the estrangement (voluntary, non-voluntary, mutual), by looking at the estrangement approach (how communicated and expressed) and, the estrangement method and duration, and, finally, by seeking the reasons (if they are discoverable).

Melvin offers a toolbox of seven ways of working with estranged clients: clarifying and validating, resourcing strategies, communication strategies, repairing strategies, parking strategies, stabilising strategies pre and post visit, and searching for symbolism. These he goes into in great detail. Which ones you use would depend on the client's situation.

In the final chapter, five case studies are given of different perspectives and experiences. These are fictional accounts, based on situations that are chosen to show what actual estrangement would look and feel like.

The book is truly helpful for adults going through estrangement themselves and it can offer ways of working with younger people suffering exclusion and isolation. I am not sure if many Guidance Counsellors would have the time and space to deal with exclusion in detail, but this book highlights estrangement and the devastating effect it can have on someone's life.

There seems to be an idea that the excluded person is bulletproof and without feelings, that the exclusion is not harming them, and it maybe even "good enough" for them, or, that they deserve it. We tell our students that they should not bully another student even though they feel that they deserve it, but, alas, as adults we can be guilty of the same thing.

Hopefully, you are not estranged yourself and that no-one in your life, family or friends is being estranged by you. I suspect the prevalence of this activity is quite high and that you won't have to look too far for examples. Either way, this book will give you great insight into estrangement, the ways and means to accept and process it, if it is happening to you, and, the understanding of how to work with, and support, those to whom it is happening.
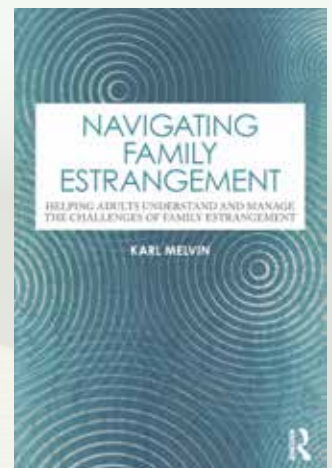
Navigating Family Estrangement, Karl Melvin, Routledge, London 2024, ISBN 9781032423067

The Importance of Guidance Counselling in Colleges of Further Education & Training (FET): Delivering the Holistic Model PRESENTATION IN DAÍL ÉIREANN, OCTOBER 2024.

In October 2024, IGC President Catríona Rodgers, Vice President Colette Twomey and FET Convenor Aideen Lyster presented to the Dáil in the AV room of Leinster House on the importance of the holistic model of guidance counselling being evident in the FET sector. The IGC wishes to thank Senator Mary Seery who kindly facilitated the session and, Siobhán McGrory of Jigsaw for her support.

This is a summary of the slides in the presentation. Readers will be aware instantly of the importance and the validity of the points made.

To understand the breadth of Further Education & Training (FET), examples were given of two large FET services, one in Dublin, the other in Tralee in terms of the number of students, location of the college, courses and levels offered and, demographics.

The presentation reminded the audience of how guidance counselling is defined in the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024 – 2030):

"[Guidance Counselling is] person-cantered, holistic in nature, and incorporates educational, career and personal/social elements. Guidance counsellors aim to empower individuals, who are supported, to develop a capacity for adaptation, innovation, creativity and self-motivation and to be confident in their ability to meet their potential." (p. 11)

The top five most frequently occurring issues/queries encountered by adult guidance counsellors (i.e. those working with adults) (n=87-94) (IGC National Survey 2022/2023 [2024])

- Career decision making   94.7 %
- Course information queries9   2.5 %
- Poor levels of self-confidence   85.1 %
- Mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, self-harm)   82.8 %
- Personal/family circumstances   78.5%
  (e.g., childcare, relationships, transport, accommodation/ homelessness)

These findings alone reinforce the importance of and need for guidance counselling's holistic approach and its benefits to the client.

*Group and 1:1 Educational and Career Information Workshops include:

- Active Consent
- CAO Applications
- Career Planning, Applications & Interview Skills
- Eunicas Applications
- Further Education Progression
- Health & Wellbeing Talks
- Higher Education Talks
- Mature Student Society
- Open Days Information
- Progression Routes
- Study Skills
- UCAS Applications, Personal Statements and Interview Prep.

*Topics (not exhaustive) which have arisen in 1:1 appointments for personal and social issues:

- ADHD
- Addiction
- Anxiety
- ASD Related Issues
- Bereavement
- Bullying
- Child Care
- Crisis Pregnancy
- Domestic Violence
- Family Breakdown
- Homelessness
- LGBTIQ+ Issues
- Mental Health Issues
- Poverty
- Self-Confidence
- Sexual Assault (current & historical)
- Social Anxiety
- Students affected by CAMHS
- Suicidal /Ideation Threats
- Work Relationships

The Concerns of the IGC

- **Active Inclusion Support Service (AISS)** – Does not support the three strands of Guidance Counselling.

- **There is a threat to the Student Support Team and the Whole College Approach**

- **Prioritising of Career-focused approach**

- **Student's Psychological Wellbeing in FET** - The National Study for Youth Mental Health in Ireland (2019) states that 58% of 18–25-year-olds were classified as outside the normal range for anxiety and depression. ESRI reports 40% of 22-year-old men and 55% of 22-year-old women were classified as depressed. (Smyth 2022)

- **Need for Higher Level of Visibility of the role of the Guidance Counsellor in Policies** – see National Strategic Framework in Lifelong Guidance (2024-30), and ETBI FET Learner Mental Health & Wellbeing Framework (2023)

IGC Asks:

- That the Holistic Model is delivered in all FET Colleges and, in the FET sector as a whole.

- That all counselling referrals and contact come through the guidance counselling department and the student support team.

- That the FET College guidance counselling allocation be changed to 350 students to one guidance counsellor.

- That the IGC be involved in the Programme Recognition Framework: the PRF to continue to be applicable for Guidance Counselling across the lifespan.

- That the single portal for guidance counselling be for the three strands, not just careers alone.

- That the educational stakeholders' collaboration and partnership are strengthened.

From President Catríona Rodgers

PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND VALUES

Firstly, I would like to share some information on my background and experience. I am a guidance counsellor who works in an interesting educational institution: it is both a second level DEIS school (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) and a College of Further Education. I am fortunate that, in my 13+ years of being a guidance counsellor, I have been able to work in both settings, with a diverse range of students. One observation from this is that the demands and needs of the students can be quite similar in both settings. There has been a significant increase in the need for personal counselling from students, evident in both second level and in further education and training (FET). In addition, students with more complex needs require and would benefit from increased guidance counselling to support transition to their next stage.

I believe in pathways, not points, and welcome all initiatives that reduce stresses placed on students, that offer genuine opportunities for them to find their path, to engage meaningfully in education and to progress to college, apprenticeship or employment, whatever is right for them.

OVERVIEW OF IGC MEMBERSHIP

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors has just over 1600 members. As of early January 2025, 1226 members work in second level, and the remainder work in FET, Private Practice, Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), Industry, Prison Services, amongst other settings. Since commencing my term as IGC President in July 2024, it has been a great pleasure getting to know branch officers and members, connecting with our stakeholders, and advocating for the profession of guidance counselling.

KEY ACTIONS FOR TERM

As President of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, I strive to uphold and demonstrate the values of equality, inclusion and, fairness. Building on the work of past Presidents and of past National Executives, the National Executive and I have been working tirelessly to advocate for equity of access to the holistic model of guidance counselling, across the lifespan.

Four key actions I seek to progress are:

1. Improving access to the holistic model of guidance counselling for students across the lifespan, including in the FET sector. There remains inequality of access to guidance counselling that depends on factors such as geographical location, social capital, and financial resources. In the FET sector, there are a variety of services including Colleges of Further Education, where the guidance counselling allocation was linked historically to the allocation given by the then Department of Education. In addition, many guidance counsellors in FET work across multiple centres which results in challenges for clients to access needed support, not to mention increased stress on a guidance counsellor moving location, often in the same day, and tied by timetabling constraints to so do.

2. Increasing funding and prioritisation of guidance counselling, so that all members of society can engage at different stages of their lives, is a key component of not just a successful education and

training sector, but of a society that values everyone equally. Guidance Counsellors work with people of every age, as well as school-goers and it is vital that everyone has access to guidance counselling.

3. Reviewing the guidance counselling allocation in second level, to improve equality and equity of access for students. Currently, it equates to approximately 583:1 (22 hour guidance counsellor) in second level schools, and 249:1 (22 hour guidance counsellor) in DEIS settings. Circular 01/2025 indicates that a review of the guidance counselling allocation will be undertaken in the near future, an action that was identified under the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024 – 2030). The IGC continues to advocate for the reduction to 350 to 1 in second level and 199 to 1 in DEIS. It remains the IGC's position that these figures, as costed in the IGC 2024 Pre-Budget Submission, are the minimum needed to ensure equality of access to guidance counselling for all students.

4. Enhancing guidance counselling allocations per autism class, and for students from an immigrant background, to ensure equity of access to guidance counselling. An enhanced guidance counselling allocation per autism class and a scheme where schools can apply for an additional allocation, based on the needs of their students and school community, would offer equity of access for these students and result in improved transition and progression.

Guidance counsellors occupy a privileged position within the school community. The role requires a qualification in second level teaching and, a qualification in guidance counselling. The Guidance Counsellor is a key member of the Student Support Team and often takes lead in situations where confidential information and student welfare and wellbeing are of critical importance. The work of Guidance Counsellors is integrated at every level in second level schools, from attainment, retention, progression and transition, to wellbeing, assessment and extra-curricular activities.

i. Guidance Counsellors support students at every stage of their journey, often starting before they are officially a student with pre-entry information sessions and entrance exams, to after they finish sixth year and may be seeking additional guidance counselling when receiving their Leaving Certificate results.

ii. The IGC advocates for the role of guidance counsellor to be allocated a status similar to an Assistant Principal (AP1) or Programme Coordinator in second level schools and in colleges of further education, by the Dept. of Education and Youth and, by the Dept. of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The benefit of this is that it would strengthen school management and leadership structures, the whole school guidance team, and facilitate improved collaboration and communication at a

formal level. Principals and Deputy Principals would have the support and experience of the guidance counsellor on their senior management team, which is essential, especially when critical incidents arise. In addition, it would acknowledge the significant costs associated with earning the guidance counselling qualification.

STRUCTURE OF IGC

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors is a charity and a registered company. Each branch nominates a branch member to the National Executive, who takes on the role of Director within the IGC. The National Executive is the board of the IGC and its members bear the legal responsibilities that come with that role. The voluntary roles of Vice President, National Secretary, National Treasurer and PRO are a tremendous asset of the IGC, and support the implementation of AGM motions, and strategic goals. The President is a seconded position and remains to date the only seconded position within the IGC, despite a motion passed at AGM 2024 to seek a partial secondment for the role of Vice President. A motion on which we continue to work.

The organisational structure of the IGC is reliant on its 16 branches. Each branch elects a Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer, PR officer, CPD coordinator, Supervision Coordinator, Standing Orders Representative, and National Executive member. These voluntary roles are integral to the successful operations of the IGC. The IGC is incredibly fortunate to have strong commitment from its members at branch and at National Executive level.

However, these roles are not always filled, and sometimes members may take on more than one role, or a role may go vacant. There can be challenges in recruiting volunteers for these roles and there is a risk of volunteer fatigue. With all the demands placed on guidance counsellors in the workplace, it can be very hard to consider taking on additional voluntary work. Please do not take this as a criticism, I mean it as acknowledgement and to demonstrate an understanding that we are all doing our best. Many guidance counsellors are at the stage of life where they are sandwiched between the care needs of two generations of their family, and it can be hard to have balance. However, each branch relies on engagement from its members.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE IGC

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all those who volunteered and stepped up into these roles in the past, and those who do so in the present. I also want to thank all members who do their best to engage and attend their branch meetings. This engagement is vital to the branch structure and the IGC. CPD is an integral part of being professional and staying upskilled. I understand that it is not always possible to attend every CPD and branch meeting but the effort that is made is greatly appreciated and it makes a difference. Supervision is a vital support facilitated through much cross-department engagement for guidance counsellors working in second level and colleges of further education. I strongly encourage all members to commit to attending supervision meetings regularly, as the support for our individual professional practice is essential and invaluable. Conference 2025 is taking place in Mullingar Park Hotel on 21 and 22 March 2025 and our AGM is on Sunday 23 March. It would be wonderful to see you there.

It has been a busy 6 months as I have settled into the role of President. I would like to thank you for this wonderful opportunity. I am working hard to do my best representing the IGC, our members and advocating for guidance counselling. I warmly welcome communications from members and encourage you, please, to get in touch. My email is president@igc.ie. If possible, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to visit your branch. Additionally we have a relatively new Instagram account (@igc. instituteofguidancecounsel) and we have released three podcasts on our newly launched Treoir: Conversations with Guidance Counsellors in Ireland, available on Spotify and YouTube. The IGC LinkedIn page is a brilliant way of keeping informed on updates, as are our emailed head office updates. It would be wonderful to have more content from our branches and members on IGC social media.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the National Executive, in particular Vice President Colette Twomey, for their commitment, engagement on policy and practice and hard work, all on a voluntary basis, for the benefit of the IGC.

Ní neart go cur le Chéile,
Catríona

President Catriona Rodgers with the Branch Chairpersons at the Networking and Training event in Mullingar.

Adolescent substance use 2: harms and prevention

By Philip James

Introduction

This is the second of three articles that examines the issue of adolescent substance use. The previous article provided an overview of different substances and how they are used. This article will focus on patterns of adolescent substance use, the harm it can cause and the best prevention methods available. The final article will focus on treatment of adolescent substance use.

This article starts by providing a brief overview of adolescent development as it has significant implications for substance use related harms. The article will then go on to discuss the drug related harms, focusing on three broad areas: the biological or physical harms, the psychological, emotional, or mental health problems and, finally, the social issues to which substances can contribute to. It is probably worth mentioning that I am deliberately avoiding using the word cause for the simple reason that causality is hard to prove in real word scenarios. For instance, we know that alcohol can negatively affect mood and that the more someone drinks alcohol, the greater the risk of developing a mood problem. However, we also know that having a mood problem makes someone more likely to drink. Trying to determine which caused which (and it may be something else that caused both the drinking and the mood problem) in an individual case, is often an impossible question and somewhat academic in any case.

Adolescence

The World Health Organization defines adolescence as from ages 10 until 19 and describes it as the period between childhood and adulthood (World Health Organization, 2024). In Irish law there is no in-between childhood and adulthood; a person simply becomes an adult on the day of their 18th birthday. However, substance use typically starts in adolescence with three-quarters of adults who enter treatment for substance use starting their use in childhood (Strashny, 2013). Similarly age 15 is the peak age for onset of mental health problems with 75% of all mental illness commencing by age 25 (McGorry et al., 2024). Adolescence and young adulthood are critical times for the development of substance use and mental health problems. Substance use during this time has different effects than substance use later in life. For example, smoking cannabis, particularly at a heavy level before age 18, leads to more detrimental effects on IQ than smoking the same amount after 18 (Meier et al., 2012). So, adolescence is a peak time for the development of mental health and substance use problems. Generally, the younger someone is when they develop problems, the more pessimistic the outcome. In other words, substance use is usually a childhood disorder that continues into adulthood, rather than a problem that develops in adulthood. Therefore, childhood is a critical period for identifying those who are at risk of developing a substance use disorder.

Drug related harms

Substance use can contribute to various harms. These harms vary depending on several factors such as the substance used, the amount of the substance consumed, the way it is consumed (such as smoking, injecting, or swallowing) as well as individual risk factors such as the person's mental health and family support. Over the following sections we will review the physical or biological harm that substances can cause followed by the emotional or mental health effects of substance use. Finally, we will talk about the social harms that can come from substance use, with an emphasis on the adolescent years. The main two substances that we will talk about throughout this section are cannabis and alcohol for the simple reason that they are the most common drugs used by teenagers in Ireland, but I shall make some brief reference to other substances such as ecstasy and cocaine.

Biological harm

In the previous article we discussed some of the various substances that can be consumed by young people and, also, the various ways, such as smoking, injecting, and swallowing, that young people can take these substances. It is important to bear in mind that, regardless of the substance itself, the way it is consumed can also play a significant role in the potential harm that a drug can cause. Injecting drug use is by far the most dangerous route, because firstly, the injecting process increases the risk of overdose as a huge amount of the drug is directly and quickly delivered into the bloodstream, and secondly, the process of injecting can lead to complications including wounds and bloodborne viruses such as HIV and hepatitis. Injecting is therefore considered a real priority for getting people into treatment but, thankfully, it is relatively rare among adolescents. The two groups who inject frequently are those taking heroin and those who use anabolic steroids for fitness and training.

As the human brain keeps developing until about the age of 25 years, taking substances which act on the brain during this developmental period tends to have more deleterious effects than using substances later in adulthood. For example, research carried out in Dunedin found that when young people consumed cannabis before the age of 18, a more significant drop in IQ is noticed compared to those who started using cannabis later in life (Meier et al., 2012). While there has been some debate about these findings, a recent meta-analysis of all the available studies on cannabis effects on youth found that there is a statistically significant decline of approximately two IQ points following exposure to cannabis in childhood (Power et al., 2021). While cannabis is the most researched illicit substance, research indicates that many substances have a significant effect on the developing brain (Hamidullah et al., 2020). The reality is that substance use tends to affect the functioning of the brain which is where emotions are processed and therefore substance use can impede a person's emotional processing. This is more pronounced during the teenage years.

In addition to the effects that the substance can have on the brain, many substances are also consumed in a way that is harmful. Cannabis is typically smoked along with tobacco in a joint or cigarette. This involves the person inhaling both cannabis and tobacco into the lungs and we are all aware of the significant negative harms that tobacco has. Those who smoke cannabis (and tobacco with it) typically do not use a filter and tend to inhale deeply and hold the smoke in their lungs for longer, leading to a greater exposure to the various harmful chemicals. The reality is that smoking cannabis without tobacco in a bong or pipe is less harmful than adding tobacco to a cannabis joint (Hall & Degenhardt, 2014).

While abstinence is obviously the safest approach to substances, the reality is that some young people will use substances and we need to keep them as safe as possible. Some simple tips can reduce the harm they experience:

- Avoid taking substances frequently as tolerance and dependence will develop.
- If taking a drug, "start low and go slow" is the slogan adopted by the HSE to encourage people to take a low dose initially and only add to it after a significant period, at least 1-2 hours, before taking another dose which reduces the risk of overdose.
- Do not use alone.
- If you or a friend have a bad reaction, call an ambulance immediately.

Psychological harm

The relationship between substance use and psychological harm or mental health is complicated and it can be difficult to determine which is the primary problem – the substance use or the mental health problem. However, on a large scale we know that people who use substances during childhood tend to exhibit greater mental health problems, and people with greater mental health problems tend to be more likely to use substances. Why this is the case is up for debate; one could argue that someone who has depression is more likely to seek out substances as a way of managing their symptoms, or, one could argue that, someone who is feeling low is pessimistic about the future and therefore less interested or concerned about the negative effects of substance use than someone who is not depressed.

A longitudinal study, using data from Australia and New Zealand which examined young people's mental health based upon their cannabis use, found that those who used cannabis daily had almost a sevenfold increase in suicide attempts compared to those who did not use cannabis and this increase was dose dependent (Silins et al., 2014). In other words, the more frequently someone smoked the more likely they were to attempt suicide. Similar research findings have been found in relation to alcohol, particularly among young people. One study in Ireland found that 11 out of 12 young people under the age of 30 who complete suicide have alcohol in their system at the time they kill themselves. In those aged above 30 the opposite is the case - very few have alcohol consumed when they complete suicide (Bedford et al., 2006). A large US study found that adolescent binge drinking or drinking when feeling down was significantly associated with increased suicide attempts (Schilling et al., 2009).

The My World survey which was carried out by Jigsaw in conjunction with UCD reported on the relationship between alcohol use and depression, anxiety and suicidality in Irish school going teenagers. They found that among the low risk drinking cohort of students, 10% had severe depression, while among the possibly alcohol dependent cohort, 33% of them had severe depression (Dooley et al., 2019). Findings also suggest that heavier alcohol use is associated with increased rates of anxiety and suicidality. In a service I worked in for young people with substance use problems our research found 48% of clients also had a diagnosed mental health disorder with self-harm and ADHD particularly common (James et al., 2013). ADHD, because of its link with impulsivity, doubles or triples the risk of a young person ending up with a substance use disorder, particularly if the ADHD disorder is untreated (Wilens et al., 2011).

What all this research tells us is that there is a relationship between substance use and poor mental health. The more someone uses substances, the poorer their mental health, and those with poor mental health are at greater risk than their peers of developing a substance use problem. For this reason, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) recommends that young people attending mental health services should be screened for substance use problems (EMCDDA, 2009).

Social harm

Social harms are often difficult to measure but they are often the most significant outcomes in the long-term happiness of an individual. We know that using substances during adolescence, as opposed to adulthood, has a more detrimental effect on a person's social functioning. Returning to the longitudinal study mentioned earlier, they examined the long-term educational outcomes of young people who smoked cannabis compared to those who didn't smoke cannabis. They found that 80% of cannabis abstainers completed high school and 41% obtained a college degree whereas among those smoking weekly or more, only 53% completed high school and 12% obtained a college degree, and, they were twice as likely to be in receipt of social welfare at age 38 (Silins et al., 2014). A review of the research on cannabis found that:

- cannabis, while driving, doubles the risk of a car accident;
- 10% of regular users develop cannabis dependence;
- regular adolescent cannabis use doubles the risk of early school leaving, cognitive impairment and psychosis;
- it is also associated with an increased likelihood of going on to use other substances (Hall 2015).

While most of this discussion has been on cannabis, it is worth noting that this is mainly because cannabis is the illicit substance which has received the most research. One of the defining characteristics of cannabis users who enter treatment is the frequency with which they use it. In clinical practice it is unusual to meet young people who are drinking alcohol daily, but most young people seeking help for cannabis are using daily or almost daily. Different patterns of use and different substances are likely to lead to different harms for an individual. For example, those drinking alcohol in a binge pattern are more likely to suffer accidents or injuries, have an overdose or be involved in antisocial behaviour, than someone smoking cannabis. These events leading to short-term, immediate harm, tend to bring them into contact with professionals such as the Gardaí or staff in A&E and provide an opportunity to intervene. The cannabis smoking teen by comparison is unlikely to present with obvious or immediate concerns but over time they can suffer significant social harm. They may fail exams, leave education earlier and with less qualifications, and be less motivated and driven at this key time in their development.

Prevention

In this section I am going to talk about the prevention of adolescent substance use. With this in mind, it is worth remembering a few key facts about substance use:

- About 50% of those who will ever use cannabis will have done so by age 18;
- Among adolescents who present for treatment, the average age for starting cannabis is 13;
- Over 80% of 16-year-olds have never even tried cannabis;
- 73% of 16 years have drunk alcohol.

So, prevention here has two focuses: preventing young people commencing substance use for the first time and preventing further substance use by those who are already using. If we can reduce the number using substances and reduce the amount and frequency of use of those who are already using, we can improve their outcomes. For instance, many teenagers will be drinking alcohol frequently. Having them drink less when they do drink will probably reduce their harms.

It is worth noting that the factors that make a person likely to use a substance for the first time can be quite different from the factors that make them likely to continue using them or develop a substance use disorder. For example, environmental factors such as substance availability are the most important factors in whether a young person

tries a drug which explains why so many more sixteen-year-olds have drunk alcohol than smoked cannabis. However personal characteristics, such as impulsiveness (perhaps due to ADHD) or sensation seeking are key to the young person continuing to use (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019).

School prevention

Schools play a vital role in helping prevent adolescents moving into substance use but how they deliver this is often debated. Fortunately, there is solid research available on what does and does not work in school prevention programmes and a recent article from an Irish author, Dr. Clay Darcy has summarised this research succinctly (Darcy, 2021). The main tenet to bear in mind is that drugs education and drugs prevention are not the same. Simply providing young people with information on drugs is not associated with reducing or preventing use. In fact, providing drugs education is often associated with increased substance use and so may be harmful (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2019). The research has highlighted several ineffective and potentially counterproductive approaches that it is strongly suggested schools avoid:

- Scare tactics such as emphasising risks of drugs.
- Testimonials or guest talks from people who had personal experience of drug use.
- One-off talks from health professionals or police.
- Information only programmes.

Instead, schools are encouraged to adopt a whole school approach to substance use. What has been shown to be useful are programmes that tend to be multicomponent. For example, as part of an overall health approach, a programme may talk about the calories from alcohol use in as part of healthy eating. Likewise, the effect of alcohol on an ability to consent to sexual interactions may be discussed as part of a sexual health class. In this manner, education and prevention around substance use is not a big topic delivered in one go but peppered throughout a whole SPHE programme.

Programmes which are interactive and get students interacting with the content tend to be more effective than didactic lectures. If the risks associated with substance use are being discussed, short term risks tend to have more of an influence on adolescent behaviour than long-term risks (Darcy, 2021). Programmes that are more interactive and structured tend to produce better outcomes in the long-term.

Family prevention

The previous section focused on the principles of drug prevention for the school. However, most young people only spend a fraction of their time in school and so it is good to have an overall view of prevention information that might be relevant to parents and families. Despite the popularity of books which promise to immunise your child from substance use problems, that is not possible. However, there is a large body of research that gives strong evidence to things parents can do that are likely to increase or decrease their child's risk of substance use.

One of the most common issues we have to deal with is alcohol use, as this is the most prevalent substance in Ireland and most western countries. Ryan et al., (2010) completed a systematic review to examine factors that might influence their child's drinking at a younger age or drinking heavier as an adult. They identified five things that parents can do that reduce the risk of these two negative outcomes:

1. Parental drinking or role modelling alcohol use increases their child's risk.
2. Provision of alcohol by parents to their teenager increases their drinking.
3. The presence of clear rules and consequences in the family home reduces risk.
4. Parental knowledge about their child's whereabouts, friends and activities reduces risk.
5. Having a warm and affectionate relationship between parents and children reduces risk.

Furthermore, they found that many of the things that parents often do in relation to alcohol, do not appear to be particularly effective. These include, talking to their child about drinking or having rules around alcohol use. The reality from these findings is that the key things parents can do to protect their child have very little to do with alcohol. Effective parenting is about parents consistently having rules on behaviour in general, knowing about their child's interests and friends, and having a warm relationship with them.

There is also useful research to guide parents who want to learn more about ways to protect their child. For over 30 years now, the Search Institute in the US has reviewed the issue of protective factors for young people in relation not just to substance use, but overall mental health and functioning. They have identified a list of factors that protect young people and promote thriving. They have called them "the 40 developmental Assets" and consists of both internal and external assets. Internal assets tend to be characteristics or skills the young person develops such as their interest in learning, reading or involvement in school, sports and other hobbies, while external assets tend to be the support, boundaries and expectations they receive from relationships (Scales, 1999). All these assets seem to protect young people from developing substance use problems. For instance, 53% of those who have ten or fewer assets have drunk alcohol three times or more in the past month compared to only 3% of those with over 30 assets (see figure 1). Those with fewer assets tend to have more negative behaviours (e.g. substance use, fighting and sexual activity) and more mood and school problems (Leffert et al., 1998). The more parents can promote or create these assets within their adolescent's life, the more likely they are to protect them from harm. Further information on the assets is available below.

Figure 1: Developmental Assets (adapted from Leffert et al. 1998)
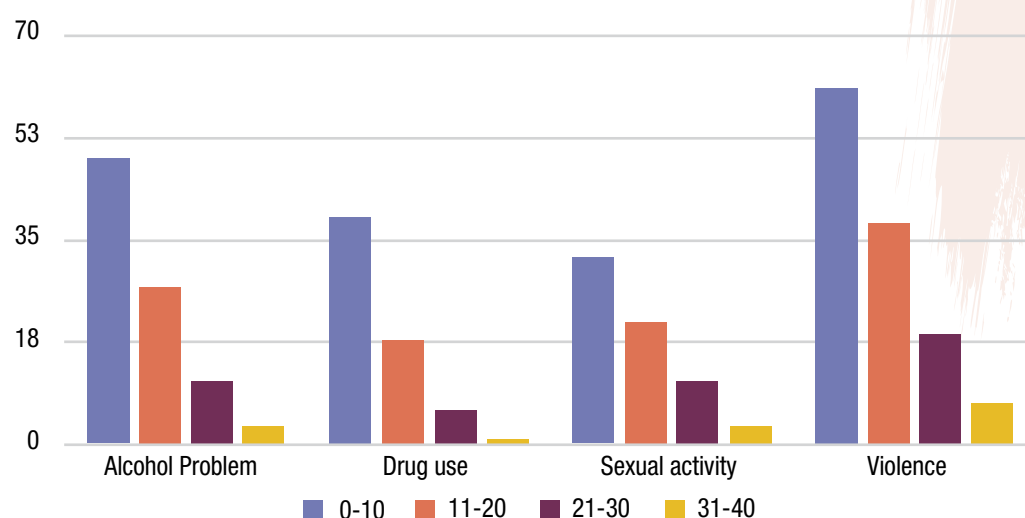
Conclusion

Adolescent substance use can prevent significant harms to young people. Depending on the substance they take, how they take it and, for how long, the harms can vary considerably. These can include physical and psychological harms as well as poor social outcomes such as early school leaving. Schools and guidance counsellors can play an important role in preventing adolescent substance use by providing evidence-based school-based prevention as well as supporting and educating parents on steps they can take. Despite this, in some cases young people will still use substances and require treatment and the last article in this series will discuss when treatment is needed and what treatment for substance use looks like.

Further reading

- The European Union Drugs Agency (formerly the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Alcohol Addiction [EMCDDA]) has produced a freely available book which summarises the evidence on prevention called the European Prevention Curriculum. https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/manuals/european-prevention-curriculum_en

- More information on the 40 Developmental Assets is available on the Search Institute's website https://searchinstitute.org/resources-hub/developmental-assets-framework

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https://www.routledge.com/Adolescents-and-Substance-Use/James-Kearns-Campbell-Smyth/p/book/9781846199790?srsltid=AfmBOoq_1jUg9lrtHFejkr4BGVkhGcYhC4A8AtohZ5-h4abLs2WBWRSj

IAEVG International Conference Finland 2024

Dr Clare Finegan, (Education and Guidance Counselling at Maynooth University)

I was invited to present my research in Guidance Counselling and deliver a workshop on 'Working with School Trauma' at the 2024 International Guidance Conference, IAEVG (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance), at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland on November 12th, 2024. This is a brief overview of the experience.

The Finnish Institute for Educational Research organised the conference jointly with the Finnish Government Ministries of Education and Employment. It was held at the University of Jyväskylä, a Lakeland city about a one-hour flight north of Helsinki. Four hundred participants representing 45 countries attended the conference, and 300 more registered to attend online. Over the three days, 72 papers, 30 workshops, 44 posters and several keynotes were presented. The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and guidance counsellors who addressed the 'Riding the Wave of Change' theme and promoted best practices worldwide.

I attended many interesting presentations offering different international perspectives and practices in our profession, but one focus emerged that was common to many. Artificial Intelligence (AI) has the potential to offer tools that can transform Career, Educational, and Vocational Guidance.

The IAEVG Guidance community now promotes an ethically responsible role for AI in creating sustainable careers. In the background of a changing Labour market, where jobs can be volatile, students and workers young and older, must be consistently prepared to face lifelong changes around their work goals and competencies to ensure a sustainable quality working life. Strategies for Lifelong Learning and Lifelong Guidance Counselling must focus on more flexible and possible rapid competence building, equal education access, regulation of learning, and counselling support in a guidance counselling context. More than ever, guidance counsellors are needed at the forefront, and the more resources they have to assist them, such as specialist technology and relevant training, the better. Technology that could collate vast volumes of personal, career and current market data and predict job trends and skill demands would be invaluable. AI may indeed have an essential role in helping us "to ride the waves of change".

The key challenge is to ensure that guidance counselling to support career development is accessible to all individuals, bridging the digital divide and providing good access to computers and technology training for all concerned. Guidance counsellors are encouraged to embrace AI's benefits, but only if they address its challenges and remain vigilant, active, and informed.

A clear message from the conference was that AI can enhance guidance counselling services, but this must not be done at the expense of diminishing human interaction. Indeed, personal one-to-one Guidance Counselling remains at the forefront of this mission to maintain and

foster the uniquely human skills that AI cannot replicate. The IAEVG called on government bodies, technology developers and educational institutions to create resources and professional development opportunities to support those working in Guidance at all levels. Equally, they call for equal opportunities for all and the fostering of individual autonomy and agency throughout an individual's working lifetime. While the ethical use of AI technology can facilitate equal opportunity, we were reminded that there has been no research on its impact on school students. These students rely on guidance counsellors who are depended on to interpret data, evaluate it, and make recommendations regarding career advice that is meaningful and valuable to the vulnerable individual concerned. From hearing how other countries operate their guidance services to young people, I was affirmed in thinking that Ireland has a very personalised, caring approach that engages young and aged people pastorally, supports them and, empowers them to help themselves, making them agents in their personal career development.

> *The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and guidance counsellors who addressed the 'Riding the Wave of Change' theme and promoted best practices worldwide.*

I came away reminded again of the value of participating in international conferences. For guidance counsellors, educators, policy makers and other stakeholders in our field, maintaining international connectivity is essential for a global focus in our work. It provides continued sharing of research and mutual learning, collaboration of ideas and a shared understanding of global economic and community needs and benchmarks, ultimately informing government policy that serves all.

Evolving Policy and Practice:

Comparing Circulars 0041/2024 and 0001/2025 on Whole School Guidance and on Guidance Counselling in Second Level, PLC and CFEs.

By Gerry Reilly, IGC National Secretary

The author wishes to advise colleagues working in PLC and CFE institutions that, while they are not mentioned in the title of Circular 001/2025, they are referred to specifically in Section 9 of the document which deals with the professional support programme of Counselling Supervision, and the statements therein affect them directly.

Introduction

In Ireland's second level education sector, guidance counselling policy has undergone considerable evolution in recent years. Two key documents - **Circular 0041/2024** and **Circular 0001/2025** - now represent the most up-to-date thinking and directives in the area of Whole-School Guidance (WSG), the WSG team and, the specialised role of the Guidance Counsellor. These circulars have emerged within the broader context of the **National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance (2024–2030)** and respond to ongoing reforms at both Junior and Senior Cycle levels, as well as the growing emphasis on wellbeing.

This article offers a detailed comparison of these two circulars, highlighting how **0041/2024** established an initial foundation for modern guidance policy, while **0001/2025** refines and expands upon that foundation. By exploring the core elements of each document - WSG definition, the role of the WSG team, the specialist role of the guidance counsellor, resource allocation, mandatory supervision, and accountability - guidance counselling professionals can gain a deeper understanding of how best to contribute as professional guidance counsellors to the implementation of WSG with other WSG team members and, navigate the shifting educational landscape.

1. Context and Purpose of Each Circular

Circular 0041/2024 was introduced as "the first of its kind" to integrate and centralise policy relating to guidance counselling in second level schools, following the publication of the *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance*. While it provided conceptual clarity on the meaning of Whole-School Guidance, it also signalled the advent of a new policy direction that would accommodate ongoing Junior Cycle reform, Senior Cycle redevelopment, and the Wellbeing Policy Statement.

In turn, **Circular 0001/2025** positions itself explicitly as an update to 0041/2024, reinforcing the same WSG model, but providing further detail. It states:

"This circular is written in the context of the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance and accompanying Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030)."

Moreover, Circular 0001/2025 places additional emphasis on how upcoming Senior Cycle changes, especially those affecting Transition Year (TY), will need to be integrated into every school's WSG plan by the 2025 – 2026 academic year. In so doing, it moves beyond general statements to more *directive* pronouncements, clarifying the responsibilities of managers, principals, and guidance counsellors alike.

2. The Whole-School Guidance Approach

Whole-School Guidance (WSG) is consistently portrayed across both circulars as a holistic, person-centred model. **Circular 0041/2024** sets the tone by defining guidance as a service that supports "students' personal and social, educational and career development," while also emphasising that WSG is "the responsibility of the entire school community."

Circular 0001/2025 reiterates these fundamentals but delves deeper into universal design and inclusive practices. It underscores the idea of **"guidance for all, for some, and for a few,"** ensuring that WSG provides broad-based activities (e.g., whole-year events, classroom teaching, co-curricular projects), as well as targeted supports (e.g., group work for select students) and intensive, individualised interventions (e.g., one-to-one guidance counselling).

Where Circular 0041/2024 introduced "WSG activities" as a key requirement in each school's annual plan, Circular 0001/2025 stipulates the need for more **explicit alignment** with the changing curriculum—specifically highlighting TY's "career exploration" dimension. This shift reflects the Department of Education's increased commitment to ensuring that WSG is not merely a concept, but rather a structured and monitored reality in each school's daily functioning.

3. The Role of the Guidance Counsellor

Both circulars emphasise the dual qualification of guidance counsellors - Teaching Council Route 2 registration and a recognised guidance counselling qualification. They also highlight the multifaceted nature of the guidance counsellor's work. **Circular 0041/2024** points to the Programme Recognition Framework (2016) as the benchmark document outlining "activities generally undertaken by the guidance counsellor," including classroom teaching, group guidance, one-to-one sessions, psychometric testing, and collaboration with student-support teams.

Yet, **Circular 0001/2025** moves this discussion further, stressing accountability and clear demarcation of time spent in each of the key areas. It repeats the **one-third / two-thirds** ratio (one-third for classroom guidance, two-thirds for one-to-one and group work), but frames it more firmly as a **policy directive:**

"A balanced approach to time management on behalf of the guidance counsellor will ensure that all guidance needs of students (personal, social, educational and careers) are met as effectively as possible."

In other words, whereas 0041/2024 presents this time allocation as an optimal balance, 0001/2025 insists on a clear demonstration that such balance is indeed being maintained and documented. The newer circular also underscores the importance of principals and boards of management ensuring that guidance counsellors' timetables adequately facilitate group and individual appointments, rather than being overly consumed by classroom teaching.

4. Counselling Supervision and Professional Support

Perhaps the most important difference between the two circulars involves **professional supervision. Circular 0041/2024** is effectively silent on the issue of counselling supervision. By contrast, **Section 9 of Circular 0001/2025**, **"Counselling Supervision: Professional Support Programme for Guidance Counsellors in Post-Primary School, PLC and CFE Settings"** makes explicit reference to the Department-funded supervision scheme for guidance counsellors, administered by Monaghan Education Centre, featuring five sessions per academic year. It asserts, in Section 9, 3rd paragraph:

"In order to support guidance counsellors with this work, the Department of Education funds a series of five sessions of supervision support, for guidance counsellors each academic year."

It goes on to say in the following paragraph, "*Attendance of guidance counsellors at their five allocated supervision sessions is imperative.*" (author's emphasis)

This pivot underscores the recognition that guidance counsellors often

address sensitive personal and social issues alongside their educational and career guidance remit. Drawing on established best practice, supervision provides guidance counsellors with an opportunity to reflect on complex cases, refine their therapeutic boundaries, and ensure alignment with professional ethical standards. The circular further instructs principals to prioritise (5th paragraph) this supervision time by ensuring clear timetables on the designated afternoons, thereby recognising its centrality to the counsellor's professional role. The circular also points out this is seen as part of a guidance counsellor's working hours.

"Attendance at these two-hour sessions is considered by the Department to be part of the guidance counsellors' allocated hours of work, in the five afternoons of the year where they are scheduled to attend supervision sessions."

5. Language, Terminology, and Conceptual Clarifications

In terms of **terminology,** both circulars share a commitment to defining guidance counselling as "holistic and person-centred," encompassing personal/social, educational, and career dimensions. Circular 0041/2024 notes that WSG "may be planned for and implemented by a nominated guidance team," within which the guidance counsellor plays a specialised role.

However, **Circular 0001/2025** devotes a fuller section to delineating: "Guidance counselling in schools is a specialised guidance service, provided by the guidance counsellor only (…) [who] has a strong capacity to hold the boundaries between guidance counselling and therapeutic counselling."

Such clarifications are invaluable to busy second level settings, where the risk of role confusion is significant. By distinguishing between universal guidance activities - led by various staff members - and specialised guidance counselling, 0001/2025 addresses the nuanced professional identity of guidance counsellors who, while fully qualified to deliver counselling in a guidance context, are *not* clinical psychotherapists. This emphasis on professional boundaries helps safeguard counsellors, students, and the school community at large.

6. References to Policy Reforms (Junior and Senior Cycle)

Both circulars refer to contemporary reforms:

- **Junior Cycle**: Schools are encouraged to embed personal, social, educational, and career guidance in the curricular and co-curricular aspects of Junior Cycle, linking to the Wellbeing Policy Statement and broader competency-based approaches.
- **Senior Cycle**: While Circular 0041/2024 introduces the concept of Senior Cycle redevelopment, **Circular 0001/2025** highlights a more **immediate** need for WSG teams to integrate upcoming changes to Transition Year, with a particular focus on "career exploration." This requirement effectively imposes a timeline on schools to reflect the revised TY programme statement in their WSG plans by the 2025–26 academic year.

"TY programmes are currently under review in line with senior cycle redevelopment (…) the 'career exploration' dimension (…) should be reviewed by WSG-teams and integrated into WSG plans and programmes in time for activation."

Such directives ensure that guidance counsellors and school leaders proactively incorporate current policy changes, rather than waiting for a future date.

7. Allocation of Resources and Time

Circular 0041/2024 acknowledges that the Department of Education is in the process of reviewing the "guidance-allocation model," signalling that the status quo might shift in future. It references older circulars (e.g. 0008/2023, 0009/2023) for detailed breakdowns of how many hours or positions are allocated to schools for guidance counselling.

Building on this, **Circular 0001/2025** elaborates on the expectation of

a "**balanced**" approach in deploying these resources. To support its "well-informed implementation", principals should ensure the WSG plan "provides for an appropriate balance" across individual appointments, group guidance, classroom lessons, and relevant planning/meeting times. This pivot from *advice* to *mandate* places more accountability on school management:

"The Board of Management and school management team have a responsibility to ensure that the provision and practice of guidance in the school is of the highest possible standard."

Thus, any school that neglects personal/social guidance, or, over-emphasises career exploration at the expense of counselling support would be in breach of the Circular's intention.

8. Future Direction and Reviews

While **Circular 0041/2024** states it "will be reviewed annually," **Circular 0001/2025** explicitly positions itself as the *current* guiding policy, to be reviewed "regularly" in line with the strategic action plan for lifelong guidance. This reaffirms that the Department sees guidance counselling policy as an evolving domain, shaped by:

1. **Progress under the National Strategic Action Plan (2024–2030)**
2. **Feedback from schools and guidance counsellors**
3. **Emerging educational reforms** (Senior Cycle, TY, Wellbeing, etc.)

At the same time, Circular 0001/2025 hints at further refinements, **particularly regarding the allocation model** and ways to optimise the delivery of WSG at post-primary level. Consequently, schools would do well to remain adaptive, continually revisiting their WSG plans and structures

Conclusion

Viewed together, **Circular 0041/2024** and **Circular 0001/2025** present an evolution of guidance counselling policy in Ireland's second level sector. Circular 0041/2024 laid a conceptual foundation, affirming that WSG is "the contemporary model of practice" and inviting all members of staff to engage in holistic student support. Circular 0001/2025 then extends this framework with more detailed stipulations: **mandatory counselling supervision**, a more **explicit time-allocation framework**, deeper **integration with Senior Cycle reforms**, and a stronger emphasis on **universal design and inclusive practice.**

For guidance counsellors, these developments underscore both the profession's increased visibility and its heightened responsibilities. As the educational landscape continues to shift toward skills-based learning, wellbeing, and lifelong guidance, the role of the qualified guidance counsellor - anchored by appropriate supervision and robust policy support - remains critical to fostering student agency and resilience.

Equally, principals and boards of management must respond actively by enabling a balanced distribution of the counsellor's workload and ensuring that personal, social, educational, and career guidance dimensions are all addressed. In so doing, schools not only comply with Department policy but also deliver on the essential mission of guidance counselling: " …to help students develop an awareness and acceptance of their talents and abilities, to identify and explore opportunities, and to grow in independence and to take responsibility for themselves, to make informed choices, and to follow through on those choices" *(Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act (1998) relating to students' access to appropriate guidance, 2005)*

Ultimately, the two circulars serve as complementary guides, reminding us that "guidance is, by definition, person-centred and holistic" (Circular 0041/2024) and that the success of WSG rests on a *coordinated and well-supported effort* by all members of the school community (Circular 0001/2025). As we move deeper into the era of reimagined curricula and expanded wellbeing initiatives, guidance counsellors stand at the forefront of shaping a generation of students who are both prepared academically and supported holistically for their future paths.

AI was used in creating part of this article.

INTEGRATION OF THE CPIP
(Career Portal Interest Profiler)
Within Guidance Counselling Practice

John Carton

Interest Inventories have played a central role in guidance practice for quite some time. Harrington & Long (2013) give a succinct historical overview of such developments. When guidance counsellors invite students to complete the CareersPortal Interest Profiler (CPIP) there are a number of critical questions that they should be considering.

• What do students understand about Interests?

• How seriously should we consider the results?

• Are interests an indicator of future career choices?

• Are Interests confined to indicating either subject/course choice and/or career choice?

"… I think the informed guidance type conversation is crucial. To talk about everything from what the tools are designed to do and how they tend to be 'a snapshot in time' and that a person's career and other preferences can and do change over time especially as additional life and career experiences build up." [4]

What do students understand about Interests?

Depending on the individual or group you are working with, providing some background information on what the profiler is, and what it can and cannot do, can create greater engagement with the user.

Holland's "theory of vocational personalities and work environments" forms the foundation of the CPIP. This well-established theory is not only easy for students to grasp but also boasts significant scientific and intuitive credibility.

An important point to stress is that the questionnaire is not "a test" and not based on the ability or aptitude of individual. In terms of the guidance counselling relationship, providing explanation demystifies the profiler and encourages a process of exploration and career learning in the guidance process.

With an understanding of the theory, the student will understand what they are doing when they take the profiler, and what the results are likely to reveal.

"I use the interest profiler in class with 5th year students. Before taking the profiler, I deliver a lesson on Holland Person-Environment Typology. After that, I explain how the CP profiler splits Realistic into Realistic and Naturalistic; and Artistic into Creative and Linguistic." [2]

How seriously should we consider the results?

In considering the results of the CPIP, or any other instrument, it is important to understand what the instrument is designed to do, and how it derives its results. The CPIP is relatively unique in terms of interest inventories, as the scoring mechanism allows for strong likes (or dislikes) for each pair of items.

Read the two activities below. Then choo clicking below.

1. Use a computer program to edit and format documents.

2. Seek new ways to promote a product.

Unlike the conventional 'likert scale' based CII's, the CPIP uses a unique, aggressive scoring algorithm that is designed to amplify any leaning towards an interest category, in part to avoid results that are largely non-differentiated. This also allows for scores in the negative range – an indication of an active disinterest in the activities suggested. This unique characteristic of the CPIP differentiates it from other CII's and provides an opportunity for Guidance Counsellors to investigate deeper (profiles with only negative scores are a matter of concern for various reasons).

In another departure from 'likert scale' based instruments, or psychometric instruments, the results of the CPIP cannot be meaningfully compared with each other – at least when considering the numeric scores. It is the relative scores within each result set that carries the useful information – not the absolute value of each interest category. If Investigative is the highest scoring category, it matters little whether that has a score of 60 or 10, the indication is that Investigative activities are preferred to all others, and that is the path to follow. Nor does it mean that a score of 60 means the person is 'more' investigative than the person scoring 10 – this is important in both communicating the results to users, and for the Guidance Counsellors in their own assessment of the results.

"After the student takes the profiler, I outline the difference between a differentiated profile and non-differentiated profile. Once the class has a good understanding of what their profile means in a broad sense, I teach the students to link the results to possible careers through the career matching app." [3]

"As a post primary Guidance Counsellor, I feel the Careers Interest Profiler is one of the most valuable tools I can use for helping students explore career options aligned with their passions. It encourages self-reflection, broadens career awareness and provides a great starting point for meaningful career discussions." [1]

"Úsáideann ár ndaltaí an Próifíleoir Spéiseanna Gairme mar slí chun an réimse leathan gairmeacha ann a ghearradh siar, iad a mheaitseáil leis na suimeanna léirithe ag na daltaí, agus mar uirlis chun tosú ag cuardach cúrsaí agus oiliúint. Is acmhainn fíor úsáideach é chun tús a chuir le taighde an dalta agus mar ábhar cainte le linn coinne ghairme. Bua sa bhreis dúinn, i meánscoil sa Ghaeltacht, ná go bhfuil an Próifíleoir ar fáil i nGaeilge." [2]

Along with discussing the Holland theory, it is important to share an understanding of the CPIP tool and the results that it produces. As a 'strengths based' instrument, the information required from the results is what are the interests that the user is most oriented towards, and to build on those.

Are interests an indicator of future career choices?

"It's most helpful for identifying potential career paths and provides insightful suggestions. The user-friendly, well-designed format enhances the student experience, making career exploration interactive, seamless and effective." [1]

Taken in isolation, however, interests may or may not be an indicator of future career choice. It is suggested that the results of the CPIP be carefully considered alongside school results, results from Aptitude Tests, Values Questionnaires, Personal qualities etc. A holistic picture needs to be painted with the student to ensure a multidimensional approach is achieved. This is strongly advocated on the CareersPortal Reach Programmes, where measures of these additional dimensions are also available and encouraged by the holistic guidance counselling approach:

"In 5th year, I find it is a very useful tool helping students in developing self-awareness about vocational interests. In the 6th year interview, I use it more in a counselling context alongside examining school exam results, CAT 4 data, interests, personality, values, aspirations, opportunities to access college etc. Time and time again, I find it is very useful to use alongside other important metrics when helping a student make the 'next step' decision." [3]

A special word of thanks to all of the Guidance Counsellors who provided feedback on their experience of integrating the CPIP in their guidance practice.

John Carton (Developer of the CPIP, and Co-Founder of CareersPortal.ie)

Testimonials:

1. Maria Faherty, GC in Abbey Vocational School, Donegal (Feb 2025)
2. Niamh Uí Thuama, Treoirchomhairleoir, Coláiste Ghobnatan (Feb 2025)
3. Róisín McSharry, GC, Garbally College (Feb 2025)
4. Susan Scott (Feb 2025) GC in Clondalkin Youth and Information Service

Constant confession

Mental health campaigns place huge trust in people's ability to act as therapists. But when should professionals step in?

- Aaron Neiman

The 2020s have seen an explosion in rhetoric about mental health – about the importance of monitoring it, tending to it, talking about it. Public discourse had already been trending steadily in this direction for years, with celebrities increasingly sharing their own struggles with mental illness, and the number of Americans using psychological services rising steadily since at least 2010. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, phrases like 'Everybody has mental health' and 'It's OK not to be OK' have started to feel less like platitudes and more like indispensable parts of the new normal. Driven by the rise of telehealth and a massive spike in anxiety and depression since 2020, there has been an increase in demand for behavioural health services across the board.

In recent years, the concept of a 'mental health day' has entered the popular lexicon, usually referring to a self-granted day off from work, school or other day-to-day responsibilities. This clues us in to the fact that, for significant parts of the world, 'mental health' is no longer simply defined in the negative – i.e., as the absence of mental illness. It now also includes positive ideas about general wellbeing, emotional intelligence and self-knowledge, and a harmonious work-life balance. It is an idiom we use to understand, critique and evaluate the basic conditions of everyday life.

The tools and theories of mental health professionals have also made their way into the ordinary language that we use to understand many aspects of our lives. For example, it is now common to turn to therapy-inflected language to make sense of our relationships: the concepts of trauma and toxicity have become powerful explanatory tools for interpersonal conflict. A raft of psychiatric diagnoses – OCD, bipolar, BPD and ADHD, especially – are commonly used as self-descriptors with varying degrees of seriousness.

Corporations, nonprofits and government agencies now endorse good mental health in their promotional materials and public service announcements. We see mental health-themed advertising campaigns and sponsored nights at sporting events, billboards encouraging us to 'fight the stigma' or lend an ear to a friend who might be struggling privately. This trend becomes especially noticeable during each year's Mental Health Awareness Day/Week/Month (the exact timing of which varies somewhat by country and organisation), in which some of the most recognisable brands participate. Walmart, Marks & Spencer, the All Blacks, Google and the Royal Bank of Canada have all created their own mental health charity partnerships and awareness campaigns for the occasion.

In 2021, the American football league (NFL) marked Mental Health Awareness Month by posting a series of short video testimonials in which players talk about the importance of maintaining both physical and psychological wellbeing (as Joey Bosa, a linebacker for the Los Angeles Chargers, said: 'Your brain is a muscle, too'). In 2023, Starbucks published brief interviews with some of its employees who were most passionate about keeping mental health a top priority in the workplace (Kirsty, a store manager, said: 'I lost a friend because of ill mental health. Having a support network inside of work [where] you feel safe is crucial'). This is typical of the way mental health discourse helps major organisations publicly affirm their commitment to kindness, neurodiversity and progressive social values.

In January 2024, the children's TV show Sesame Street made headlines when its most famous spokesman enquired about the public's mental health. The X post, which went viral, read: 'Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?' Elmo's social media post racked up hundreds of millions of views and tens of thousands of replies from seemingly desperate and frightened people. Amid the top responses to this bit of light engagement bait were serious expressions of economic anxiety, climate doom, intense loneliness and general political despair. In March, possibly in response to this high-profile display of public distress, the show's parent organisation Sesame Workshop launched a partnership with the Ad Council to provide a host of emotional wellbeing resources for children and families.

The attention generated by these campaigns may or may not translate into concrete mental health resources, as it did in the case of Sesame Street. Often, their splashiness seems to eclipse the underlying message. An illustrative example here is Burger King's #FeelYourWay campaign from May 2019. Tying into the theme of authentically expressing one's feelings, customers were encouraged to order a 'Real Meal', that is, a Whopper in special packaging decorated to match the consumer's mood at that time. In the words of the press release: 'Burger King restaurants understands that no one is happy all the time.' In contrast to their rival McDonald's well-known 'Happy Meal', the campaign included options like 'Pissed', 'Blue', 'DGAF' (for 'don't give a fuck'), 'Salty' and 'Yaaas'. Understandably, Burger King faced some criticism for this rather dubious connection to Mental Health Awareness Month.

Still, paying attention to these campaigns can tell us something important about our present moment. They all subscribe to the same, basically sound internal logic:

1. Many people experiencing mental health issues like depression and anxiety suffer in silence.
2. Simply talking about what is going on with someone else can significantly ease this burden.
3. Encouraging such conversations can help people spot concerning signs like suicidality.
4. Stigma, which prevents these interventions, is morally wrong and potentially deadly.
5. People should feel unafraid to seek appropriate treatment or professional help.
6. Small lifestyle adjustments like regular sleep and exercise will make many people feel better.

In Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom and Aotearoa/New Zealand, these tenets help form the basis of a (nominal) public consensus in polite society: that mental health is an indelible part of human health in total.

There are good reasons to celebrate these campaigns. They reflect the welcome reality that 'psychic wellbeing matters' is now a mainstream, even 'neutral' position. This recognition of the inherent goodness of mental health is the result of hard-won gains made over decades by the activists, scientists,

artists and philosophers who together have transformed our understanding of the dark and frightening things of which all our psyches are capable.

Pioneering research in psychoanalysis identified the unconscious as a fundamental component of human being, demonstrating that we are all subject to alien, irrational and contradictory dynamics within ourselves. Decades of published research and case studies confirm that 'neurodiversity' is an essential part of our species' natural variation – that suffering extremes of thought, feeling and behaviour are all relatively common, and that these tend to be disordered in ways that follow particular patterns, and which may respond to specific medications or therapeutic techniques. Those with lived experience of psychiatric violence have pushed the movement for disability justice to include both 'users and refusers' of the mental healthcare system and forced society to reckon with the thorny question of involuntary commitment. Countless celebrities, musicians and athletes have shared their psychiatric diagnoses and become positive role models to everyday people who are similarly struggling.

In his classic study *Madness and Civilization* (1961), the philosopher Michel Foucault shows that the supposedly more 'enlightened' and scientific idea of 'mental illness' (which came to replace the older concept of 'madness') also resulted in exquisite brutality for those who were deemed different. These legacies of shame, abuse, unjust institutionalisation, homelessness, excessive physical restraint, employment discrimination, neglect, stupefaction with powerful drugs, and disownment by family lasted well into the late 20th century and are still very much with us today. But something really has shifted in our own time: we now identify more with the figure who is different; the pathological position has become the default one. In this sense, 'It's OK not to be OK' isn't just a corporate slogan. It's also a profound distillation of massive social change.

Foucault was greatly disturbed by modern psychiatry's ability to draw definitive lines between the 'reasonable' and the 'unreasonable'. He came to see it as another way for society to punish and marginalise its most troublesome subjects. Deploying the metaphor of a circulatory system, he conceived of psychiatrists as figures of 'capillary' power – unlike the conspicuous, beating heart of the state, these authorities functioned as more subtle, distal agents of the status quo. Writing in the 1960s and '70s, Foucault saw the psychoanalytic therapists of his day as the latest technicians managing 'one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth of one kind or another' – the confession. This is the idea that disclosing one's inner darkness leads to salvation, truth, self-actualisation. There is an important similarity between how this dynamic plays out in the church and the clinic: 'bravely confront and share the ugly things inside you' equally describes the task of the confessional booth as it does the therapist's couch. In both cases, there is more at play here than simple unburdening: it is not just that 'shared sorrow is half sorrow', as in the case of confiding in a friend, but also that having an adversarial encounter with yourself can be fruitful in some way.

This uneasy brush with the self, mediated through a person with social authority, is an essential feature of these confessional practices, and distinguishes them from other kinds of dialogue. Therapy is based on this same model: it is carefully choreographed around a highly skilled worker, one with the practical knowledge and symbolic authority to endow this interaction with the gravity it deserves. We see this same idea articulated today when a therapist reminds their patients that their office is a 'safe space'. In many countries, the law itself recognises the clinic as a place of privileged communication, subject to the strictest standards of medical confidentiality.

Today's mental health campaigns likewise try to capture this sense of security and special protection from reprisal, but with an additional challenge: they wish to project this ethic beyond the confines of the 50-minute session, into everyday conversations with friends, colleagues and loved ones. There are many initiatives whose names allude to this focus on ordinary dialogue as a form of intimate disclosure: there is 'Seize the Awkward' and 'Talk Away the Dark' (campaigns of the major mental health charities), 'Make It OK' and 'Operation: Conversation' (put on by regional healthcare providers), 'Here to Hear You' and 'Ask Listen Talk Repeat' (organised by local health departments), #ReachOut and #LiftTheWeight (campaigns of major professional sporting organisations), 'I'm Listening' and 'Britain Get Talking' (those of private broadcasting companies). Some are bespoke, such as 'Walk the Talk' (aimed at New Zealand youngsters), 'Don't Keep It Under Your Hat' (for Aussie farmers), #YouAreNotAlone (for Norwich City FC supporters), and 'Let's Talk About It' (for NBC News consumers in the catchment area of Greater Portland, Maine).

Through these sorts of programmes, it seems that confession – in a broader and more literary sense – is a key social commandment of our time. These campaigns and initiatives present being there for people as a duty to those who want to share what's bottled up inside them, and doing the same yourself. In real ways, this affords us an unprecedented level of freedom of emotional expression. It reaffirms that even ordinary relationships are based on the most profoundly caring ethics.

But the campaigns make it less clear in whom we should locate the social authority necessary for these kinds of vulnerable interactions, in which we may encounter alien or delicate parts of ourselves. The campaigns blur the line between laity and expertise, between clinic and home, between therapist and friend. The already diffuse, 'capillary' power of the therapist has somehow become even more so, osmosing through the walls of the clinic. In neoliberal societies with mental healthcare systems buckling under the pressure of skyrocketing demand, this essentially conscripts everyday people as frontline healthcare workers with an unclear remit.

If we're really going to heed the call to address this ocean of unmet psychic need, then we will need to stop mystifying who is meant to be doing what. There is an ambiguity in these campaigns about exactly what kind of conversation topic, or conversation partner, constitutes 'getting help'.

On the one hand, this messaging clearly takes expertise seriously. It is common for such campaigns to direct the public towards relevant healthcare providers: emergency services, general practitioners and mental health specialists. This is known as 'signposting' – using one's own visual real estate to direct people to other services or organisations (e.g., 'If you are feeling suicidal, call this crisis line'). The effect is to highlight the necessity of the trained mental health professional, and to endorse the basic trustworthiness of those with credentials (social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc). It endorses the formal tools of the 'psy' disciplines – structured therapeutic sessions, medication, hospitalisation when necessary – as fundamentally legitimate.

> **'It's OK not to be OK' isn't just a corporate slogan. It's also a profound distillation of massive social change.**

So there remain some very important questions: who is fine just talking to friends and family, and who needs professional help? How does one know the difference?

On the other hand, these campaigns also downplay the authority of the therapist. They stress the necessary everydayness of such conversations and encourage the troubled person to confide in a close friend, family member or coworker. The informal, nonprofessional nature of these intimate conversations is evident in the marketing materials for these campaigns, which often feature text bubbles or other stylisations to hint at the casualness and ease of checking in. R U OK?, a prominent Australian anti-suicide charity, is exemplary in this regard. Premised on the idea that 'a conversation could change a life', the organisation places its eye-catching yellow-and-black signage all over public spaces. These ads encourage ordinary Australians to perform simple, routine check-ins with others they know, to help spot concerning signs of mental illness.

The organisation's name, stylised in textspeak, alludes to the belief that life-saving conversations – i.e., ones in which signs of suicidality or depression are spotted – can be easily and informally initiated. One ad campaign for the annual 'R U OK? Day' in 2011 featured the actor Hugh Jackman brandishing a tiny coffee cup with the organisation's logo, referencing the fact that profound conversations about mental health can be had in unremarkable social settings, like over a (soft) drink. The organisation has continued to stress this link between routine sociality and psychological wellbeing. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the suicide prevention organisation ran an ad campaign that encouraged people to #stayconnected while locked down and social distancing. The implication is that informal care relationships are the first line of defence against the worst possible psychiatric outcomes.

I think that even the architects of these well-meaning campaigns would agree that, at a certain level of acuteness or severity, a person's psychological problem passes from the realm of the everyday to the realm of the pathological. At that point, there should be a seamless handoff to an appropriate mental health professional.

So there remain some very important questions: who is fine just talking to friends and family, and who needs professional help? How does one know the difference? At what point does the conversation stop belonging in the social realm and enter the domain of the expert or professional? A tremendous amount of trust is put in the lay public's ability to adjudicate this, calling into question both the upper bounds of intimate friendship and the lower bounds of mental healthcare.

R U OK?'s four-step, quick-start guide for these conversations hints at the tension between the normal and the pathological. Step 2, 'Listen', reminds the public that: 'It's important to remember that much of what people go through in life will be out of your control. You don't need to "solve" or "fix" what they're going through, and often you can't. Just listening and helping them feel heard can go a long way.' Step 3, 'Encourage Action', reads, in part: 'If they are really struggling, encourage them to access professional support. You could offer to help them book an appointment with their GP or research some helplines. You can find a list of free 24/7 national support services at the link below.'

The question of who should actually get professional help is a grave one, and it raises structural issues beyond the scope of these campaigns. For example, booking an appointment with a GP (who may or may not be adequately trained in mental health issues) can take weeks in Australia, whose healthcare system faces a growing shortage of physicians due to chronic government underinvestment in Medicare, the country's universal healthcare insurance scheme.

Mental health organisations in the UK, whose public health infrastructure suffers even more neglect than Australia's, also fudge the important distinction between a good chat and a productive therapy session. In 2017, 'Heads Together', an initiative of the Royal Foundation of the Prince and Princess of Wales, launched a campaign called #OKtoSay, similar to those described above. In a promotional video for the campaign, Prince William, Princess Catherine and Prince Harry sit together at a picnic table in a bucolic outdoor setting for a candid-seeming chat about why mental health matters to them. Harry likens these 'simple conversations' to 'almost like a form of medicine'. Kate repeats the line, recalling meeting 'a young mother [who] said that to me … just talking to somebody, having those conversations, is like medicine for her. And that is the point.'

Of course, the royals were using a literary turn of phrase here, but the language matters and brings back the unresolved questions: are these simple conversations, no more intimidating than watercooler chat, or are they tantamount to a miniature therapy session in itself? If we consider this in light of the fact that the UK explicitly began publicly funding cognitive behavioural therapy to return the unemployed to work, then 'talking to a friend is actually like treatment' becomes potentially more sinister. Minimal social expenditure for maximal labour productivity is still the order of the day, so messaging from the members of the British royal family hinting that a friend is as good as a doctor should at least make us raise an eyebrow.

In the absence of strong social bonds or comprehensive political programmes, Western governments and their corporate and nonprofit allies have collapsed the two into one half-measure: everyone is a therapist, and everyone is in therapy. The loud part – which says that intimate, honest conversation is good – masks the quiet part, which is that it's also meant to serve as an adjunct to the state's mental healthcare capacity. The result is that conversation may seem an end in itself, with no proper attention paid to the actual content of these interactions.

In all of these campaigns, the potentially deadly seriousness of the subject matter seems to be at odds with the casual manner in which people are encouraged to discuss mental health with friends or colleagues. This remains a problem worth our consideration. Let's take seriously the idea that these organisations really are in the business of saving lives, of facilitating the kinds of conversations that might actually lead someone to conclude that life is worth the trouble of living, after all. We must acknowledge the fact that we often encounter these serious entreaties in settings that remind us of the deeply unserious nature of our world. Adults unburdening themselves to Elmo, Depression Whoppers, soccer teams with official positions on healthcare debates.

> **Reminders to be a better friend, gentler family member or softer person are often welcome and will never be unwarranted. But let us not confuse this with the hard work required to address the very real mental health crisis**

Real care for the currently, partially and potentially 'mentally ill'– which, today, means a lot of people – is unlikely to come from these methods. It will not come from more efficiently shunting people into overburdened healthcare systems and volunteer-run crisis services. It will not come from corporate advertising campaigns, not even good ones, because, by definition, these do not address the root of the problem.

It will come from massively expanding the productive capacity of the public healthcare sector, training up more practitioners, building and upgrading infrastructure, and investing in basic standards of living for the poor and working classes of some of the world's wealthiest societies. It will mean transforming the way people move between social services, clinicians, friends, family and community. It will mean addressing climate change materially, not only obliquely referencing how bad it feels. It will mean addressing the alienation of screens, tech feudalism, delivery apps, union-busted workplaces and the chronic enshittification of everything.

Like confession, therapy is not simply another form of chatting, as good as any other. It is a special zone of play, built for purpose – one that incorporates many of the best aspects of platonic love, but which is additionally bound by professional duty, specialised training and uniform standards of conduct. When it comes to the dark night of the soul, all ears are not created equal. Reminders to be a better friend, gentler family member or softer person are often welcome and will never be unwarranted. But let us not confuse this with the hard work required to address the very real mental health crisis to which such campaigns rightly call our attention. Only then will we find out just how OK we can really be.

Aaron Neiman is a medical anthropologist and a postdoctoral researcher at the Center for Mental Health Services Research, Brown School at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, USA.

From *Aeon.com*

Educating Gen Z:
why authenticity and connection are key to thriving in an AI-driven world

LUCY GILL-SIMMEN

According to Merriam-Webster, America's oldest dictionary, "authentic" was the top word of 2023. The dictionary's publisher also declared the meaning of the word "fake" was becoming increasingly blurred.

In an age where AI is becoming increasingly prevalent, the concept of authenticity has taken on new significance, particularly for Gen Z. Born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, this generation has grown up in a digital age where social media and online personas are part of everyday life – as are misinformation and disinformation. So, Gen Z has had to develop an acute ability to discern what is genuine from what is artificial.

Immersed in technology since birth, authenticity for this generation is not just a desirable trait, it's a necessity. Gen Z has witnessed first-hand the ease with which false information can spread – as evidenced by high-profile conspiracy theory cases, events like the Southport riots, and the rise in the use of deepfakes to misrepresent people.

As a result, Gen Z has developed a well-honed scepticism towards anything that appears too polished, too perfect, too contrived – a skill that will serve them well as AI-generated content becomes increasingly sophisticated and harder to distinguish from reality.

In 2021, a Gen Z insights report from Ernst & Young showed that 92% of this generation value being "authentic and true to oneself" as important. In fact, they crave authenticity in all aspects of their lives.

Compared with Millennials, a larger proportion of Gen Z say they base their job choices on their personal values and ethics. Many describe wanting genuine relationships, authentic emotional connections and transparency in all forms of communication.

Another study found that 90% of Gen Z consumers believe authenticity is crucial when deciding which brands to support. They seek out genuine connections and experiences, both online and offline, and respond to brands that appear to echo these concerns.

In research undertaken with my colleague Sukanya Sen Gupta, we asked Royal Holloway School of Business & Management students to engage in an artistic activity of "future self-portraiture" – an exercise that encourages participants to connect with their authentic selves.

As a tool for self-discovery and self-expression, they were asked to create an artistic image in which they imagined themselves when they were older. We found that by engaging in introspection and self-reflection through art, students were able to identify and express their true thoughts, feelings and values.

Leading the way for Gen Z

Research suggests that for teachers, adapting the curriculum and teaching methods to prioritise authenticity is essential to preparing Gen Z for success in an AI-driven world.

Traditional classroom settings alone are no longer sufficient; innovative, experiential approaches that allow students to become critical thinkers and embrace individuality are required to develop well-rounded professionals. Engaging students in teaching methods that incorporate real-world activities – such as conducting market research for local businesses, or managing a virtual investment portfolio using real-time market data – helps foster authenticity within the learning environment.

By working on real-world challenges and making thoughtful contributions, students not only gain practical skills, they experience the satisfaction of creating something tangible that has an impact. In other words, a bridging of theory and practice that has lasting effects – a stark contrast to the often fleeting nature of digital interactions.

When we asked students to create a future self-portrait as part of our research, they were told they could do this however they pleased – using pencils, paint, fabrics or even flowers. We offered the students a loose, creative process that was not overly prescribed.

The participants expressed joy in harking back to their past to help identify their future-self. In this part of the exercise, nostalgia played its part in generating positivity about the future.

By exploring personal histories, family stories and cultural roots, a person can gain a deeper understanding of who they are and what they value. This process of self-discovery can prove particularly powerful now, at a time when AI and algorithms are often shaping our experiences and interactions. We believe this new-found self-awareness can help Gen Z navigate the complexities of an AI-driven world with greater confidence and clarity.

In addition to self-portraiture, we have found that employing personal branding exercises can help students develop their unique identity. Encouraging students to create personal mission statements, identify core values and develop genuine social media profiles – rather than the "Insta-just-for-show" variety – can help them establish who they really are. By embracing their unique qualities and perspectives, young people are empowered to stand out in a world where AI-generated content threatens to make everything seem generic.

It appears that over time, Gen Z has grown tired of upholding an online persona that deviates from their true personality. Recent findings suggest the only way to market effectively to Gen Z on social media is for brands to come up with more thoughtful messaging that aligns with their target audience.

Similarly, as AI-generated content and fake news continue to permeate daily life, it is crucial that we prioritise the value of authenticity in education, especially for younger generations who are particularly impressionable.

By making this a guiding principle in education, teachers and lecturers are well positioned to empower Gen Z to create a future where genuine human connections and experiences continue to thrive alongside technological advancements. When the line between reality and artifice is not always easy to distinguish, nurturing the importance of authenticity could be the most vital responsibility for those tasked with shaping the next generation.

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From *theConversation.com*

Murmuration of starlings photo by James Crombie

IGC Networking and Training Event

The Bloomfield House Hotel 17 & 18 January 2025
by Fred Tuite and Catríona Rodgers

The Bloomfield Hotel is situated on the shores of Lough Ennell where photographer James Crombie, a celebrated sports photographer, but, turning to nature during a sports-free Covid, photographed a murmuration of starlings that briefly formed the shape of a bird. This celebrated photograph, along with much of his other work, is now gathered in a new book called *Murmurations*, published by the Lilliput Press. No murmuration was visible when I arrived at Bloomfield House. But, it makes me wonder what the collective term for Guidance Counsellors should be. Maybe a Consultation or even an Empathy of Guidance Counsellors, but anyhow, they were gathered there for the IGC Networking and Training Event. Catríona takes up the account:

Officers from every branch were invited in addition to members who are involved with the IGC, working groups and subcommittees. There was representation from 15 out of our 16 branches, a fantastic result. The event was kindly sponsored by Studyclix and Ulster University with Luke and Leona from Studyclix and Conan from Ulster University attending and speaking at the event.

We had a 6.00 p.m. kick off on Friday evening, which traffic on the M50 slightly delayed, with President Catríona Rodgers warmly welcoming attendees. Claire Kenny, Midland branch Chairperson, shared information on Conference 2025, which is taking place in Mullingar on 21 & 22 of March. IGC researcher Dr Eimear McDonnell presented briefly on the upcoming IGC National Survey and drew our attention to the importance of completing the survey. A highlight of the evening was the award to Brian Howard acknowledging his dedication and tremendous work on the Directory of Leaving Certificate Requirements (DLER) for the past 20 years. The DLER was published for the 20th time in November 2024, a fantastic

achievement that is down to Brian's commitment. Brian Mooney presented Brian with the award, and shared some fond reminiscences of their work together on the NE.

A keynote address was delivered by Shane Martin, who spoke on the importance of resilience and "bouncebackability". This wonderful session concluded with a closing address from Vice President Colette Twomey. A delicious dinner offered an opportunity for members to connect in a more relaxed atmosphere.

On Saturday morning officers of the IGC headed to their respective workshops where they met their counterparts from other branches. Training was provided by NE Representatives and Officers, with support from IGC head office staff. Feedback from the event has been overwhelmingly positive. The opportunity to connect and network with our branch members was a key outcome, as was the training provided on the Saturday morning. Thanks to all who gave up their time to attend and engage with the IGC, and to Edel Williams, IGC National Administrator, for all her work and preparation. Once again, sincere thanks to Studyclix and Ulster University for their support and for sharing their insights with attendees on the evening.

Survey of Guidance Counsellors

Eimear McDonell

One of the main aims of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, as outlined in the IGC Constitution, is the "promotion of research in the field of Guidance Counselling services and the sharing of results with government departments, statutory bodies, and the general public" (IGC 2024e, p.2). In line with the *IGC Strategic Plan 2024–2027*, which seeks to "strengthen our advocacy to ensure that the positive voice of the guidance counselling profession in policy-making is heard and respected" (IGC 2024d, p.8), the IGC is committed to "investing in research that delivers policy-relevant insight for both IGC and its stakeholders" (IGC 2024d, p.9).

The National Survey for 2024/2025 provides critical data that can strengthen the IGC's ability to advocate for members at a national level. Evidence-based research allows the IGC Officers and National Executive to engage in meaningful discussions with policymakers and other stakeholders with credible claims about workload, funding needs, and systemic challenges.

The IGC's advocacy efforts are only as strong as the data underpinning them. A high response rate will ensure that decisions and advocacy are based on the realities of all guidance counsellors to adequately reflect the diversity of settings in which members work, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the profession in 2024/2025. **Therefore, we need all members to engage with and complete the National Survey to achieve these goals. This is a critical opportunity for you to have your voice heard.**

As the only national body collecting data of this scope (to the best of our knowledge!), we feel privileged to be in a position to capture this vital data. The National Survey is a significant undertaking by the IGC and demonstrates its commitment to serving members' needs and safeguarding the profession. It builds on the findings of previous IGC surveys in 2022/23 (IGC 2024a, b, c), 2019 (IGC 2019), and those conducted in response to the cuts to guidance in 2012.

We want to ensure that the response rates from each branch are above a certain threshold, so we urge all branch officers to convey this message to their branches. It is vital that we have representation of members across the country from all branches.

Members have the opportunity to add comments within the survey. Even though your comments may not appear in the final report, these valuable insights will be used to advocate and lobby on your behalf to the best of our ability.

By taking part in this survey, you are directly contributing to the future of guidance counselling in Ireland, ensuring that the profession is represented with accurate, data-driven insights.

Click on the QR Code below to access the IGC National Survey 2024/2025:

> By taking part in this survey, you are directly contributing to the future of guidance counselling in Ireland, ensuring that the profession is represented with accurate, data-driven insights.

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13-YEAR-OLDS HAVE BETTER RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR PARENTS BUT FEWER FRIENDS THAN A DECADE AGO

EMER SMITH, ESRI

New research, published by the ESRI and produced in partnership with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY), looks at how the lives of 13-year-olds have changed over a decade in terms of their relationships with family and friends, their day-to-day activities and their school experiences. The report draws on data from the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, comparing 13-year-olds in 2011/12 and 2021/22 (Cohorts '98 and '08), a period of considerable social and policy change, including the disruption of the pandemic, growing digitalisation and reform of the junior cycle.

Relationships with family and friends

- Mothers and fathers report much lower levels of conflict with their teenage children over time and mothers are more responsive to the needs of young people than previously.

- In discussing their behaviour, parents are more likely to explain what the young person has done wrong (63% compared with 49% always doing so) and much less likely to use punitive approaches like grounding (69% compared with 59% never doing so) or shouting at the young person (41% compared with 28% never doing so).

- Young people report having smaller friendship groups than previously: 53% have three or fewer close friends compared with 41% ten years previously. In addition, mothers are more likely to report that 13-year-olds have problems interacting with peers.

Day-to-day activities

- There has been an increase in weekly involvement in organised sports (from 65% to 70%). There has also been a reduction in the proportion of 13-year-olds who have very low levels of engagement in hard and light exercise.

- Levels of engagement in cultural activities (such as drama and dance) have been stable, if not increasing, with over a third of young people involved in these pursuits.

- There is evidence that a significant number of young people rarely read for pleasure. Almost half (48%) of boys from working-class or jobless households say that they read less than once a week or never.

- Not surprisingly, there has been a shift away from traditional media (such as TV watching but also playing video/computer games) towards other screen time (time on a phone or other device). High levels of screen time are generally associated with less involvement in sport and cultural activities.

School experiences

- The recent cohort of young people had experienced junior cycle reform as well as a change in approaches to teaching and learning at both primary and second level. This was reflected in improved levels of interest in English (44% to 51%), Maths (32% to 42%), and Science (60% to 68%).

- This did not translate into improved attitudes to school. Instead, there is a decline in the proportion of girls who say they like school very much (from 35% to 24%). This is at least partly related to increased emotional difficulties over time among girls.

Policy implications

While there has been a general improvement in many domains, the study findings highlight persistent differences in the lives led by different groups of adolescents. Financial strain continues to be associated with greater parent-child conflict, reinforcing the need to target adequate levels of income support towards families with children to reduce conflict and improve wellbeing. Young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to take part in various out-of-school activities, including sport and other forms of hard exercise, cultural engagement and reading. This pattern is likely to contribute to an ongoing social gap in cognitive and physical outcomes among adolescents.

There are marked gender differences in young people's lives, with girls more likely to be involved in cultural activities and reading and boys more likely to be involved in sport and hard physical exercise. Previous research suggests that these gendered patterns emerge early, and in- and out-of-school settings should seek to provide all young people with access to a range of activities from their early years onwards. Gendered attitudes to school subjects are evident, with girls more positive about language-based subjects and boys more positive about Maths and Science; the gender gap in attitudes to Maths and Science has widened over time, an issue of policy concern.

Dr Emer Smyth, author of the report said: 'There are very encouraging findings of better-quality relationships between teenagers and their parents, with less conflict and greater discussion. However, financial pressures continue to be a source of friction in families. In addition, young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to take part in the kinds of out-of-school activities (like hard exercise and cultural engagement) that enhance their development, highlighting the need for subsidised activities in communities and supports for schools to provide access to a range of extracurricular options.'

Talking about the report, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth, **Dr Roderic O'Gorman, T.D.**, said: 'I welcome the launch of this report on the social worlds of 13-year-olds. I hope that this report will inform policy making across Government on areas such as highlighting the importance of physical exercise in young people, the effects of the pandemic restrictions as well as the impact of screen time on their psycho-social development.'

The Changing Social Worlds of 13-year-olds by Emer Smyth is published by the ESRI (www.esri.ie).

Biophilia and the Healing Power of Nature

By Professor M. L. O'Rourke

"If you have a garden and library, you have everything you need in life" - Cicero

A large and rapidly growing body of evidence suggests that people benefit in many ways from being exposed to trees and forests. This research, largely done in Asia, Europe and Australia, concluded that being in forests, particularly walking and exercising there, reduces stress, boosts immunity and calms aggression. Research shows that being in forests produces positive effects on a range of disorders including obesity, mental health imbalances, social isolation, diabetes, violent behaviour, substance abuse, and even suicide (Merivale, 2015, p. 8). In Britain, research has indicated that recovery rates improve, even if the patients can only view trees from their hospital window. In one study it was found that in a ward where all patients were recovering from similar abdominal surgery, those on the side of the building with a view of green space and trees recovered more quickly and were discharged on average three quarters of a day sooner than those looking out onto a brick wall (Merivale, 2015, p. 8). Moreover, from the first day after surgery the 'green view' patients required a lower dose of analgesic medication. There is a growing body of evidence that links our physical and mental health with the time we spend in nature. Ironically, the research grows while we humans destroy the natural world with lethal speed and efficiency. In other parts of the world, nature has long been regarded as an essential component of daily life. In East Asia, notably China, Japan and Korea, the concept of 'forest bathing' and 'breathing the forest atmosphere' has been valued for centuries in preventing illness and aiding recovery. Similar trends have been taking place in recent years in Germany, Switzerland, China, Japan, Korea and Canada following positive data from various studies. More recently, the Swiss authorities have started to advocate exercise specifically in forests, rather than in the gym or urban open spaces. This has become so important that the major health insurance companies there now consider Tree Therapy or Nature Therapy as a form of preventative medicine.

Since time immemorial, of course, indigenous peoples have lived in and with forests all over the world. They have made medicines from trees and other plants and, many communities consider certain trees to be sacred because of the numerous benefits, they provide. The natural environment provides our brains with a 'recharge' and humans show an immediate positive response to views of nature programmed in evolution. Aboriginal peoples have always believed that everything is connected, that forests and the people are intimately aligned. Within indigenous healing systems, wellness and well-being are seen in a holistic sense and, that it is the duty of the healer to restore the lost equilibrium. Thus, people are treated in the totality of mind, body, spirit, and nature. Trees and humankind have always had a symbiotic relationship. Throughout the centuries, trees have offered us shelter from the cold and the heat. They have provided us with a multitude of nutritious fruits, leaves, flowers and roots for food and medicine. They have given us wood with which to make tools, weapons, toys, not to mention timber for houses, fences, boats and bridges and most significant of all, trees have provided fuel for fire; they are our strongest allies. Hageneder considers: "The entire spectrum of human existence is reflected in tree lore through the ages: from birth, death and rebirth to the age-old struggle between good and evil, and the quest for beauty, truth and enlightenment (Hageneder, 2020, p. 7).

The American ecologist, Edward O. Wilson, popularised the word "biophilia" with his 1984 book of the same name. Coming from the Greek and meaning a "love of life", biophilia is our "innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes". A yearning for nature is genetically hard-wired into us, Wilson argued. He writes: "From infancy, we concentrate happily on ourselves and other organisms. We learn to distinguish life from the inanimate and move towards it like moths to a porch light". Wilson was an unapologetic naturalist and reminds us: "My attention was on the forest. It has been there all my life. I can work up some appreciation for the travel stories of Paul Theroux and other urbanophile authors who treat human settlements as virtually the whole world and the intervening natural habitats as troublesome barriers. I have thought exactly the opposite. Jungles and grasslands are the logical destinations, and towns and farmland are the labyrinth that people have imposed between them sometime in the past. I cherish the green enclaves accidentally left behind (Wilson, 1978, p. 49).

Biophilia and its Theoretical Scaffolding in Psychology and Sociobiology:

Research is now taking place at the University of British Columbia in Canada, where the School of Forestry and the School of Population and Public Health have joined forces. Dr John Innes, Dean of Forestry at UBC, considers that considerable areas of woodland should be managed specifically to improve the physical and mental health of local populations. Dr Innes cites three theories linking mental health to the natural environment:

i. Biophilia - this theory maintains that we have been programmed during the course of evolution to respond positively to natural environments to help us survive and thrive, and where we feel more content and function more effectively;

ii. Attention Restoration Theory - this holds that the natural environment provides a restorative environment where our brains can 'recharge' when we are tired;

iii. Psycho-physiological Stress Recovery Theory - this is based on evidence that humans show an immediate positive response to views of nature. This response causes a rapid reduction in stress levels, blood pressure, muscle tension and heart rate, usually within minutes of the exposure.

iv. Further Canadian research has found that the use of visual wood in buildings has a positive effect on health. Dr Fell of FP Innovations, a Canadian forest sector research institute, believes that exposure to wood in the built environment is a natural extension of the proven benefits of exposure to forests. Dr Fell considers the notion that as a species we have not yet adapted successfully to urban living. The results from his research indicate that where wood is a visible component of the built environment, there is a measurable reduction in stress.

There are many distinguished theorists in psychology and sociobiology at Harvard University, including E. O. Wilson, in his celebrated texts, *On Human Nature (1979)* and *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge (1998)* who suggests that "biophilia simply means the love of life, living systems and the natural world" (1998, p. 49). Wilson popularised the concept when he studied how our health improves when we are in nature and how it suffers when we aren't and how we have evolved to be hard-wired to connect with nature. It is a rather interesting insight when we consider the oft-quoted statistic which suggests that Europeans spend less than 10% of their time outdoors. Carl Gustav Jung, even earlier, in the 1920's, was writing about the power of nature to heal and used the term biophilia in 1928. "The human psyche is interconnected, interrelated and in a continuum with all other manifestations of nature" (Jung, 1964, p. 49). The entire thrust of Jung's work focused on what has always been part and parcel of the human psyche from the beginning of human existence on the planet. He minutely studied all the forces, patterns and dynamics that make human psychic life what it is. Jung felt that "people in Western societies find it hard to see their unity with trees, animals, clouds, rivers, sunlight and air, not to mention other human beings" (Jung, 1933, p. 49). Jung is in fact intimating that there is no animal or creature, no plant life, nothing in the whole hierarchy of nature with which we are not intimately spiritually interlinked (Pascal, 1992, p. 198). However, Carl Jung believed that the modern world had lost its soul and connection with nature. In one of his many great works, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, he writes:

Modern man does not understand how much this 'rationalism' (which destroyed his capacity to respond to numinous symbols and ideas) has put him at the mercy of the psychic 'underworld'. He has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. His moral and spiritual tradition has disintegrated, and he is now paying the price of this break-up in worldwide disorientation and disassociation. As scientific understanding grows, so our world has become dehumanised. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional 'unconscious identity' with natural phenomena. These have slowly

lost their symbolic implication. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry God, nor is lightening his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain caves the home of a great demon. No voices now speak from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing that they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied (Jung,1962, p. 252).

In addressing man's disassociation with nature, Jung acquired a piece of land in Bollingen, near Lake Zurich's edge, and about twenty miles from his family home in Kusnacht, Switzerland. There, he built his own country retreat, planting trees and shrubs on the land surrounding his house. Jung found that "the simple acts of life make man simple and human. In Bollingen, I am most deeply myself. Silence surrounds me almost audibly, and I live in modest harmony with nature. Thoughts rise to the surface which reach back into the centuries, and accordingly anticipate a remote future. There I see life in the round, as something forever coming into being and passing on. The silences hold the secrets; silence is the song of the soul" (Jung, 1949, p. 49). Jung loved nature; he loved the peace and solitude that living in nature can bring.

Some Practical Outcomes for Ecopsychology and Ecotherapy:

At my old University of Indiana, South Bend (IUSB), as a visiting professor, some colleagues developed there the first classes in ecotherapy for graduate counselling students some ten years ago using nature-based experiences to help clients and students find resources for personal growth and development and to enhance their experience of relatedness with each other and with the non-human world. The processes of change as observed and experienced in the natural world as a model for human change and growth were other interesting areas for discussion and reflection. It's not for every client or every situation, but so many clients and students have reported greater well-being and wellness from taking solace in nature. The following are some extracts from research collated at IUSB:

"The whole stigma of counselling kind of flew out the window. Taking them outside the walls of the counselling office was beneficial".

"Many of these adolescents have been abused, neglected or exposed to domestic violence situations. Eye contact can be very intimidating for these children. If they're not having to look you in the eye, they have a greater chance of disclosing. They want to tell their stories, and walking in the forest or engaging in some other activity outdoors as we talk makes it easier for them. Going outside is not a panacea for everyone's problems, but it gets them into a place that's neutral".

"Being outdoors typically enhances the rapport-building process with certain tough-to-reach teenagers, particularly those who don't consider counselling to be masculine. Some of the best counselling sessions I've had with kids who didn't even realize they were in counselling because we were outdoors".

One staff colleague/counsellor had this to say: "Person-centred, reality therapy / choice theory, behaviour modification, you can pull from any number of approaches and use them in conjunction with

> *"The whole stigma of counselling kind of flew out the window. Taking them outside the walls of the counselling office was beneficial".*

nature. I'd like to see more counsellors add nature to their toolboxes because of its versatility and flexibility. I'd like to see it recognized as a legitimate intervention and acknowledged as a resource that can help a variety of issues. It's a huge untapped resource. Nature is free, it's available and our students can benefit greatly from its embrace".

Another staff counsellor/researcher working with children with emotional and behavioural disorders, noted: "I observed the powerful calming and focusing effects of nature with a wide variety of students. I didn't know then about the research on nature's therapeutic benefits, but I saw its effect first hand with my students. Most of the research is targeted at reducing aggression and building social skills, particularly with students who are struggling with behavioural issues or feelings of connectedness".

A growing literature is thus exploring not only nature's potential for addressing certain behavioural, psychological and emotional problems but also the possibility that society's growing disconnect with nature is a major contributor to - if not the direct cause of - many of those problems. In his influential book, *Last Child in the Woods,* (2005), Richard Louv compiled a wide body of research and coined the term "nature-deficit disorder" in proposing that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood and adolescent development as well as the overall physical and emotional health of individuals of all ages.

John Swanson is a long time American Counselling Association (ACA) member who is recognised as a pioneer in the field of eco-psychology and author of *Communing With Nature: A Guide for Enhancing Your Relationship with the Living Earth (2008)*. He suggests: "Nature can be a wonderful sanctuary for the healing of grief and loss. It can also heal us emotionally, in part because nature is non-judgemental. It can accept and receive all of a client's feelings and pent-up energies, no matter how raw. The natural world is the most common environment for what Maslow described as peak experiences. Our sense of awe in nature is often so powerful that we can be transformed by it".

Swanson considers that modern culture has cut most people off from the natural rhythms of life, creating a sense of disharmony in the process. He states: "We'd be much better off if we started the day watching the sunrise and ended the day watching the stars rather than watching TV, listening to the birds sing rather than listening to the radio. These natural cycles are much more soothing and organic than following digital clock time and chopping everything into minutes and seconds. Watching the natural world, the changing seasons, can teach us about change and the seasons of life. Sometimes, as a society, we think we need to have constant daytime to be productive. But it is also beneficial for life to lay fallow sometimes" (Swanson, 2008, p. 49).

From Trinity College to Life as a Writer and Forester:

With all this evidence and advice, this writer has taken himself off to the North-West of Ireland to manage the stewardship of some acreage, home at various stages to the cuckoo, hares, pheasants, red squirrels, deer, barn owls, foxes, and a chorus of birds. With the shock of Covid has come a yearning to circle back to somewhere solid and "far from the madding crowd" having tired of cities and traffic. The therapy of nature and the idea of building a forest of native woodland is now a preoccupation. I am returning to my roots as an academic, writer and forester and am getting to know these fields again which are criss-crossed with hedgerows of hawthorn, blackthorn, birch, willow, oak, hazel, holly, and with the help of an ACRES Programme licensed by the Department of Agriculture. Trees make me happy

and calm my climate anxiety. It has been a joy to bring old friends to this other world of peace and tranquillity to make space for nature. We are like peasants in a 19th century painting, in better rain gear though, and determined to create a beautiful biodiverse farm with the help of some good wines and outdoor cooking! We watch and enjoy the wildlife and the sounds of various bird life - idyllic and pastoral. Poetry and old quotations come floating from across the years - Goldsmith, Kavanagh, Heaney, and Hardy are likely to figure in this dreamworld and Yeats "comes dropping slowly". The future of the forest will be to manage it as a forever resource. We are growing it for biodiversity and as a carbon sink. We can manage it for timber, thinning out the trees in seven to ten years' time, a way of harvesting timber without cutting down the whole forest. Oaks take time to leaf up. These new baby oak leaves have a silken texture like the softest skin. Here is hope, the quiet beginning of a story which will continue to strengthen and unfold beyond us. For now, we will praise them to the skies and hope to see them thrive. The growing body of evidence that links our physical and mental health with the time we spend outdoors increases and what better way to bring us out of our over-focusing, overthinking minds than with this "soft fascination" and with those beautiful patterns and textures enveloping us. We have also learned about some beautiful flowers and plants growing alongside our trees - gorse, bilberry, heathers, bluebells, violets, orchids, meadow thistles, ragged robin, lady's smock, wild thyme, meadowsweet, eyebrights, marigold, yellow flag iris, bird's foot trefoils, bracken and fern. In the midst of this natural beauty, this writer has finally learned of the significance of rewilding lawns and meadows. I am often reminded here of the pioneering American naturalist John Muir who wrote: "the clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness" and I have become more aware that our woodlands have helped me to value the important things - family, environment, and contentment with life.
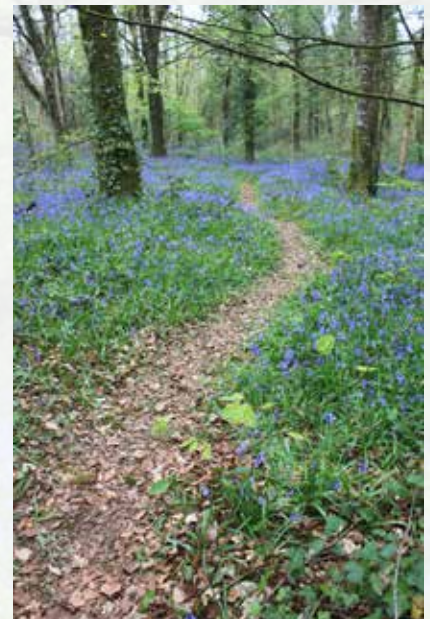
Conclusion:

Native North Americans call trees "our standing brothers and sisters". Humans and trees share an upright, vertical orientation. We walk, they stand. We move and change, they remain the quiet centre of being. It is my belief that society's growing disconnect with nature has led to much of the dissatisfaction and disorientation that many people feel in their lives. As we have gone from a tribal society to an agricultural society to an industrial society and now to a technological society, we have moved further and further away from our relationship with the natural world. However, many people still yearn for that connection instinctually which calls them to nature, and that is embedded in our genetic code. We are talking here in this piece of research of a paradigm shift and of a concept of living in

27

harmony with the environment. Ecotherapy takes the ideas inherent in ecopsychology - an integration of ecology and psychology - and applies them in therapeutic practice. The paradigm of ecotherapy posits that personal health is related to the health of the planet, not just physically but psychologically and spiritually as well, and is very much in harmony with the current zeitgeist politically. Ecotherapy is also very much in tune with indigenous cultural knowledge and healing practices, including those beliefs that preserve practices of environmental sustainability and connectedness to nature. This emphasis makes ecotherapy a potentially attractive alternative for clients who struggle to find meaning or healing in traditional, Western-based counselling approaches that primarily focus on the individual as separate from the natural world.

Many counsellors, including those who rarely set foot outside the office, testify to the effectiveness of using symbols and metaphors to speak to clients on a deeper level. However, nowhere is metaphor more powerfully presented than on nature's stage, from the changing of the seasons to the caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly, to the rich species in various forests and gardens teeming with flowers and beautiful scents. The big lesson of nature, of course, is that everything is cyclical, and that nature has this way of putting our little individual, ego-centred stories into the bigger picture. The process of helping a person to become more connected to nature can be really simple. It doesn't have to involve a hike up the mountain! It can be simple and yet have layers of meaning. It can be symbolic and cleansing. Irvin Yalom, in existential therapy, has reminded us that it is important to create a new therapy for every client and "nature offers us a world of opportunities to do just that". Likewise, in multiculturalism and cross-cultural counselling we are also reminded that indigenous systems of healing play a significant part in achieving wellness and well-being. Indigenous systems of healing derive from more spiritual bases and view wellness and wellbeing holistically where people are treated in the totality of mind, body, spirit and nature. Time, then, to take over from the village elders!

Finally, I would like to go back to a point I made at the beginning: *Ironically, the research grows* (on the value of trees and forest) *while we humans destroy the natural world with lethal speed and efficiency*. That raises the point of the need to be practical. You may well be thinking, What about the people who live in small apartments in large blocks in large cities, whose windows gaze on neighbour's windows and who don't have a view of nature at all – apart from, perhaps, a distant sky - and who, being eco-friendly, do not have a car and are not within walking distance of a decent park? I believe there are some practical initiatives we need to take and to be open to build communities.

One is to look at cities that do sustainability well and to follow their imagination.

In 2016, the World Economic Forum hosted a piece by Joe Myers which showed that sustainability has three 'pillars': People, Planet and Profit – social, environment and economics. In 2016, based on the Sustainable Cities Index, the top four cities were Zurich, Singapore, Stockholm and Vienna. No city was good on all three pillars. Part of the Planet pillar is having green spaces. In 2024, different cities were given the top accolade, depending on which group or organisation was doing the evaluation. It has growing international interest.

It is necessary to facilitate the role of policy if we are to cater for sustainability within 15-minutes of a natural environment, planted, with trees, with seats, where one can sit, reflect, admire, and feel at one with nature, even on a small scale.

In overall planning for the future, if people are expressing this as something they would like to have, to live in a sustainable community, they need to have areas with which they can find connection, such as small parks, planned well. This needs to be part of a national discussion.

Also, we know of the value of farmers protecting hedges and developing new ones so that there is a continuous corridor across the land that benefits all living matter from the quality of the soil to the animals and birds. It is open to us to take a proactive initiative to build continuous sprawling hedgerows across all our suburban landscapes. Imagine everyone planting the last one-to-two metres of their garden abutting the end wall with plants and shrubs that can produce hedging. Two gardens backing on to each other double the width of the hedge. Properly organised, there could be advice on what to plant for each orientation and, for people who, for whatever reason, could not physically manage, neighbours or other volunteers would do the needful. I can imagine new jobs being created to get the initiative off the ground and manage it in the future – an urban ACRES programme! As was done in Brazil, the countryside can be part of urban life, enriching everyone.

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Biographical Note:

Professor M. L. O'Rourke is a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Cross-Border Studies, QUB, Belfast. He is Senior Lecturer and Academic Consultant with The Military College, The Curragh, and the Irish Defence Forces.

Awards in the Northeast

At a recent meeting of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors Northeast branch, several members were recognized for exceptional service to Guidance Counselling in their careers.

Gerard Malone is a retired member who served as a Guidance Counsellor and on the IGC executive over a period of many years. An indefatigable advocate for the importance of Guidance Counselling, Gerry was central to the campaign to oppose the reduction in Guidance counselling provision to schools in 2012. Gerry worked tirelessly, addressing parliamentarians, the media, and a wide variety of professionals to publicise the detrimental effect that the cuts were having on students. His determination and conviction never wavered, and we thank him for his contribution to Guidance Counselling at a time of crisis in our profession and our country.

Madelene Skoronski, another retired member was also acknowledged at the event. Madelene has given many years of dedicated and passionate service to guidance counselling. In addition to her work, she has also been a very active member of the Branch, serving on the National Executive for two terms. She has remained active since her retirement and is currently our Standing Orders representative.

Also honoured was **Dr Clare Finegan** who has many years' experiences in Guidance Counselling, psychotherapy, and supervision of guidance counsellors. Clare received a branch award for her outstanding contribution to Guidance Counselling. Clare served as branch chair and completed a PhD researching schools' experiences of, and their responses to, student suicides. This important research explores the experiences of Guidance Counsellors in dealing with these difficult and tragic events and is an area in which there was a dearth of research heretofore.

In addition, **Arthur Dunne** was honoured for his outstanding contribution. Arthur is a former president of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and currently teaches counselling skills to student Guidance Counsellors in Maynooth University. A past president of the European Association for Reality Therapy, he introduced reality therapy training to Ireland. Arthur was responsible for making this training available to guidance counsellors who have used their skills to assist countless young people within their schools.

Bernie Lynch's retirement from Mary Immaculate Secondary School, Lisdoonvarna, Co. Clare. Bernie was a former member of the National Executive.

Left to Right: Olivia O'Connor, Eileen O'Toole, Mary Tyrell, Bernie Lynch, Aine Meehan, Josephine Ryan and Una Ruddle at the retirement gathering for Bernie Lynch

The Importance of Research:
Insights from the Studyclix Student Survey
Fred Tuite

Surveys are really important in getting an accurate picture of the situation. In this issue you can see how survey results are crucial to the implementing of guidance counselling in Further Education Colleges where the holistic model is being threatened. Our own IGC survey is beginning, and you really should complete this. It gives a vital picture of the issues that confront us and the daily tasks and issues we face as we do our work. Our supporters, Studyclix, recently conducted a survey based on recent feedback from 1,131 sixth-year students, with representation from all 26 counties and the results make for interesting reading.

According to the survey, Leaving Cert students are struggling to get adequate one-to-one time with their guidance counsellor, with 60% reporting having only one meeting with their guidance counsellor since beginning sixth year. Almost one in five (18%) said that they have either had no meeting with their guidance counsellor or met them only in a group setting.

With 40% saying that they are unsure if they're making the right choice on their CAO form, uncertainty is driving some to pursue alternative options. Some 15% said that they have worked with a private guidance counsellor outside of school to help them decide on their choices on the CAO form.

Luke Saunders of Studyclix commenting on this said: "The guidance counsellor is a vital member of school staff, with responsibilities for taking careers classes, helping students with CAO and UCAS forms, and, for supporting students with mental health issues.

"The fallout of the 2008 economic recession saw dramatic cuts to guidance counsellor hours in many small schools, with guidance counsellors also forced to take on a certain number of subject teaching hours. It's no surprise that most students feel they do not have enough time with their guidance counsellor.

"The government should invest in giving schools a greater allocation of guidance counsellor time so that counsellors can provide sufficient support to students."

The survey also looked at ChatGPT and other AI tools and noted that 71% of students reported having tried ChatGPT or other AI tools. However, the number who said that they have used ChatGPT or other AI tools for school-related tasks is nearly 58%, more than double the figure from the 2022 Studyclix survey, with almost one in five using it for projects that contribute to the overall Leaving Cert grade. So, for project work which is already a significant part of many subjects, this will prove a big challenge especially if the project work is done at home.

The survey also looked at housing and the cost of living. This revealed a lack of optimism among students that the housing crisis will alleviate in the coming years, with 66% saying they do not believe they will be able to afford a house in their home county when they start work.

The survey also found that students are factoring accommodation into their plans for third-level education, with one in three reporting that rent, and the cost-of-living are major factors determining their choice of university location. Indeed, these concerns are more acute for students from rural counties like Waterford (56%) and Clare (52%).

More than half (55%), meanwhile, say that they plan to live at home while attending third-level education. The figure is higher in counties Dublin (84%), Cork (67%) and Limerick (56%). However, in Kilkenny, just 10% say that they plan to remain at home during their college years.

This I have certainly seen in terms of the colleges that students are considering with accommodation factors or commuting high in their priorities for Third Level choices.

The survey highlights a collective disinterest among sixth-year students in apprenticeships or trades, partly as they are not getting enough information about this important career choice. Just 5% of respondents say they are considering apprenticeships or trades. And, despite a massive Government push in recent years to promote them, 44% of students say that they haven't been given enough information about alternatives to university.

In support of government, guidance counsellors have experienced, in many cases, staunch pushback from parents against considering apprenticeship as a route to a worthwhile career. Much further research needs to be done to get a fuller understanding of the impediments affecting parents' views and how they can be helped to see apprenticeships as beneficial careers in the wider choices of career or the future.

It will take some time and a lot of promotion to get more people to consider apprenticeships but that is improving with the widening of the range of choices of apprenticeships. I say to my students that there is everything to be said for being an intelligent, well-educated and highly skilled plumber or mechanic. Many apprenticeships are the basis for starting one's own company and it is important to learn the basic business skills. I also point out that Artificial Intelligence (or Clever Plagiarism to give it a more useful title) or outsourcing to Asia won't do your hair, fix your car or build your house – even if part of it is constructed off-site.

Speaking of outsourcing, more than half of sixth-year students surveyed said that they were or highly likely to emigrate after finishing university. This figure was highest in Waterford (70%), Louth (65%), Donegal (64%) and Mayo (61%).

Luke Saunders commenting on this said: "While the survey question does not ask respondents to account for the length of time for which they plan to emigrate after finishing university, it's interesting that more than half plan to spend at least some time abroad to begin their professional careers. The above-average figures for rural counties highlight the need to invest in regional development and better resource third-level institutions outside of the biggest cities, to ensure that students can aspire to remain in their local community, if they wish."

So, some interesting findings and food for thought in that Studyclix survey, and powerful information we can use to make our case for more resources.

Make sure you add your voice in the IGC survey. This applies to all members, whether actively working at present, or not. All information is valuable. Nothing builds a case like accurate, informed and up-to-date data so, do your bit to help!

WHY TEENAGERS ARE DELIBERATELY SEEKING BRAIN ROT ON TIKTOK

by Emily Owens

It is midday on a Friday, and I am in a room with about a dozen teenagers at an international school in Oslo, Norway. We are talking about how and why they use TikTok, the digital video-sharing application. The prevailing mood is laid-back: though I am technically a media researcher, and they are technically my research participants, this group of 16- and 17-year-olds are joking around with each other and with me as we chat about the role of TikTok in their everyday lives. It's a beautiful day – warm and summery – and everyone, including me, is in a fun weekend mood.

'I dunno, it's kind of hard to describe what I see on my For You page,' says one of my participants.

'Yeah, it's like…' another of them pauses, looking for the right word. 'It's just mostly brain rot, you know?'

I do not know. This is my first introduction to the term 'brain rot'. Perplexed, I ask them what it means. Laughing, they describe it as a 'Gen Alpha word' that refers to the 'stupid stuff' they see on their main TikTok feeds (which are called, for those who aren't on the app, For You pages or FYPs).

'It's stuff that's dumb, like, it rots your brain. Memes and just random stuff.' One participant shows me a video on her phone as an example as the others look on. What I see on the screen – an absurd, poorly animated colourful character dancing in the style of a drag queen – looks like nonsense to me, and I say so. This makes them all laugh even harder.

Brain rot: stupid, mindless internet (though mostly TikTok) content. It may seem like a silly bit of slang, but as a researcher I think this new teen terminology can tell us something important about how the younger generation are managing their media lives.

The origins of the term brain rot are not entirely clear. Some websites suggest that it comes from the 2011 video game The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, in which characters can contract a disease known as brain rot. A handful of medical news websites and webpages for private treatment institutions go so far as to suggest that brain rot is a genuine mental health condition that develops as a result of overexposure to online content, with symptoms that include decreased attention span and lethargy.

'TikTok is for three things: learning stuff and feeling good about yourself, stalking people, and brain rot'

But despite these questionable origin stories, most sources – including the teenage participants in my TikTok study – agree that brain rot is simply one of many slang terms emergent from and made popular by the current generation of children and young teenagers,

Generation Alpha, who were born between 2010 and the present day. 'Gen Alpha is, like, his little brother's age,' explains one of my participants, referring to her 17-year-old friend who has a 10-year-old sibling. 'But we use the word a lot now. Brain rot, you know?' Regardless of how it is understood in other places across the web, for these teens it can be defined simply as online content (videos, images, etc) that is so meaningless, banal or dumb that it feels as though it rots your brain.

Of course, not all brain rot is created equal. Categories of brain rot have emerged: from the relatively harmless but wildly popular Skibidi Toilet series created by Alexey Gerasimov, which features animations of a human-like head spinning in a toilet, to potentially problematic content such as 'looksmaxxing' videos, in which individuals go to extreme lengths to maximise certain aspects of their appearance, or 'mukbang', which consists of individuals eating enormous volumes of food while filming themselves. Other types of brain rot include: Grimace Shake, where users on TikTok make videos pretending to have suffered a horrible fate after consuming the purple McDonald's Grimace Shake, and the Only in Ohio meme, a humorous satire of a conspiracy theory in which unimaginably horrible things happen in Ohio, started after a Tumblr post in 2016 showed a glitching bus station reading 'Ohio will be eliminated.'

Brain rot as a term covers these as well as all other silly, dumb or time-wasting online content that does not fall into any specific category, such as the video of the dancing animated character my research participants showed me. For them, brain rot is a very clear type of content, but it also represents one of the distinct ways to engage with TikTok.

'If I want to learn something, I can do that. I actually learn a lot from TikTok. But other times it's just stupid things and, like, brain rot,' one participant tells me.

> **"**
> Yeah, TikTok is for three things: learning stuff and feeling good about yourself, stalking people, and brain rot.
> **"**

In this way, brain rot is what we might call a 'genre of participation', to borrow a term from the work of the cultural anthropologist Mimi Ito. On a digital social media application like TikTok, with its endless different types of content, one way of participating is to seek out

brain rot and therefore turn off, so to speak, one's brain. And it's clear from my research that this type of mindless TikTok video serves an important purpose in the larger ecosystem of the internet.

Brain rot is one small piece of a broader vocabulary teens use to negotiate the vastness of digital media saturating their lives.

As a term, brain rot is most definitely not meant to be taken literally. Though the medical websites proposing brain rot as an emergent mental health crisis facing our society may be well meaning, their definition is misguided, at least as far as teens are concerned. The group of 16- and 17-year-olds I work with in Oslo aren't worried that watching dumb videos on TikTok will really rot their brains. It's a bit of jokey terminology; one small piece of a broader vocabulary they use to negotiate the vastness of TikTok as well as all the other digital media saturating their lives. As a genre of participation, brain rot is an oasis of calm amid the media chaos.

Moreover, this oasis is a much needed one. My participants tell me they know that brain rot is a waste of time, but they don't express any genuine fear about it. However, they do tell me about plenty of other things on TikTok and the internet more broadly that make them worried or upset.

'It's, like, the climate stuff,' one girl tells me. 'Or seeing how things are in other places in the world. It's good to see it because I can, like, learn about it, and about activism against racism and homophobia, but it also makes me feel bad because there's nothing I can do. I feel like grown-ups don't care; they are making decisions that are going to ruin everything for us.' The other participants around the table are unusually quiet as she says this, and I feel them silently echoing her frustration.

Another boy describes the strangeness of experiencing conflict through a screen: 'War is a trend on TikTok. Like, Ukraine was a trend for a while, but then Palestine happened and so that's a huge trend and everyone is pro-Palestine, and now Ukraine… everyone has forgotten about Ukraine.'

These teens also seem keenly, even cynically, aware of the increasing indispensability of these apps and technologies in their lives.

'I don't think we could live without them at this point,' one boy tells me.

'Yeah,' says another girl, 'and in terms of privacy, I know they are taking our information and data and stuff, but that's just how it is.'

TikTok and digital media aside, this is also just a group of teenagers. They have tests and exams and final assignments to complete, and they are starting to think about university applications. They are extremely worried about their grades, probably because they are being told by nearly every adult, they know that what they do right now – the decisions they make this year and the next – will matter for the rest of their lives. They have complex social and personal lives: deepening friendships, nascent romances, family members all around the world, as well as hobbies and interests and goals and ambitions. Their worlds are filled with much anxiety and uncertainty,

both onscreen and off.

In this context, for these teenagers, brain rot on TikTok is one tool for tuning out all the stress. It's a genre of participating in the digital world that enables them to enjoy mindless content, and to turn off their brains for a while. You might say that brain rot is a necessary strategy for managing the particular anxieties of being a teenager at this precise moment in history, fraught as it is with conflict, catastrophe, and predictions of future doom. And while this is by no means the first generation to experience a collision of multiple frightening global events within the space of a decade, this moment in history is perhaps unique in that hundreds of thousands of updates and opinions on said conflicts, catastrophes and predictions of future doom are accessible to anyone anywhere, at any time, with only the swipe of a finger across a screen.

As adults, we can have an unfortunate habit of forgetting our youth as soon as we've left it and policing the next generation according to our own expectations. But when it comes to teenagers on TikTok, I think the emergence of the term brain rot suggests that members of this generation possess a highly sophisticated approach for navigating the complexities of their media lives. Much in the same way that teenagers in the 1980s navigated changing economic landscapes through their video games and music video consumption, or earlier generations pushed back against restrictive social values using pirate radio and television, teens today are using TikTok and other digital media to negotiate and make sense of a complex world that is very often designed for adults. In a time of heightened global anxiety and fear, rather than restrict their digital access, we might stand to learn from teenagers about how and why they spend their time on TikTok.

I have narrativised key quotes from my real-life teenage participants, paraphrasing in places in order to protect their privacy rights as consenting informants to an ongoing study.

Emilie Owens is a youth and media researcher at the University of Oslo in Norway. Her current project is focused on better understanding the role of TikTok in shaping the social lives and identities of teenagers.
From *Psyche.co*

WHY PEOPLE SELF-INJURE:
'You have no other voice – and no one would listen anyway'

PETER STEGGALS

On a May evening in 1991, a tense interview between music journalist Steve Lamacq and musician Richey Edwards led to one of the most infamous and challenging images in the history of pop culture. Lamacq had come to see Edwards' band, the Manic Street Preachers, but suggested they were less authentic punk rebels than cynical profiteers.

In response, Edwards produced a razor blade and cut "4REAL" into the full length of his forearm. The picture, taken by Lamacq's photographer moments later, shows Edwards gazing with steady defiance at the camera, his wounds apologetically displayed. It would become an iconic image. Controversially published by the NME (New Musical Express), it was turned into a poster, t-shirt and internet meme, and was voted 16th in Q magazine's 100 Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Photographs.

Besides saying something important about Edwards' mental condition, the image captured a wider shift in our culture of expression: a sense that, for some people, words seem to have lost their power to communicate anything real or authentic, such that only blood and pain can bear testimony to their true feelings. As Edwards, who disappeared in 1995 and was later declared dead, explained:

[It's] really connected to the fact that you almost feel silent, you have no voice, you're mute … you've got no option. Even if you could express yourself, nobody would listen anyway. Things that go on inside you – there's no other way to get rid of them.

A GRIEVOUS EMOTIONAL WOUND

I was reminded of Edwards and the steady defiance of his gaze in that photograph when, just over a decade later, I saw it mirrored in the face of an inmate sitting opposite me in a female prison in the north of England. I was working in forensic psychology and had been called to interview a young woman (let's call her Fiona*) who had used a plastic knife to cut deep gashes into her face, leaving only her eyes and mouth free of damage.

Fiona had just been returned to prison after visiting hospital under guard to give birth to a baby boy. The baby had been taken away for adoption against her wishes, but she had known to expect this – she couldn't raise a child in prison, after all. What she had not expected was that the baby would be taken away before she had any opportunity to hold him.

It was a grievous emotional wound, and one Fiona had no intention of hiding. As she sat with her blond hair pulled back to expose the full extent of her injuries, it was impossible to miss her message: the prison made her feel faceless, more an object of penal management than a human being, let alone a mother. So she had removed her face and exposed the undeniable reality beneath. She had demanded attention, to be taken "4REAL".

Neither Edwards nor Fiona represent a typical case of nonsuicidal self-injury, more commonly called "self-harm". Most people who use cuts, burns, blunt force trauma, or any of a dozen other methods of self-injury, do so in private and are careful to hide their wounds. They are also typically opposed to any suggestion that they are looking for attention or trying to make a statement. This is partly because a widespread prejudice frames self-injury as attention seeking, implying a kind of emotional blackmail used to extort care and concern.

Consequently, many people who self-injure, and their advocates, not only deny the charge of attention seeking but also that self-injury has any social or communicative meaning whatsoever. For them, it is a claustrophobically personal crisis: something so completely "inner" that nothing outside themselves and no one else has anything to do with it.

But there's a problem. Even as the relational and communicative aspects of self-injury have been repeatedly denied, researchers have been quietly collecting evidence to prove their existence. Since 2016, myself and two colleagues, Ruth Graham at Newcastle University and Steph Lawler at the University of York, have been mapping the social character of self-injury, trying to find ways to describe it that go beyond the derogatory charge of attention seeking.

The need for such a description is clear. As long as those who share their self-injury with others are accused of attention seeking, they will have good reason to keep it to themselves and refuse to ask for the help they need.

As we described in a recent article for the *Sociological Review*, while Edwards' and Fiona's forms of self-injury may be unusual in some respects, their visceral turn to the body as a kind of witness, and their defiant demand for social recognition, may be something much more common. As one interviewee told the researcher Kim Hewitt a few years after Edwards disappeared, far from being attention seeking:

Self-injury seems to be a great self-destructive attempt to become human. To gain recognition, to prove to someone that I matter, and that I bleed too.

A CONFUSED AND CONFUSING PRACTICE

I met up with Sam, a 21-year-old woman wrapped in a baggy Army Surplus coat, outside a London tube station and we walked to a local pub. She was instantly likeable and brimmed with energy and humour as she told me about her history of self-injury.

Sam said she began cutting herself when she was 12 after being grounded for piercing her ears without her parent's permission. "I don't know if it was revenge," she told me, "but I felt like: 'You're not letting me be who I want to be. I'm an individual, I should be

33

able to do what I want to do.' … I felt so upset that no one was listening to me."

This frustration led her to a razor blade: "I didn't question it, I just did it. It was such a release – you know?" Before long, she was addicted and sometimes felt the need to cut herself more than once to get through the day:

> " I would need to go to the [school] toilet, and by the time I came out, my whole arm [would be] just completely bleeding and … I'd be like: 'Oh, thank God.' Then in a couple of hours, I'd do the same again. "

Sam's story embodies the strange social ambivalence of self-injury – often social in its origin, yet private in its practice. It takes a home problem, a friend problem, a school problem, a work problem or a social expectations problem, and cuts it into the flesh which makes it a personal problem. As Sam noted:

Sometimes it really is just for yourself, a very private pleasure – but sometimes, yeah, you do want other people to understand how you're feeling … and not necessarily [by] doing it vocally.

This theme of wanting to be understood recurs in most of the hundreds of interviews I have conducted over the years, both in prisons and as a social scientist – but largely in tones of disappointment and pessimism. In the late 1970s, the psychiatrist D.W. Pierce described self-injury as a "confused and confusing practice", and there is little need to update his sentiment for the 21st century. Despite its millennial familiarity, it remains a shocking and darkly enigmatic phenomenon – even to many health professionals.

"I've seen lots of them," Sam told me, ticking off all the psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors she has encountered over the years. "I can't count them on all my fingers and toes."

While she'd had some good experiences, Sam recalled with a mock shudder all the times therapists and health professionals had been less than understanding or sympathetic. "I just couldn't stand the way these people were looking at me," she recalled.

Her experiences are not unusual. According to sociologist Amy Chandler, many people who self-injure can tell stories of seeking medical help only to find the response "brutalising, dismissive or abusive".

A KIND OF 'ANTI-SUICIDE'

Society's journey to understanding self-injury has been painfully slow and highly resistant. Before the 1970s, it was generally viewed as a suicidal behaviour, a kind of "practice run" or self-destructive icebreaker.

It wasn't until the late seventies when psychiatrists began to realise that, far from being suicidal, self-injury was in fact a kind of

"anti-suicide" – a survival strategy to manage a life of challenging thoughts and feelings, rather than an attempt to end it.

For many, self-injury can function as a highly adaptable coping mechanism: calming overwhelming thoughts, feelings and memories; bringing the dissociated back to reality; or providing self-punishment in answer to deep feelings of shame. While self-injury and suicide are statistically correlated – both are products of a life in distress – they are not the same thing. Self-injury is to suicide what swimming for your life is to drowning.

But, even after the shift among psychiatrists in the late seventies, awareness of self-injury spread through both the world of medicine and the wider public at a glacial pace. It wasn't until the 1990s that self-injury pushed its way to the front of public consciousness – a push that began with Edwards' picture, and which included numerous other pop culture references and celebrity confessions. Most famously, Princess Diana told the BBC's Panorama programme that she had cut herself with razor blades, a penknife and a lemon slicer, explaining:

When no one listens to you, you have so much pain inside yourself that you try and hurt yourself on the outside because you want help.

In the decades since that interview, awareness of self-injury has grown – but so has its prevalence. A 2019 study found the number of people using self-injury in the UK increased steeply over the first two decades of the new century. Notably, prevalence rates for young women aged 16-24 increased from an already worrying 6.5% in 2000 to a shocking 19.7% in 2014.

And there is good evidence to suggest that levels of self-injury increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sweden, rates of adolescent self-injury jumped from 17.7% in 2014 to 27.6% in 2021. Self-injury appears to have become a meaningful 21st-century way for people to both experience and express their personal distress and sense of estrangement from life. But how did it get this meaning?

YOU CAN'T ARGUE WITH WOUNDS

For Sam, self-injury is meaningful because it gives her a way to cut, literally and figuratively, to what's important, truthful and authentic. She told me that she struggles with "normal society", putting down her drink to emphasise the point:

I just think we all should stop lying to each other … We need to get to the point of what's actually important in life – what's real.

She referred to her self-injury as making so many "big statements" about "how shit everything is". Statements that speak for her and represent what she's feeling, because such deep and powerful feelings "need to be shown". Yet Sam feels such statements cannot be made in words.

The American poet and activist Jerry Rubin once wrote that language "prevents communication". Even before the advent of social media, he was suggesting that "words have lost their impact, intimacy, ability to shock and make love". For Sam and many others, the body provides an alternative language of action and authenticity, and self-injury draws on this language to make powerful statements in blood and pain.

There is some truth to the stereotype of the average "self-harmer" as a female teenager. Certainly, they make up the majority of those who turn to this alternative mode of emotional expression and regulation. But there are also far more boys and men who self-injure, and far more people over 40, than most realise.

A few weeks after talking to Sam, I met George, a stockily built man in his mid-40s with a history of alcoholism, self-injury and attempted suicide. George was in Newcastle on business, and I interviewed him in his hotel room, a collection of Sylvia Plath's poems resting on his bedside table. If self-injury has a patron saint, it's Plath. "She writes how I feel," George told me.

Unlike Fiona, he avoided eye contact throughout our conversation, staring at the floor as his story unfolded. He was raised in a physically abusive household by alcoholic parents. "It was a pretty horrendous childhood," he told me, "a lot of drinking and chaos … a lot of violence and shaming."

> " Nobody listened to me when I was in pain as a child. The people who were supposed to listen to me were the ones who were causing the pain … so I was fucked basically, all I could do was repress it. "

But as George grew up, he said this survival strategy "became the problem", leaving him disconnected from his feelings and locked behind a wall of numbed dissociation. For him, words alone proved incapable of piercing this wall, connecting with his trauma and bearing witness to his pain. But where language had been muted, his body spoke up:

There is something for me, some sort of release in being able to see the pain made flesh. There just seems to be something about it that is a validation of the pain inside, as if the manifestation of it as a visual somehow makes it more real.

George, like almost all the people I have interviewed, knew his own story all too well, having been tormented by it all his life and having repeated it dozens of times to doctors, therapists and support groups. Yet somehow, it remained painfully ambiguous and uncertain – he still needed someone to listen in the way his parents never did; to have his past and his pain acknowledged and affirmed as real. This is when self-injury becomes validation:

It's like the mental pain or emotional pain isn't real, but physical pain is. You can't argue with.

THIS REALLY ANGRY STRANGER

Sometimes, self-validation is enough for those who injure themselves. The wound testifies to this wounded person that their inner pain is real. But sometimes, the recognition of others is also needed.

I met Paula, a professional woman in her late-40s, at the house of a mutual friend so she could tell me about her daughter, Mary. Paula sat down in a large leather armchair while balancing a cup of tea and chatting away with breezy confidence. Smiling, she described a photograph taken the year Mary turned 14 on a cold January day. Mary looked the picture of innocence: a beaming young girl in "piggytails" stroking a horse.

But by that summer, Paula said, something had changed:

It was like one moment I had this little girl and the next moment I had this stranger … this really angry stranger. Like, what happened in such a short space of time? It was almost like I grieved for her.

Paula said this challenging transformation had begun with problems at school, which Mary had wanted to share but felt unable to talk about to anyone. Her solution had been to cut a small scratch into her arm. "That was my first mistake," Paula said.

She explained that she had asked Mary to show her the cut, saw how superficial it seemed, then asked her: "Well, is that it?" Mary's response the following day was to cut deeper. Perhaps she felt had not been taken seriously, not been listened to, so now she raised her "voice".

"Well, I freaked," Paula admitted, rolling her eyes at the memory. "I said: 'What the hell are you doing? Why have you done that?' And then Mary got upset, and I got upset."

Mary had got her mother's attention, but not her understanding. She still felt unable to talk, so continued to communicate in other ways. This is another of self-injury's oddly ambivalent characteristics: nothing is more communicative than a refusal to communicate: closing down, locking yourself away, cutting instead of speaking.

Those who love and live with people who are self-injuring soon become hyper-sensitive to changes in the emotional atmosphere of their home. Ordinary objects take on new and threatening meanings. Everything becomes a potential warning, or potential threat. It is not that communication stops – rather, it continues by other means.

Mary shut herself away in her room; she decorated the walls with darkly themed anime posters and she left confessional notes and other things on the floor for her mother to find. Paula remembered with a grimace:

I'd clear the bedroom and find the tissues with blood, and that used to bother me. It used to make me feel sick.

But Paula said she had learned from her earlier mistakes. Instead of rejecting these alternatives modes of communication, she embraced them. Over the following months, Paula and Mary relearned, from the ground up, how to communicate with each other. Paula learned to listen more attentively to her daughter, and to who her daughter was becoming. Mary learned to speak in ways other than the firmly shut bedroom door and bloodied tissues. Together, they renegotiated and renewed their relationship, and within a few months, Mary had stopped self-injuring.

Her self-injury seems to have functioned as what the psychologist Matthew Nock calls a "high-intensity social signal", aimed at cutting through the communicative noise of a household or other social setting. Where talking, yelling or crying has failed to

attract the recognition someone needs, self-injury turns up the emotional volume. After all, as George told me: "You can't argue with wounds."

Mary's self-injury probably had roots in a number of challenges she was facing, including to do with her school friends. But these roots converged on the family home. Here, Mary's self-injury demanded that Paula change the way she related to her daughter. She wasn't that beaming little girl with piggytails anymore, and she needed Paula to understand that. By rupturing her mother's expectations of how she should be, Mary forced Paula to renegotiate their relationship.

Perhaps this is attention seeking in the literal sense. But as mental health activist Louise Pembroke has written:

> " If I wanted 'attention' in an exhibitionist way, it would be much easier and pain-free to walk into the middle of the street and remove my clothes. I would not need to cut up my body. But if attention means being listened to and taken seriously, then along with the rest of the human race, I'm attention seeking. "

Reflecting on her teenage self-injury, Sam concluded: "I feel it was a cry for help, and you could call it attention seeking. Well, I kind of did need attention."

WILL THEY LISTEN?

A colleague in the prison service told me a story about attending a self-injury awareness course. Announcing break time, the instructor had said: "I'm sure you all need a coffee or the toilet, but there's one thing you need to do first." He then emptied a box of razor blades on to the table in front of his students and told them: "You need to cut yourself before I let you leave."

At this signal, two prison officers in full riot gear blocked the doorway, preventing escape. People looked at each other, wondering if their instructor was serious. He let the moment linger, then explained: "If I had been serious, then sooner or later you would have become so desperate to leave that you would have cut yourself."

His point was that, while it might be tempting to dismiss self-injury as "playing the system" (the prison service variant of attention seeking), if someone is willing to mutilate themselves to get something, then that underlying need is both very real and very strong. Which brings me back to Fiona.

I have been working on the issue of self-injury ever since I interviewed her in 2005 – first as a risk assessor for the prison service, then as a social researcher. I have come to appreciate

how self-injury can be used in different ways by different people – or even in different ways by the same person, from one act of self-inflicted harm to another.

But a point Fiona made to me in dramatic fashion has proven consistent in every one of the hundreds of cases I have since encountered: whatever else self-injury is doing, it is always saying something. Its meaning rests in its power to replace language: to express the otherwise inexpressible.

In some cases, this work of expression is entirely private, somewhat like a secret journal, with self-injury recording someone's deepest pains and dilemmas. But in other cases, it is more like a letter. Perhaps the letter is written but not sent, the act of writing having been enough to vent, bear witness and calm down. Sometimes, it is written and then accidentally discovered by others. And sometimes, it is written and intentionally delivered to the one who most needs to read it.

When self-injury becomes known to others, the primary question is: will they listen? It is always difficult to discover that someone you care for is harming themselves. But will their actions be met with understanding and recognition – or with angry dismissals, resentment, and accusations of attention seeking?

What's become clear to me is that, regardless of their reasons for self-injuring, those who harm themselves need help and support, not criticism. What everyone from Richey Edwards and Princess Diana to all my interviewees have tried to make clear is that there is nothing more important than being listened to and taken seriously. They want and need to be recognised as someone who matters. This is the foundation for every other intervention or treatment that might follow.

What my colleagues and I have realised over our many years researching this issue is that self-injury speaks. And when people speak through the body in this way, when they use their blood and pain as an alternative to words, we had better listen.

*The names of interviewees in this article have been anonymised for their protection.

Peter Steggals is Visiting Researcher in Medical Sociology, Newcastle University

From *theConversation.com*

Dyslexia Resources

Wyn McCormack
the Dyslexia Association of Ireland.

The Language used in Project Maths

An educational psychologist once told me of a girl with dyslexia who had said to her, 'If they put Maths into the English syllabus, there would be ructions. They have gone and put English into Maths.'

In the Irish Independent in June 2024, Stephen Begley, subject expert at Studyclix.ie and a maths teacher at Dundalk Grammar School, said about the Junior Cert Higher Maths paper, "The exam was accessible and diverse, though far too wordy. Many questions contained multiple sentences and contexts surrounding them, with very few just 'straight up' maths questions. This would have surely swayed a few students in trying to unpack what was being asked of them." And he was talking about students with no difficulties. Think of problem for the student with dyslexia!!!

As a SEN teacher and as a parent, I realised that the wordy questions in Project Maths would cause difficulties to students with dyslexia when it was introduced. Since then, when I mention this opinion when giving in-service in so many schools, the reaction from teachers, both Maths and SEN, has been to agree wholeheartedly. Why was there no evaluation of the language used in Project Maths? Why were maths teachers and SEN teachers not asked their opinion over the years?

It was left to Phillippa McIntosh, a TY student in Bandon High School to address this issue in a wonderful Young Scientist Project for which she got the runner up prize in 2024. Her project found

- 'Dyslexic students were heavily disadvantaged by the complex vocabulary used in the JC Project Maths. It is as though they have to solve a word puzzle rather than just focus on what is being asked of them.'

- She found a significant difference between the linguistic complexity used in the GCSE tests and the JC exams. The linguistic environment of the GCSE tests is more basic and streamlined than that of the JC counterpart which is dense and convoluted. The gap is especially noticeable when examining the terminology, phrasing and overall clarity of instructions in maths questions.

- While the goal of Project Maths was to promote a more practical and applied understanding of mathematics, an unforeseen result was an increase in the complexity of exam question language and structure. … the sophisticated phrasing, paired with the demand for difficulty comprehension, puts dyslexic students at a considerable disadvantage.

She argues the case for different approaches which include such as simplification of language without reducing the mathematical complexity, multiple choice questions or direct calculation responses.

Her work is so important and raises very valid concerns. Subjects with less verbal content suit many students with dyslexia. Maths was one of these subjects. Project Maths changed this. The introduction of such complex language reduced their access to a subject in which many could do well.

Extra Time in State Exams

Extra time is not available for dyslexic students in second level examinations in Ireland. Many dyslexic students need access to this type of support as timed exams create many barriers for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

In Ireland, extra time in exams is available as standard for dyslexic students at third level. The Public Appointments Service allows extra time for applicants with dyslexia in their recruitment service. And in many other countries extra time is an established option for dyslexic students both at second and third level. In France students with dyslexia have access to 33% extra time, in Italy 30% and in the UK 25%. As dyslexia affects approximately 1 in 10 people, this is an issue that impacts tens of thousands of students every year in Ireland.

Rosie Bissett, CEO of the Dyslexia Association of Ireland, noted that 'extra time is universally recognised as a reasonable accommodation in time exams and is available to second level students with dyslexia across most of Europe, so why are young people with dyslexia denied this accommodation? We are calling on the State Examinations Commission to urgently review their Reasonable Accommodations policy to bring into line with best international practice.'

The Dyslexia Association of Ireland have submitted a petition with 32,000+ (as of December 2024) signatures on it requesting extra time in second level examinations in Ireland. You can sign this petition at www.change.org.

Some online resources for dyslexia:

Wyn McCormack would like to share her insights, practical strategies and resources that she has collected through these YouTube webinars.

The link is as follows: https://studio.youtube.com/playlist/PL4-7_mnM91PKYhg1kwCKi_fHDFpEXFlYo/videos

The webinars are:

Dyslexia at second level
- Dyslexia at second level: How dyslexia affects the student
- How Parents can support the student
- The Dyslexia Friendly School
- Languages
- Organisation, Memory and Note-taking
- Reading, Spelling and Vocabulary
- Self-esteem
- Study skills that support the student
- Writing

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The future is here.

Advertorial

Studyclix levels playing field to unleash potential of second-level students

As the only serving guidance councillor at Ballinode College, a DEIS school in Sligo town, Leona Moran has seen first-hand how differences in individual family circumstances can influence outcomes for the school's 150-plus students

Leona explains that while competition for university places may lead some to request grinds to supplement their classroom work, it is often only those whose families can afford additional one-to-one tutoring who gain an edge on their peers. Indeed, she continues, it was a desire to help students with limited means to escape this cycle that led Ballinode College to Studyclix, Ireland's largest study and teaching website.

"Studyclix is an online resource that simplifies the study process by breaking down each subject into topics, providing past exam questions, marking schemes, quizzes, videos, and much more," she says.

"All schools have huge disparities in terms of family incomes. Studyclix provides equality of access and breaks the cycle of poverty for students. After we received our school licence in 2023, junior and senior cycle students gained immediate access to the wealth of Studyclix resources. The impact has been profound – for students and teachers."

Studyclix has grown significantly since its foundation in 2009 by teacher Luke Saunders and software engineer Keith Wright. Indeed, some 233,000 second-level students and 29,000 teachers are now registered as users, attracted by research which shows that Leaving Certificate students who use Studyclix receive an average of 494 CAO points, some 127 more points than those who do not use the resource.

Schools can now buy Studyclix licences for junior and senior cycle students using the Schoolbooks Grant, a government measure to relieve the overall cost of schoolbooks and core classroom resources for parents. Leona insists that the availability of Studyclix through the scheme is a welcome development, not least because it will alleviate the cost of purchasing past exam papers for both the school and students.

"The features contained within Studyclix, such as access to past exam questions, provide significant savings to both the school and students," she says.

She continues: "On top of that, teachers use Studyclix to set quizzes and assign homework. Through their individual profiles, students can access video and audio explainers on different topics, which allows those who are more visual or audio learners to replay solutions again and again at home. That's important for students who don't quite get it in the classroom. And from a career guidance perspective, it's extremely helpful because it contains CAO advice, study guides and even tips on studying for students with Dyslexia.

Leona learned of Studyclix after CEO Luke Saunders delivered a presentation on the platform to the Sligo-Leitrim branch of the IGC. She then recommended the service to management at Ballinode College who decided to take up the licence.

"The set up was seamless," says Leona. "Profiles were created for each student using their individual student email addresses. On the first day, students logged in, set up their passwords and they were ready to go. For anyone with a technical issue or a query, there is a chat feature which is manned by a human to troubleshoot."

The guidance counsellor explains a visit to the school by Luke, who delivered a further technical demonstration of Studyclix, helped teachers and students to maximise the benefits of the tool.

"Luke was fantastic. He came to the school and went through the resources for students and teachers. It was only when he gave us the tutorial that I realised that I wasn't using Studyclix to its full capabilities," she says.

Feedback from Ballinode teachers and students has been overwhelmingly positive, with teachers particularly keen on some of the platform's more convenient features.

"Teaching involves lots of paperwork, so teachers will embrace any resource that makes their lives easier, one that's easy to navigate and use. Whether it's assigning homework, or the provision of video or audio resources that allow students to develop their understanding of a topic in their own time, Studyclix has relieved the pressure on teachers," she says.

CEO Luke Saunders is clear that even if schools choose not to take up the offer of a Studyclix licence, the Studyclix website contains numerous free resources to aid students in their educational and career journey.

"The website has lots of free resources. In particular, students find the free videos on CAO helpful as they're short, informative, and it's a different voice from their teacher so they maybe tune in a bit more," he says, adding that the success of Studyclix at Ballinode College can be replicated right across the spectrum of second level schools.

He says: "Studyclix has a proven track record of delivering results for schools, teachers, and students. More than 300 schools in Ireland are currently using a school licence, accessing the array of features, like all state exam questions by topic, quiz questions and flash cards, video solutions and examiner graded-annotated sample answers, and more.

"The great benefit of Studyclix is not just the advantage it gives in terms of CAO points, but that it levels the playing field for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, giving them the same chance of success of their peers from families with higher incomes. We want to level the playing field in schools right around the country."

Working group on IGC document management and archive storage

An IGC document management and archive storage working group (DMAS) was set up in Autumn 2024: The convenor of the working group is Eimear McDonnell (IGC researcher / Clare Branch), with Liam Harkin (NE / Donegal Branch), Catríona Rodgers (President / Dublin West), Patricia Wroe (ex-NE / South Dublin-Wicklow Branch), and Edel Williams (head office administrator).

It aims to facilitate the uploading of new documents and material onto the IGC website, with ease of access and retrieval available to all. Also, to work through a considerable amount of archive material stored in the IGC Head Office which contains significant and important documents, including donations from the late Tom Casey and from Gerry Jeffers, Richard Keane, and others, for which the IGC is extremely grateful.

Much material will be scanned electronically and made available on the IGC website. This will include all past issues of *Guideline*, the *IGC Journal* and its forerunner, *The Counsellor.* The group may well be reaching out to members to source any missing copies.

Competitive commercial quotes will be obtained for the digitisation of the archive material chosen for retention and, requirements will be developed and agreed for a tender to an IT provider to develop a searchable document database for all past and future documents.

Part of the work of the group will be to establish document retention, access levels, and metadata (e.g., year, author) and, also, to ensure that appropriate accessibility requirements are adhered to for the IGC website.

The group is committed to setting up and enabling a search facility on the IGC website for themes and content.

The working group will also identify items worth retaining in a physical library in Herbert Street which may be made accessible on request to any IGC member or person conducting research. This will include books, publications and reports not available online.

All of this is to create a facility which will provide an accessible, a single location where IGC members can search and retrieve interesting material, both previously and newly published, which will be of use to them in building their personalised CPD and in preparing for their professional work. It will support and be of value to those undertaking research for their own academic writing.

The group has met several times, both online and in person, and work is progressing.

A full report has been presented to, and approved by, the National Executive and will appear in the Handbook for the annual IGC AGM to be held in Mullingar in March 2025.

Youth drinking is declining – myths about the trend, busted

By Laura Fenton, Amy Pennay and John Holmes

Alcohol consumption among younger generations has been declining for years. And with many pubs and cocktail bars now catering to the sober and "sober curious", it's easier than ever to opt out.

Starting in the US in the late 1990s, and spreading to several other wealthy countries in the early 2000s, young people began to drink less than previous generations, or avoid drinking alcohol altogether.

The proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds who report drinking alcohol in the last week fell from 67% in 2002 to 37% in 2021. The decline was even steeper for younger teens. In England, the proportion of 15-year-olds who have drunk alcohol in the past week fell from 52% to 20% between 2001 and 2021, although some of this may be due to changes in the survey methods over that period.

We have been researching the decline in youth drinking in England and Australia, using both surveys and interviews with young people.

When we present our findings to other researchers and the wider public, we find that adults are often surprised to hear that young people today drink less. In our experience, their reactions suggest a belief in outdated stereotypes of young people as irresponsible and feckless.

They also sometimes jump to incorrect conclusions about the reasons why young people are drinking less, projecting adults' motives for abstaining onto young people.

Why are young people drinking less?

The reasons behind the decline are complex, but by analysing survey data and interviewing young people in England and Australia, we can provide some answers.

The change reflects a general trend in young people's attitudes toward risk. From smoking to sex, young people – including those in early adolescence and in their early twenties – are generally more risk averse than previous generations.

This extends to where they choose to, or feel able to, spend time. Some young people have less independent access to public spaces, like parks, than past generations because of increased restrictions on their ability to access such spaces. There is also evidence that they view socialising in such spaces with alcohol to be unsafe and morally suspect.

Recent research shows that drinking has become less routine and expected for young people, while not drinking has become more socially acceptable. This could be due to more efforts by governments and businesses like supermarkets to make alcohol less available to young people.

However, it can't be the only explanation, as in some countries where there has been a decline in youth drinking, policies regulating young people's access to alcohol haven't changed.

Adolescents' attitudes toward drinking have generally become more negative, while their attitudes toward non-drinking have become positive and accepting. Researchers argue that this stems from a longer, more protracted transition into young adulthood, as well as young people's concerns about the future and feeling a strong sense of pressure to succeed in life, including economically.

We found most of the young people we spoke to didn't consider peer pressure to be an important factor in their decisions to drink or not, except for a small number of university students who resented how alcohol-centric social life at university is.

Misconceptions about youth drinking

People we have spoken to about our research often assume that if young people aren't drinking, they must be doing something else instead that is equally (or even more) harmful, such as smoking cigarettes or cannabis.

In fact, the opposite is true: smoking and cannabis use decreased at the same time as alcohol. There were some signs of increases in cannabis use among schoolchildren before the pandemic and smoking among young adults after the pandemic.

But both of these – like the rise in teen vaping – occurred years after the decline in youth drinking was well-established. In other words, some groups of young people may be smoking cannabis or tobacco and vaping more, but they are unlikely to be doing so in place of drinking alcohol.

And while the rise of the internet and social media happened at the same time as the drinking decline, there is little evidence that young people are using technology in place of drinking. On the contrary, it is those who use the internet the most who also tend to drink the most.

It is important to note that the decline in youth drinking is not the same as the growing "sobriety movement". The latter has been behind temporary abstinence campaigns like Dry January, and helped by social media influencers, celebrities and online communities promoting sobriety as a way of life.

Those who speak publicly about their decision to go sober usually describe how this decision was made after years of binge drinking. The sobriety movement is about adults reassessing their relationship to alcohol. This is very different from teenagers deciding, actively or passively, not to take up drinking.

Though at least one study has identified links between young people's decisions not to drink and their health consciousness, the general trend is not about giving up alcohol, but about not really developing a drinking habit in the first place.

From *theConversation.com*

Laura Fenton,
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Amy Pennay,
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John Holmes,
Professor of Alcohol Policy, Sheffield Alcohol Research Group, University of Sheffield

Fr Joe McMahon

Ar dheis de go raibh a anam.

On November 10 last, the St Flannan's College school community was deeply saddened to learn of the death of our former college President, colleague and dear friend, Fr Joe McMahon. A native of Miltown Malbay, Joe sat his Leaving Certificate in 1966, achieving extraordinary results. Ordained to the priesthood in 1973, Joe returned to the college that same year where he joined the teaching staff. For the next four decades, St Flannan's College would become his home as he taught at and lived on the grounds of St Flannan's. While Joe's early years were spent teaching subjects like Irish and Latin, he came into his own when he became our Guidance Counsellor. Joe not alone put many of our students on the right career path, but his kindness and empathy meant his office became a place where staff and students were afforded a friendly welcome and offered sound advice. Joe's ability to listen and to help people achieve a clarity of thought was appreciated by those lucky to encounter him. Of course, Joe's mischievous personality and cool wit meant he was loved by all who knew him, with the number of stories told about him at his funeral testimony to his impact. In 2014, his duty all ended as a teacher at St Flannan's, Joe took up the position of parish priest of Scariff. While he remained involved with the college for many years, he gained a new lease of life in Scariff, tending to the concerns of his parishioners. Their affection for Joe was evident when they celebrated his golden jubilee as a priest in 2023. Fr Joe's impact on all who knew him was immense and he will be greatly missed by his friends and family.

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