

Maths -1, Happiness -9

First, the competitive ferocity of so-called 'Tiger Mums' unfairly denigrated both a species of large striped cats and maternal nurturers the world over. More recently, it has been forceful fathers receiving a bad press, as in the case of 'cruel' tennis coach John De'Viana.

De'Viana was accused of subjecting his daughters Monaei and Nephe to years of physical and emotional abuse in an obsessive bid to replicate the career success of Venus and Serena, whose



own father Richard Williams was reportedly exacting and unforgiving. A court heard that De'Viana wrote derogatory comments on match sheets, shouted abuse, beat his daughters behind curtains and even scrawled 'L' for 'loser' across Monaei's face when she was just nine years old. Eventually, De'Viana was cleared of all charges, countering that the girls' mother had begun a smear campaign against him as part of some very messy divorce proceedings. Whichever one was telling the truth, contrary to what Gothic fairy tales and Dickensian fiction might have us believe, being an orphan in the 21st century, free of pushy and overbearing parents, might actually be a blessing!

It might only be the extreme cases that make the headlines but in the background are millions of young people being made to feel anxious and despondent as the UK finds itself in the grip of a teenage mental health crisis. Rates of depression among teenagers have soared 70% in the last two decades, according to figures from leading charities who are working to combat feelings of low self-esteem.

So what exactly is going on and what can be done about it?

Today's society is intensely competitive: having a degree is not the guarantee of a good job that it was a generation or two ago; social media creates an unrealistic pressure to keep up with the Kardashians; 24/7 connectivity makes demands on our time that we feel obliged to meet for fear of being perceived as weak, even though such strains cannot be physically or psychologically sustained. Many parents and teachers are able to empathise, yet it doesn't stop them from exerting even more pressure on the children in their care.

Research by the mental health charity Young Minds has found that exams are a significant trigger for mental illness in young people. Under pressure to get the best possible results, schools are inclined to give pupils the impression that their exams are the be-all and end-all. This burden is also being transmitted to parents, who turn into prison guards during revision leave, denying their children much needed sunshine by decreeing that they mustn't leave their bedrooms until they've memorised the periodic table. It's tough on the kids, but it's also tough on their parents, who are only trying to do what they think's best.

Action for Happiness advocates a radically different approach. Their vision is of a happy world in which wellbeing is made the priority in homes, schools and workplaces. Their patron is the Dalai Lama. They acknowledge that everyone's path to happiness is different but, based on research, have identified ten keys to happier living, conveniently spelling out GREAT DREAM:

G iving	D irection
R elating	R esilience
E xercising	E motions
A wareness	A cceptance
T rying out	M eaning

Note that academic achievement or excellence is nowhere to be seen, despite a surfeit of vowels in the snappy acronym, although several of the keys could be considered contributors to good exam results.

In an ideal world, every parent would want their children to be both happy and successful (the two are not synonymous, as is often believed). Similarly, in an ideal world, teenagers would be self-motivated, giving their parents no need to be pushy. Sadly, we do not live in



an ideal world. According to American clinical psychologist Dr David Burns, idealism, or perfectionism, is “man’s ultimate illusion... it promises riches and delivers misery.” Though he has written ‘Dare to be Average!’, in which he suggests choosing an activity and instead of aiming for 100%, trying 80%, 60% or 40% to see how much more enjoyable the activity becomes, his theories are not a slacker’s charter for defeatism. The idea is that the constant pursuit of perfectionism, or top grades, is a holy grail (even if achieved at school, prepare to be disappointed at some point later in life) and that lowering expectations accordingly can

lead to a happier, more relaxed existence, which conversely can lead to greater success.

The message to everyone: in the chilled-out words of jazz-reggae artist Bobby McFerrin: ‘Don’t Worry, Be Happy’. And it won a Grammy Award for Song of the Year, by the way.