

Stressed?

By Ed Constantine

It's exam time for tens of thousands of teenagers all around the UK. Stress levels are at an all time high in the minds and bodies of fifteen and sixteen year olds everywhere. There are dozens of websites, books, leaflets and programmes telling parents and students how to cope with teenage anxiety and stress. It is a recognised phenomenon, but not everyone sees it that way: Bert and Betsie Starling are grandparents to two students who are both dealing with pressures of life.



"This is Bert in his army uniform," Betsie Starling says proudly, passing me a thick family album. "And the next picture is us on our wedding day. Bert had just left the army after completing his National Service, see how baggy his de-mob suit is. I didn't care. I was sixteen and madly in love with my Albert." She laughs and looks to her husband, sitting next to her. Bert and Betsie Starling are proud parents to three grown up children and grandparents to five grandchildren. The eldest of which, cousins Joe and Genie, are about to start year ten at the nearby secondary school.

The Starlings have always played a big part in all their grandchildren's lives: child-minding and babysitting for the busy parents ever since the children were toddlers. They know their grandchildren well, or at least they thought they did.

"Genie was such a lovely little girl," chuckles Betsie, showing a framed school photo of Genie, then seven. "She was always so affectionate and confident. She was cheerful and out-going, never moody or aggressive." Betsie sighs and looks at Bert. "Her mum, our daughter, says she is seeing a school counsellor now." When



asked why, Betsie begins "I think it all started at a party at one of her friends' houses. She didn't get invited and found out about it on the internet the next day," she explains. "Genie couldn't understand why all her friends were there and she wasn't. She didn't know what to do."

"Parties are just trouble anyway," Bert chips in. "The only parties we had were for the Queen's birthday and Jubilee," he says, wagging his finger. "And VE day."

"Now you are showing your age, Bert," Betsie says to her husband before continuing, "I think

there was a boy that she liked that was at the party and he started going out with one of her friends. There was a picture on Facebook. That was the thing that really upset her.”

When asked if they think that social media plays a part in teenagers’ mental-health issues, Bert begins “She just needs to get over it and spend her time doing something more constructive - girls have too much time on their hands. The art of the housewife has been all but lost.” Betsie nods in agreement and Bert continues. “Girls used to learn how to look after the house - cooking; washing; cleaning; darning socks! It gave the girls purpose, and a sense of achievement. It also prepared them, ready for when they got married.”

Betsie pats Bert on the knee and smiles, looking at her slippers. “These days, girls don’t know the start of how to look after themselves and a family. If they were kept busy by their mothers, they wouldn’t have the time to feel ‘stressed’.” Bert finishes by doing inverted commas with his fingers in the air.

Betsie seems to have a slightly different idea about Genie’s potential. “She is a bright girl

and I think she could do well at school and go to university. The school obviously thinks



so, or else they wouldn’t be providing all this counselling for Genie. You know, helping her to sort things out and stopping things getting any worse at school.”

“The teachers should be doing what they are paid to do - teach the children, not get inside their heads and put ideas there.” Bert grumbles, clearly not very impressed with the idea of school counsellors.

When asked about their grandson, Joe, Bert looks to the ceiling. “Well, apparently he’s stressed-out too!” he shouts. “Bloomin’ stressed!”

Betsie shows a picture of Joe in his school uniform, smart, smiling and handsome. “It was earlier in the year, about the same time as they moved house, Joe’s father got a new job you see, after being out of work for a couple of months. Joe had to go to the doctors with his mum because he was anxious about school.”

Bert shakes his head and breathes in deeply. “Apparently, he was worrying about all the homework he was getting. More like he was being bone idle and not doing it.” Bert finds a long black and white picture in the photo album. “Look: there I am, with the glasses,” he says, pointing to a tiny blurred figure. “In my day, you did your homework, for fear of getting a beating from your teacher.” He gestures with his hand. “And you didn’t want a beating from your teacher, because if your parents got wind of it, you’d get double the beating back at home.” Betsie gets up and offers to make us all a cup of tea.

Bert leans forward whilst Betsie is out of the



“Let’s all have a nice cup of tea now,” Betsie says as she pours “Genie and Joe will be here soon; school has just finished.”

One thing is certain: Genie and Joe are growing up in a different world compared to the one Bert and Betsie knew as children, and as I drink my tea with the Starlings, I wonder if Bert doesn’t have a point.

room. “I’ll tell you what I think the problem is: the parents are too soft on kids. They just cave in to them. The minute little Jimmy feels this, or says that, the parent is all ‘Ooh, have an iPad, here’s a holiday’ or ‘Poor thing, you must be ill, let’s go to the doctor.’ In my day, you wouldn’t dare trouble your parents, not with all the hard work they had to do just to put bread on the table.” Bert is prodding the table with his finger to drive his point home. “In my day, we joined the army when we left school. That sorted us out. You never saw any of us saying we were suffering from anxiety.” Betsie returns with a tray of tea and biscuits.