

Problems arise when left to their own devices

Increasing 'screen time' can lead to more mental health issues among young people.

At every opportunity people appear to be viewing a reassuring rectangle of blue light, held in their palms. We would probably notice those doing it all the more were we not doing it ourselves.

Smart phones are ubiquitous and convenient. However, they can also be an avenue to potential harm to mental health, especially among the young.

Five of the "eight stages of psychosocial development" identified by groundbreaking psychologist Erik Erikson in 1959 have to be endured before you finish puberty. That's a lot of psycho-social change in a short space of time. Erikson's final three stages come with their own adult pitfalls.

It could be fraught even in simpler times, however our smartphones, tablets, laptops and gaming consoles may contribute to making things that much harder for tech-savvy teens and children, who now have unprecedented exposure to technologies that most parents had scant or no access to when growing up.

Dr James van Cuylenburg, principal psychologist for Engage 1on1 clinics in Northcote and Ivanhoe, agrees with research that lays much of the blame for a sustained surge in anxiety-related problems and teenage suicidal ideation at the feet of technology.

"Anxiety is the most common symptom we treat. It is a normal human emotion and is essential for our survival," Dr van Cuylenburg says.



Evidence indicates that increased screen time equals poorer mental health outcomes.

However, clinical anxiety refers to an exacerbated anxiety response out of proportion to any actual or perceived threat. The severity can be due to a variety of reasons but for young people, use of technology is often an important factor to consider.

"More and more we treat young people whose mental health issues are intrinsically tied to their use of technology, which can affect them in a variety of ways. Evidence indicates that increased screen time equals poorer mental health outcomes."

He says his experience tallies with a US

study published in *Clinical Psychological Science* that showed 33 per cent more teens presenting with depression; 23 per cent more teenage suicide attempts and 31 per cent more actual teen suicides between 2010 and 2015 - the first years of the smartphone explosion in society.

Dr van Cuylenburg says social development and engagement is affected by computers and video games, particularly among boys, who tend to play online rather than face-to-face.

Engage 1on1 counsels men and women as

well as children and teens as technology's reach can affect people of all ages. "It just comes in different forms," he says.

The challenge is to teach everyone how to web-surf "healthily", he says. Teenagers' overuse of social media can lead to unhealthy comparisons between themselves and others or foster a "me" focus.

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James van Cuylenburg

They may have less community and social conscience or find that constant use can exacerbate insecurities and may give a false sense of what "everyone else" is doing or going through.

Engage 1on1 works on improving the emotional intelligence of children, adolescents and adults. Its team of psychologists encourages clients to express what they feel and identify their emotions. The team teaches how to understand the importance of expressing emotions healthily and how to learn to understand what others are feeling.

Using mostly a mix of cognitive behaviour therapy and mindfulness meditation training, a client's coping skills, social skills and social confidence may improve.

Engage 1on1 may also discuss failure. It can be important because humans learn from mistakes in the real world, not necessarily the virtual one.

Psychology Services

Engage 1on1 provides psychology services for people of all ages - Children, Adolescents and Adults. We see GP referred clients, paediatrician referred clients and private clients for counselling and intervention therapy.

Engage 1on1 Child & Adolescent Psychologists also provide services embedded within over 40 Primary and Secondary schools located throughout metropolitan Melbourne, at no cost to school or parents, supported through the use of GP Mental Health Care Plans, supporting young people to develop ongoing emotional resilience, improve self-confidence and adopt a positive approach to engaging with life.



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181 High Street, Northcote, VIC 3070
Ph: 03 9489 3007 Fax: 03 9489 3004
www.engage1on1.com.au