

Unemployment takes its toll on young people's mental health

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are committed to working but vulnerable to experiencing mental health problems, according to a new study by researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London, Duke University and the University of California.

The current generation of young people faces the worst job prospects in decades, yet previous research into how 'NEET' youths feel about their own prospects and how unemployment affects their mental health is scarce.

Using the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, researchers assessed commitment to work, mental health problems and substance use disorders in more than 2,000 British young people transitioning from compulsory schooling to early adulthood at the age of 18. 12 per cent of the participants were not in education, employment or training.

The study, published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, found that NEET participants showed greater vulnerability for mental health issues, including higher rates of mental health and substance abuse problems. However, when interviewed about attitudes toward work and actual job-seeking strategies they had used, the NEET youth reported higher levels of commitment to work and more job searching behaviours, as compared to non NEET youth in the sample.

Nearly 60 per cent of NEET youths had already experienced more than one mental health problem in childhood or adolescence, compared to around 35 per cent of young people who were in education, employment or training. 35 per cent of NEET participants suffered from depression compared to 18 per cent of non-NEET youths and 14 per cent had generalised anxiety disorder, compared to 6 per cent of their non-NEET peers.

The researchers also found that NEET participants were less equipped to succeed in the job market, reporting fewer 'soft' skills such as problem-solving, leadership and time management.

Professor Terrie Moffitt, co-author of the study from the IoPPN at King's College London, said: 'Our findings indicate that while the struggle to find work appears to take its toll on the mental health of young people, this does not appear to be an issue of motivation. The majority of 18-year-olds we spoke to were endeavouring to find jobs and committed to the idea of work, although they are perhaps hampered by a lack of skills that would serve them well in the job market.'

'Compared to their peers, NEET young people are also contending with substantial mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse and aggression control.'

In a follow-up analysis the researchers accounted for pre-existing vulnerability to mental health problems and found that the impact on mental health remained large and statistically significant in nearly all cases.

Professor Moffitt added: 'We think that NEET status and mental health problems may occur in tandem in young people for a number of reasons. First, the stress of wanting to work but being unable to can be harmful to mental health; second, employers tend to prefer ap-

plicants who seem healthier and third, because early manifestations of serious mental illness can in itself include disengagement from education and employment.'

Professor Louise Arseneault, co-author from the IoPPN, said: 'Young people who are neither working nor studying are often assumed to be unmotivated or unwilling to work, yet our study suggests that they are just as motivated as their peers - but many face psychological challenges that put them at a disadvantage when seeking employment.'

'It is crucial that young people are better supported by mental health services as they make this challenging transition from school to employment, and that they be trained in professional 'soft' skills which could help them in the search for employment.'