

Editor's comment

Times of turmoil



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This edition of *CME* is about adolescence – that wonderful, exciting, but very troubled time of life. I am sure that most of us can remember all the emotional turmoil as we entered our teenage years – the rebellion against authority, the burgeoning of sexuality. And we will also remember those people who managed to communicate with us during those years. If you were lucky, it was your parents. But for many, this is the time when parents become the enemy and adolescents often suffer a profound sense of total isolation.

When my husband started teaching science at a local private high school recently I started to understand some of the issues around communicating with adolescents. We don't have children of our own and teenagers have, frankly, always frightened me. But Craig has what Marian Campbell so eloquently describes as a 'genuine curiosity and non-judgemental acceptance of [an adolescent's] state of mind'. As a result he was a very successful teacher – but his methods were not always popular with some of the other staff who

suddenly found that their charges were questioning and challenging in class in a way that they hadn't before! What I also found very interesting was that I, through Craig's experience, started to find it easier to communicate with teenagers – generally friends' children, or young men with surfboards hitching to and from Noordhoek beach. I started to understand how interesting an adolescent's perspective is and stopped trying to fit them into my view of how a teenager should think and behave.

There are very few people who feel truly comfortable with the unpredictability that is adolescence. So I think that most people will welcome the approach of Alan Flisher and his team to the difficult topic of adolescent mental health. It is an area about which less is known than other areas of mental health and psychiatry, but one which, in this increasingly complex world, is extremely important if we are to allow these young people to develop in their own way into well-adjusted adults. Two of the main articles are almost philosophical,

but I would particularly recommend them – Campbell's article on communicating with adolescents and Strauss's article on taking a positive perspective on adolescent mental health. She points out that in the past health care professionals have tended to focus on defining pathologies and devising treatments for what are seen as adolescent problems and deficits. But the new approach to adolescence sees adolescents as a potential resource for society, rather than as a problem. As she says, 'Adolescence could be understood as one of the most valuable developmental phases and offers the opportunity for enormous growth.'

This, I think, should be the approach to these developing personalities. Look at what they have to offer, not at how much chaos they may be creating in your world view. As I write this I am listening to music on an iPod and I recently bought a sports car for the first time – proof indeed that the positive aspects of being a teenager should remain with us for the rest of our lives.

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