

Teenagers and the pandemic

The rich world of emotions

Maddalena Ionata

Adolescents are vulnerable by nature and it is not possible nor desirable to spare them disappointment and upset. But there is also great richness at this age, a richness that challenges the world of adults. Psychotherapist, Maddalena Ionata, reflects on the ways in which adolescents have been able to live the "virtuality" forced upon them by the pandemic with a positive look to the future.

My first work experience was at the 'listening desk' of a vocational institute, one that was central to the clinical work I would later undertake with adolescents. Meeting in a classroom setting and getting to know them individually was a challenge but also a precious opportunity for students and for me. It also offered me a chance to observe them in their daily environment and approach them on tiptoe, giving them the opportunity to be seen and heard in a safe, protected space.

In class there was curious interest and openness to receiving from those who had something to give. There is vital energy in youth and a thirst for intense relationships, things which are often extinguished in adults. While some are perhaps the same adults that they also live with, they are felt by other teens as emotionally distant. In fact, this is precisely the complaint of teens in their regard: "You have lost the spark in your eyes". They almost seem to want to reproach adults. Their adolescent "mission", so to speak, is one of "awakening" and opening themselves to "real life" with its affections, curiosity, research and initiatives, as well as its obligations, duties and dull, daily routines.

From initial enthusiasm to uncertainty

New memories are built daily. A small part of our memories overrides time barriers while the rest remain silent. The explanation for this is quite simple: Memory is an emotional process. In fact, for this reason many Italians still have vivid memories of their gut reactions and what they lived on that first day of the lockdown on March 9, 2020.

My first memory is of teens' excited voices outside the mental health center where I served. Swarms of teenagers poured onto the streets that morning after the announcement of school closures. Their enthusiasm was mixed with my sense of unease: What will we encounter? The news during those days contained conflicting messages with no real perception of risk, nor its effects over time. Certainly no one would have expected a national lockdown that would last months.

As psychotherapists, we also found ourselves unprepared as well. The vast scientific literature available proved insufficient. It did not allow us to fully understand what we were experiencing, much less foresee its long-term consequences. This is because we were faced

with an event -- the pandemic -- which had no precedent in the history of psychology. We knew this emergency required us to keep therapeutic relationships alive. Yet, therapy offices were no longer safe places. So, like many colleagues, I turned to Skype and WhatsApp video calls with my young patients. Overnight I found myself entering their homes, though not necessarily their rooms. "From my room, you can hear everything," explained 17-year-old Sonia (*names are fictional*), who preferred connecting from her parents' room at the end of the hall. Or another, Paul, explained: "Today is sunny and I thought I'd connect from here," as he smiled in the light of the apartment terrace. Then, there were those who did not have a room to themselves: "Sorry, doc, can we talk when my parents go shopping?" another asked.

When affection loses its three-dimensionality

With some teens I had to limit myself to telephone appointments. In those long months we were a voice for one another. Voices (theirs) sometimes agitated, sometimes bored, but also frightened, angry. Voices that asked for explanations, that did not surrender to the surrounding uncertainties. And I, who was also experiencing this uncertainty, knew I needed to be the closest "thing" to a safe haven amid the storm.

In their nocturnal dreams appeared mountains to climb, distant and unreachable islands, phone calls in which communication fell, video games with hard tests and obstacles to overcome. It was their inner world that appeared during the night that processed the emotions and challenges of the day. They were repetitive days, spent largely in front of a screen and in rooms/shelters that became more and more cramped with the passing of time. External stimuli were depleted, filtered by smartphones and computers. Teachers' voices bounced and echoed between four walls, often leaving a deafening silence.

They had lost their closeness and physical contact and their affections had lost their three-dimensionality. All this changed the content of our conversations. Their talkativeness was suddenly put to rest. "I don't know what to say. Can I tell you about the latest Netflix series?" asked Federico in a resigned tone before discovering that even through a series he could get to talk about himself and his emotions.

The challenge of imagining oneself in the future

If it is true that their first reaction was one of enthusiasm, it was short-lived. It may be that adolescents are physiologically inclined to love novelties. Thus, they soon changed their minds as a fragrance of monotony soon became evident.

Some were seized by intense states of anxiety. Nineteen-year-old, Giulia, feared the panic attacks from which she had managed to free herself would reappear. Explaining to her that the activation she felt was a physiological reaction to what she was experiencing was enough to reassure her.

There are those who felt the need to question their own prior choices. Dario, twenty years old, decided to leave the facility in which he had struggled to take exams. While waiting for the end of quarantine, we explored what could be a better path for him. The time of waiting had become a time for reflection. I wasn't surprised when he announced that he wanted to embrace a health care profession.

In those days, many young people felt offended by media communications which portrayed them as indifferent, disrespectful and irresponsible. They did not see themselves in this image which was being attributed to them. For a teenager searching for his or her own identity and in need of defining oneself also through external eyes, this can be painful.

What allowed most to move forward instead were affections and the ability to continue imagining themselves in the future. In other words, having confidence that there was still someone and something to love out there, waiting for them at the end of the lockdown.

The problem of emotional distance

From a teen's perspective, questioning the validity of virtual versus actual does not seem to make much sense. No clear dividing line exists for them. *Online* and *offline* are like two sides of the same coin, two complementary dimensions in which to move, encounter, express oneself, feel seen and heard or in which to remain hidden. We owe a lot to social *media* and to all that communication (including distance learning) continued to provide during the pandemic. It was a safety net that favored adaptation and, at times, guaranteed true psychic survival.

The real drama was not so much one (or not only) of physical distance as emotional distance. Problems arose when isolation generated loneliness. Emotional flattening has been the real risk factor for teens and beyond. "This very strong sense of nothing" sings Mostro, an Italian rapper who I met thanks to my young patients. He summarizes the loss of hope well. In the emergency context in which we have lived, this loss has had little to do with the virtual world and much more with the internal world of young people. A distinction must be made between Internet addiction and pathological social withdrawal (better known here as the *hikikomori phenomenon*) which is instead indicative of a more serious psychological malaise. Entire days spent in front of a screen in situations of necessity is not necessarily the same as "flattening" with that screen.

The greatest challenge was precisely one of maintaining warmth, trust, emotional sharing and the possibility to be seen and heard despite the external limitations. Their Copernican revolution (but basically ours, too) was discovering they could keep their dreams, hopes, friendships, loves and deepest emotions alive within themselves. Those who succeeded had hope-filled certainty that their inner world, rich in feelings and imagination, was incredibly more powerful than a global pandemic. What ultimately matters is the affective relationship, the humanity behind the virtual as much as the real life. The true richness and deepest freedom of the human person lie in this capacity. Viktor Frankl in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), wonderfully summarized this: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

It reminded me that no technique is more effective than my willingness to listen and authentic emotional attunement. One needs to approach another with the patience and constancy of the Little Prince with his fox, accepting that much is accomplished simply by giving back to others the possibility of a relationship. "You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me – like that – in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day..." (Saint-Exupéry, 1943).