How depression, anxiety and loneliness cut across the generations

By Dave Murphy
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A message to students at an Oakland school is advice everyone can use.

Photo: Michael Short / Special to The Chronicle 2019

Does anybody have a map?

Anybody maybe happen to know how the hell to do this?

I don’t know if you can tell
How depression, anxiety and loneliness cut across the generations

But this is me just pretending to know

That’s a mother’s lament in “Dear Evan Hansen,” a Tony Award-winning musical about teen suicide, depression and social media that manages to be both a sign of the times and a symbol of hope.

The numbers are grim: The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say the suicide rate for people ages 15 to 19 soared 76% between 2007 and 2017. For those 10 to 14, it nearly tripled.

Over a third of people ages 15 to 40 said they’ve received treatment from a mental health professional, usually for anxiety or depression.

Philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Kelly Clarkson and Rowdy Roddy Piper have said that whatever doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger. But what if it is killing you? Chronic loneliness can do that.

All of us can help a 5-year-old with a skinned knee, but we’re as clueless as Evan’s mom when the wounds are inside. We tell our loved ones, young and old, to be strong and that everything will be all right, but we’re just pretending to know.

I don’t have a map, either. Maybe we can make one together ...

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"You got everything to give right now"

That song by Logic is “1-800-273-8255,” the number of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Abby Govindan remembers sitting in a Starbucks in October 2017, writing suicide notes to her family. Her life felt like a fraying rope, losing strand after strand to things like an abusive relationship, a struggle with friends, a breakup with a guy she loved. Classmates were finding their passions while the junior at Fordham University kept changing majors. Nothing fit.

“I kind of felt like I was on my last strand,” she said.

Even her longtime dream, stand-up comedy, seemed hopeless. Her parents, who had risen out of poverty in India to build successful careers in the U.S., wanted her to be a doctor, scientist or engineer.

Then her mother called, and could hear the pain. This was no skinned knee.

Give comedy a try, she said. It wasn’t exactly her blessing, but it was a blessing.

And the strand got stronger.

San Jose therapist Lia Huynh has seen parental pressure make teens sick. “The immigrant population often has sacrificed a lot to come to America,” she said in an email, “and there is often a sense of ‘I need to pay my parents back by being successful.’”

“Being happy or living out one’s ‘calling’ can be considered selfish,” particularly in Asian cultures, she added. “As a result, young adults often feel stuck between living out their gifts and fulfilling their parents’ wishes.”
In “How to Raise an Adult,” former Stanford freshman dean Julie Lythcott-Haims describes a private-school educator asking a colleague: Would parents at your school rather have their kid be depressed at Yale or happy at the University of Arizona?

These resources could help you — or a friend

If you’re thinking of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255. The Crisis Text Line is 741741, and lots of other help is at SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources.

Other good resources

Listen to the “Ten Percent Happier” podcast that features Johann Hari. The website for Hari’s book, “Lost Connections,” includes a quiz about depression.

Besides “How to Raise an Adult,” Marlon Morgan recommends two books for parents and children: “Reclaiming Conversation” by Sherry Turkle and “iGen” by Jean M. Twenge.

Turkle and Twenge have given TED Talks, as have Hari and Julie Lythcott-Haims.

Professor Sydney Engelberg’s Psychology Today blog has tips on loneliness.

If you want to try meditation, apps like Calm, Headspace, Insight Timer and 10 Percent Happier offer free trials.
“My guess is 75 percent of the parents would rather see their kids depressed at Yale,” the colleague replied. “They figure that the kid can straighten the emotional stuff out in his/her 20s, but no one can go back and get the Yale undergrad degree.”

That’s assuming the “kid” isn’t too busy sorting out parental emotions about, say, race relations, religion and sexual identity. Huynh even sees some parents push adult children into relationships that will “make the family look good.”

“Part of Asian culture is the notion that we obey our parents over our own desires,” she wrote. “We often joke with our friends that if you have a wedding, it is not your wedding, it is your parents’. They plan everything and they invite all their friends. You might have a small say and be able to invite a small number of friends.”

Report: Everyone Starting New Exciting Stage Of Life Except You

If that headline makes you smile, thank the Onion. If it makes you cringe, thank human nature.
When you’re young, life can seem painfully slow. Marginal friends post on social media about raises and promotions while you’re stuck at a dead-end job forever (as in 18 months). You go to wedding after wedding, then spend Valentine’s Day alone.

And maybe you begin to wonder if you’ll ever get to show your beautiful smile.

Life serves us an anxiety buffet, with generational specialties. A 2018 Pew Research survey of 13- to 17-year-olds found that 70% said anxiety and depression are major problems among peers. That’s far more than for bullying, drugs or gangs.

About 40% of adults don’t have enough savings to cover a $400 emergency. Student debt has doubled in a decade. About 70% of those 18 to 34 are anxious about paying bills or keeping their family safe.

Then there are the old standbys like midlife crises, caring for aging parents, getting fired before you can retire, Alzheimer’s ...

Even good things make us anxious. Writing for CNBC, San Francisco psychotherapist Tess Brigham said the biggest problem Millennials raise is, “I have too many choices and I can’t decide what to do. What if I make the wrong choice?”

For Baby Boomers rolling their eyes: This might be because parents spoon-fed life’s realities to their children.

“When parents have tended to do the stuff of life for kids — the waking up, the transporting, the reminding about deadlines and obligations, the bill paying, the question asking, the decision making, the responsibility taking, the talking to strangers, and the confronting of authorities, kids may be in for quite a shock when parents turn them loose in the world of college or work,” Lythcott-Haims writes.

“They will experience setbacks, which will feel to them like failure. And, in a cruel twist of irony, they then won’t be able to cope with that failure very well, because they haven’t had much practice at failure, either.”
Friends from other generations can change your perspective. Older workers can get energized by younger colleagues, and can return the favor with reassurances. Such as:

Yes, Millennials, you will make bad decisions, maybe hideous ones, and have bad luck, too. And you'll obsess and you'll overthink and you'll do something ludicrously stupid that will embarrass you forever. But you'll bounce back even stronger, just as people have for generations from things like bad investments, nasty bosses and dateless Valentine’s Days.

For those still waiting to show their beautiful smiles, keep in mind that when people celebrate their 30th or 40th or 50th anniversaries, those are real-life Instagram photos. They should be cherished, but there were outtakes, too.

To ease anxiety, try these tips from the “Happier With Gretchen Rubin” podcast:

• When worries keep you awake, write them down. Then let go until a more civilized hour.

• If anxieties dominate your thoughts, set aside a time each week for worrying.

• When you’re upset about something that’s quantifiable, like spending time with your children, keep a log. You may be doing more than you think.

I’ve got a problem

But it ain’t like what you think

I drink because I’m lonesome

And I’m lonesome ’cause I drink

Chris Stapleton might sing about “Whiskey and You,” but for most people, the problem isn’t too much whiskey. It’s not enough “you.”

Loneliness is at “epidemic” levels, health insurer Cigna says. In another study, 42% of Millennial women said they are more afraid of loneliness than a cancer diagnosis.

It’s not that people don’t have a mate, Johann Hari writes in “Lost Connections.” It’s that they don’t have anyone.
Social scientists have been asking a cross-section of U.S. citizens a simple question for years: ‘How many confidants do you have?’” he writes. “They wanted to know how many people you could turn to in a crisis, or when something really good happens to you. When they started doing the study several decades ago, the average number of close friends an American had was three. By 2004, the most common answer was none.”

Loneliness hits all ages: a 22-year-old in a first job, a 44-year-old divorcee, a 66-year-old retiree, an 88-year-old widower. Living with someone isn’t necessarily a cure, either. If that widower moves in with his kids or the divorcee is a single mom, they still might feel lonely. Some married people do, too.

Julia Bainbridge started her podcast, “The Lonely Hour,” partly because of societal changes like “the video game-ification of dating” and the growth of gig jobs, which lessen people’s chances for meaningful contact.

“I want people to start looking each other in the eyes again,” she said in an email. “Have you noticed how rare this is today? And how it catches people — the barista, a stranger walking down the street — off guard when you engage in this way? I think part of the reason we feel anxious today is because we don’t feel seen, i.e., we feel invisible and inconsequential.”

Students have plenty of opportunities for that meaningful contact, but they have to look up from their phones first. Social media is a wonderful way to stay in touch, but you can have 1,000 friends on Facebook and still be lonely.

“They think they’re getting a need met, but they’re not,” said Marlon Morgan, 39, founder and executive director of Wellness Together, a nonprofit that works with almost 100 schools, including many in the Bay Area. Morgan said students spend too much time alone and don’t get enough sleep or physical activity, increasing their risk of depression. He said many choose screen time — “the candy of relationships” — over an authentic connection.

“Relationships themselves are more like farming,” he said. They take time and effort.

If you socialize and keep looking at your phone, you’re sending a very real message: My phone is more important than you. Not exactly the start of a beautiful friendship.
Even if you have loved ones, life — and death — can intervene. A recent article in AARP magazine points out that chronic loneliness has serious health consequences, and companionship isn’t always the solution.

“Putting lonely people together to make friends doesn’t work, for two reasons,” Stephanie Cacioppo, director of the Brain Dynamics Laboratory at the University of Chicago, says in the story. “First, loneliness increases self-centeredness. And second, loneliness makes people more irritable and defensive. If you put two lonely people together, they’re going to hate each other after two minutes."

She said people want someone with similar values and experiences. “We all need a witness to our lives and people to look after. Our survival and well-being depend on our collective well-being, not our individual might. Which is why something like volunteering — helping others — really helps.”

Looking in the mirror can help, too. Dr. Philip Muskin, 71, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center, recalls how a patient was frustrated because people weren’t friendly in restaurants and bars. Muskin helped him realize that he was showing his “scary face,” the kind lots of us display as we walk through gritty streets.

My two cents: If you wear headphones, you’re flashing a “do not disturb” sign. That’s fine for BART, but you also won’t connect with people at a cafe or your office. Is that what you want?

Life is not always a matter of holding good cards, but sometimes, playing a poor hand well.

Heed those words from Jack London if you’ve faced rejections, setbacks, discrimination. And guess what? Everyone has. Here are ways to play the hand:

Rejuvenate yourself. Focus on what you have, not what you don’t. Talk with people instead of passing them by. Take a class, go to a religious service, join a trivia league.
essentially, develop properly. And we’ve gotten uncomfortable with silence. But we simply can’t have deep conversations with ourselves — the conversations that help us mature — when we’re distracted.”

**Use it as fuel.** Taylor Swift sings about bad relationships. The Warriors’ Draymond Green has a mental list of all 34 people picked ahead of him in the 2012 NBA draft. Pre-Facebook Mark Zuckerberg listed one of his interests as “defeating nemeses.”

**Look at your priorities.** Hari’s book describes how psychologist Tim Kasser had people keep a diary that detailed their moods when they achieved intrinsic goals, like being a better friend or more loving son, compared with extrinsic goals, like getting a promotion or bigger apartment.

The intrinsic goals made them happier. Extrinsic didn’t.

“Yet most of us, most of the time, spend our time chasing extrinsic goals — the very thing that will give us nothing,” Hari writes. “Our whole culture is set up to get us to think this way. Get the right grades. Get the best-paying job. Rise through the ranks. Display your earnings through clothes and cars.”

Does your work give you a sense of purpose? Never mind how much it pays you, as long as you can live reasonably. Does it make you proud? Are you happy? If not, why are you there? What are you doing to change things?

And if you’re a parent determined to pick the “right” college, career, spouse and sexual identity for your child, keep in mind that you’re sending a clear message: My wishes are more important than your happiness. Nice epitaph!

**Get help.** You’ve talked with friends, listened to upbeat music, exercised, communed with nature, prayed, meditated, written a journal. Nothing works. When should you see a professional?

Dr. Muskin’s rule of thumb: If you can’t concentrate, miss work, have trouble sleeping, can’t eat or abuse substances (sex counts in this case), you might want to see someone.
after the patient clearly feels better. How quickly he tapers off can depend on the original symptoms.

“The risk of relapse is 50% for someone with one episode of depression,” he said, “and it goes up if the person has 2 or more episodes.”

Hari, 41, started on antidepressants when he was 18, but stopped years ago. He writes that while meds help some people, others get depressed again in months. He also says that being sad about things like a breakup, losing a job and going in debt is normal, so be wary if a doctor rushes to prescribe something, especially without therapy.

Learn about yourself. “I usually post for Suicide Awareness Month,” Govidan, the young comedian, tweeted in September to her 70,000 or so followers, “but I didn’t this year because I recently relapsed and had to quietly move home without telling anyone. Success stories are easier to share than stories of failure, which is what I feel like right now, but that’s OK and I’ll be OK.

“No point to this other than just a reminder to check in with yourself and not feel guilty about having to take a step back. Recovery isn’t linear.”

She had alcohol poisoning and spent about a week rehabbing in a mental hospital, but she played the hand well — and had her mother in her corner. Now 22, she’s sober and has done dozens of gigs, even headlining a show near her home in Houston.

“I always say, ‘I got a really funny five-minute bit out of it.’”

Leo tells Josh a story on “The West Wing”: A guy falls into a steep hole and yells for help. A doctor writes a prescription, but it does no good. A priest writes a prayer. Ditto. Then a friend hears him — and jumps into the hole.

“Are you stupid?” he says. “Now we’re both down here.”

“Yeah,” the friend answers, “but I’ve been down here before, and I know the way out.”
Celebrities from Oprah Winfrey to Lady Gaga have told of sexual assaults. Olympic hero Michael Phelps has talked openly about depression and thoughts of suicide. Star basketball players Liz Cambage and Kevin Love have written about having anxiety and depression.

Maybe your help will come from a 22-year-old comedian who was once at the end of her rope. Now she has a couple of strands to spare.

“When I was in the depths of depression, stand-up was what helped me get through it,” Govindan said. “The idea of being that light for anyone else kind of keeps me going.”

Sometimes the best way to help yourself is by helping someone else. It feels amazing.

Hari writes about Berkeley researchers who looked into a seemingly simple question: If you try to make yourself happier, can you? Yes, for the people they sampled in Russia, Japan and Taiwan. No, for Americans.

The reason lies in the cultures. To make yourself happier in those other places, you lift your friends. In the U.S., you try to help yourself. It’s not as rewarding.

Hari also likes “sympathetic joy” meditation. Focus on how good you’d feel if something great happened to you, then gradually (and this will take time) move along the scale until you can feel joy if something great happened to someone you aren’t exactly fond of.

If you can do it, you might cut way down on emotions like jealousy and envy — and share other people’s happiness. Maybe you’ll even like their Instagram photos.

Even if you’re having a bad day, there’s always joy in the world.

Dear Evan Hansen,

Today is going to be a good day and here’s why: Because today, today at least you’re you, and that’s enough.
people can help you find your way. Let them.

And if you’re doing well, people need you. Find them.

You won’t need a map, either. Just follow your heart.

Dave Murphy is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer who writes the monthly Generations column. Email: dmurphy@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @daexmurph