

Male Mental Health



The Next Generation

The mental well-being of our children and teenagers is in crisis, with anxiety and depression at an all-time high. Can early intervention help today's young men grow up better equipped to deal with life's challenges? **MH spent a week in a south London school to speak to those working to brighten futures**

Words by Dan Masoliver – Photography by Chris Floyd →

S

even boys between the ages of 14 and 16 sit shoulder to shoulder around a table in their principal's office. Their white shirts are tucked in and their ties neatly knotted. They are wearing matching midnight-blue blazers and a studiously serious expression befitting their surroundings. But they're not here because they're in trouble. They're here to discuss what's on their minds.

Today's subject is mental health. "When my mum died, I didn't cry. I was, like, is there something wrong with me?" says one boy. "Sometimes, I just get so angry. I used to get in a lot of fights," admits another. One by one, they chip in: "Most boys I know don't talk about anything serious. It's always jokes. They don't talk about the deeper things..." "People will be, like, 'What's wrong?' But I don't want them to come check on me and make sure I'm alright. I don't want people to think I'm an attention seeker..."

These young men have not had the easiest of lives. They are students at Oasis Academy South Bank in the borough of Lambeth, a secondary school with one of the highest intakes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the country. On top of the usual pressures that come with adolescence, many have also had to deal with living in poverty, watching friends fall victim to gang violence, or losing relatives to the penal system. But while these kids' experiences may seem exceptional, the emotional struggles that they have been asked to describe today – anxiety, anger, depression – are increasingly commonplace among their age group.

When it comes to young people's mental health, Britain is in the midst of a crisis. The latest research indicates that one in eight children now has a diagnosable mental health disorder – that's three kids in a class of 24 – up from one in 10 in 2004. But these are just the disclosed cases: the figures don't include the so-called invisible children, who have not been reported to the mental health services. When you widen the net further to include young adults in their early twenties, the proportion of those at risk rises to one in five. A recent survey by the Prince's Trust found that 18% of 16-to-25-year-olds disagreed with the statement: "I find life really worth living."

These figures paint a bleak picture. That's why Men's Health has spent the past few months investigating the troubling state of our children's headspace. We have immersed ourselves in the day-to-day world of Oasis Academy South Bank and spoken with the teachers, counsellors, clinicians, commissioners, legislators and, of course, the students to try to understand the full scale of this crisis.

Suicide is the biggest killer of men under the age of 45. Today, that disquieting statistic is repeated so often that it risks losing its impact. Yet is this the



Andrew, age 16

"I started going to Place2Be because of my behaviour. There was something different in me. I was caged up and I wouldn't speak out. Nobody knew what was going on, but everybody could tell there was *something*. It was a lot of things, from my mum and dad splitting up to just being influenced in ways that I didn't want to be. I felt powerless.

"I expressed myself negatively – skipping lessons, being rude to teachers, getting in fights – and positively, through football. When I play football, I forget everything. It's like I'm not on the planet any more.

"It can be hard to talk about your problems. When people look at me, they never think, 'He's been through this, he's been through that.' They just expect that everything's good, as if I don't have struggles. If I say something, people think it's a joke, like, 'Ah, you must be joking, we all know you're not actually upset.'

"Girls usually have someone they can tell everything to, but boys don't. Boys have close friends, but they won't tell them every single thing. There'll still be things that nobody knows, that you can't tell anyone. Not your dad, your brother, your mum... Nobody can know.

"Sometimes, you'll have the illusion that the problem's gone, that you've moved on, and then, out of nowhere, it'll just hit you. That's when it's worse. But when I'm talking to someone about mental health, I'm not hiding from the stress. I'm speaking about it and learning more about myself at the same time. Then, I start to realise, 'Oh, this is how I'm feeling. I didn't even know it was affecting me like that.'"



"Nobody knew what was going on, but everybody could tell that there was *something*"

“People can see your physical pain, but you can’t limp for depression”

fate of today’s young men? Are these boys destined to walk the same tightrope as their elder brothers, fathers and mentors? Since half of all mental health problems manifest by the age of 14, surely the answer is to equip the next generation with the tools to cope with these issues before it’s too late? That’s an admirable goal. The question is: how?

The Class of 2019

Oasis Academy South Bank is an unremarkable block of brown stone, grey tiles and concrete trimmings, located on a busy intersection near London’s Waterloo Station. Between lessons, 11-to-18-year-old boys and girls walk in silence on the left-hand side of the corridors, in a routine display of the school’s emphasis on order. During breaks, they run around the playground, a tarmacked roof terrace bordered by local housing estates, and play table tennis, or talk in conspiratorial huddles. In other words, they act like kids. They laugh, they play, they practise what it is to be grown-ups. To the untrained eye, they certainly don’t look anxious or depressed.

Yet many of the young people here have found themselves in need of additional support. Four such students are Hasan, Ibrahim, Elohim and Andrew, now in year 11. They and their peers would sometimes draw attention to themselves for all the typical reasons associated with their age group: missing lessons, talking back to teachers, clashing with fellow students. But dig a little deeper and such behaviour can be seen as symptoms of something else. In our conversations, both Ibrahim and Elohim talk about losing friends to knife crime. Hasan describes the stress of exam pressure and how he sometimes struggles to manage his anger. Andrew tells us about his parents splitting up and feeling powerless.

Mental health issues don’t develop in predictable ways. Even so, is it really harder to be a kid in 2019 than it was in your day? Or is the next generation simply better at talking about their problems, and are adults now better at identifying them?

“I think it’s undoubtedly the case that it’s now much more acceptable to talk about these issues,” says Anne Longfield, the children’s commissioner for England. “But I do think that more children are suffering with poor mental health than there were.” Longfield’s office has been responsible for much of the significant research conducted into this area over the past year; until then, no major survey of children’s mental health had been conducted in the UK since 2004.

“Life is more stressful for a child growing up now,” Longfield says. “[Children] have less access to their parents than they would have done 40 years ago; both parents are probably working. We’ve got 24/7 communication and social media, and that certainly heightens problems that are already there. A lot of kids say they feel that their schools are very stressful, that they’re hothouses.” All of this combines to take its toll on children’s developing minds, she says. To make matters worse, most schools aren’t adequately prepared to deal with the problem. “We know that schools are under pressure with their budgets.”

To grasp the crisis in children’s mental health, it helps first to understand the challenges faced

in supporting them. Every publicly funded school is given a budget, and it’s up to each school to decide how to allocate the money in its coffers. Meanwhile, a school’s success is measured according to exam results, ranked against its “competitors”. So, when a head teacher is deliberating between paying for a full-time counsellor and hiring another maths teacher, the sterling tends to land on the side of the balance sheet marked “education, education, education”.

With no guaranteed provisions on the front line, a child’s first contact with support often results from referral to the underfunded, overstretched Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). If your son, daughter, niece or nephew were referred to CAMHS today, they could have to wait as long as 10 months for their first appointment. Little wonder, then, that studies suggest two-thirds of children with diagnosable mental health conditions don’t get access to the care they need. Meanwhile, one report found that adult mental health services receive 15 times the funding allocated to children’s services – a clear case of closing the stable door once the horse has bolted.

“From the first time I walked into this job, four years ago, children have told me about the difficulty that they perceive – *rightly* perceive – in getting treatment,” says Longfield. “Some have chillingly said, ‘We know you can’t get help until you’ve tried to take your own life.’ And many have low expectations of anyone being able to do much about it.”



Hasan, age 16

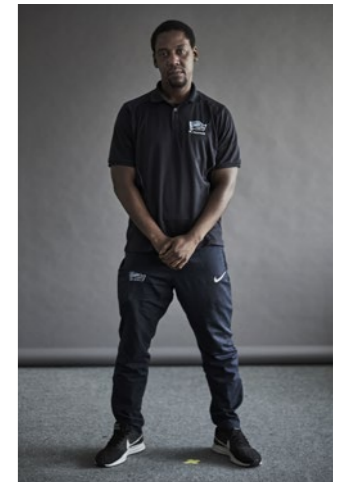
“At my old school, there were basically no rules. Everyone was fighting. Everyone was trying to be the powerful man. I didn’t know how to deal with my emotions, so I used to get into fights. Now, I can control my anger. I see things differently. Oasis has changed me. The system just shapes a person in a good way.”

“I have a session with Place2Be every week. I can talk to [therapist Guy Rashty]

confidently about my mental health. If I’m angry, or if I’m feeling down for some reason, he’ll help me through it. He’ll give me tips about what to do throughout the day.

“I have my GCSEs [this summer]. I’m quite confident. I think I can get the grades. But pressure is everywhere. It comes from friends, teachers, my parents. Sometimes, I’m in a science lesson and I don’t know what’s going on, and I’m just there, under pressure, and my whole body will start hurting. I feel the pain in my muscles.”

“At break time, I can laugh, I can move about, I can try to get rid of all the stress. Sometimes I’m stressed, and



OASIS ACADEMY’S ON-SITE COUNSELLOR CHRIS BROWN (TOP) AND ART THERAPIST GUY RASHTY ARE ALWAYS AVAILABLE TO LISTEN

sometimes I’m angry – it’s like there are feelings inside of me and I just want to let them out, but teachers don’t see that. I sometimes get told off for being too active at break time. People can see your physical pain. If I’m hopping around, limping, they’ll know there’s something wrong with me. But you can’t limp for depression.

“I don’t know why there are barriers. But I don’t think people should keep it in. It’ll ruin them. I know, if I kept it in myself, I wouldn’t be here.”

An Everyday Oasis

Fortunately, not all schools see decent exam results and mental well-being as incompatible goals. Carly Mitchell is the Oasis Group's director of behaviour, pedagogy and curriculum but was, until very recently, the principal at Oasis Academy South Bank. She was an unusual head teacher, not least because the kids didn't so much fear her as adore her, many describing Miss Mitchell as being like a second mother. A whirlwind of positive energy, she animatedly gesticulates while speaking and leans in when listening. It was Mitchell who oversaw the introduction of several provisions to support her students' mental well-being.

"I think schools with a pure focus on academic outcomes really miss a trick," says Mitchell. "In fact, those outcomes are stronger if there is robust mental health support, a shared sense of respect and an understanding of who [the students] are as people – who they want to become and what they need to do to make those transformations in their character." We are sitting on child-sized plastic chairs in the hallway outside an upstairs classroom. A geography teacher has called in sick and Mitchell is supervising the class through a large window, her eyes flitting easily between interviewer and students. "Great academic outcomes, I felt, would come as a by-product of having a focus on developing a young person's sense of self and their attitude to themselves, and to the world around them, and their relationships with other people."

In Mitchell's experience, it isn't enough simply to rely on NHS services. For vulnerable children, the unfamiliar, hospital-style environments in which these exist could seem at best intimidating, at worst alienating. "CAMHS does some amazing work, but it's a saturated service with high thresholds." The solution, as Mitchell saw it, was to bring support in house.

At the end of the lesson, Mitchell escorts us downstairs, through a bustling assembly hall and out of a back doorway, into a quiet playground-cum-bike store. On the other side of this space is a door with a round, yellow sticker on its glass panel. The sticker's sans serif script reads "Place2Be" and is crowned with a smiling, hand-drawn sun. This is the school's designated therapy room.

The space exists as part of a long-running partnership between the school and the children's mental health charity Place2Be, paid for out of Mitchell's budget. Almost 300 schools up and down the country have welcomed the charity into their grounds, with Place2Be practitioners providing



Elohim, age 15

"I lost a friend when I was in year 10. I just couldn't get over it, for a long time. To this day, I still haven't got over it. Then, I lost another friend over the summer. I feel like I'm handling it alright now, but I was bringing that anger into school. I just did not know how to control it. That made me very stubborn and defiant towards teachers. I wouldn't care what they were saying to me. I'd just get angrier and angrier.

"I didn't come to school much. I'd stay at home, or come in late. I didn't care. I was trying to forget my problems. But when I try to forget them, they just grow bigger in my mind, and it affects me a lot. Sometimes, I would break down in lessons, thinking about it. At random moments, it would come and bite my mind. I never knew how to handle situations when it came to death, but now I feel I've developed coping mechanisms.

"In my generation, people take lots of stuff as a joke. We need to change that, because mental health is serious. Males should be more open about it with each other, because I feel like mental health is the most serious thing that you can talk about. But if we're all joking around, everybody will be, like, 'Why are you bringing that up? We were having fun.'

"Social media is the worst place to talk about your mental state, because people love to expose how others feel, then it gets spread around. You wouldn't even imagine how quickly it spreads from one person to another, to a big group – in a matter of minutes. That's why I never speak about my personal problems on social media. I feel more comfortable talking about it one to one."

support for kids, parents and teachers, to help them deal with everything from bullying and bereavement to domestic violence and divorce.

Co-ordinated by art therapist Guy Rashty, the Place2Be room at Oasis Academy South Bank is bursting with expressive potential. Overflowing boxes of art supplies – paints, crayons, putties – fill the shelves; guitars, drums and an upright piano are just a few of the instruments dotted about the room. Tactile stimulation comes in the form of soft toys, bean bags and trays of sand. The varied creative tools of Rashty's trade are vital, he says, to help children think about, come to terms with and communicate complex feelings that they may not have the vocabulary to express.

Rashty's sessions clearly have the potential to positively affect the lives of the individual kids he sees, but he believes that the value of having a room of this kind in the school is to normalise conversations about mental health. "This is an oasis," he says. "It's not in a hospital; it's in their environment, their school. It makes it 'normal' – though I don't like to use that word. They have a nurse, there's admin [staff], there's a reception and there's a mental health room, or an art therapy room, whatever they want to call it.

"It's about breaking the stigma. And I've seen it happen. It has changed in this school, I think," he says. "Even the students who don't access it know that it exists. They know they *can* access it. For the ones who don't need it, it's still planting a seed [in their minds]. So, hopefully, when the day comes, when they grow older, it's just in their system and they'll go, 'Maybe this is what I need.' Any child, any adult, can develop mental ill health at any time. Knowing that support exists, and that it is readily available, can be a lifesaver."

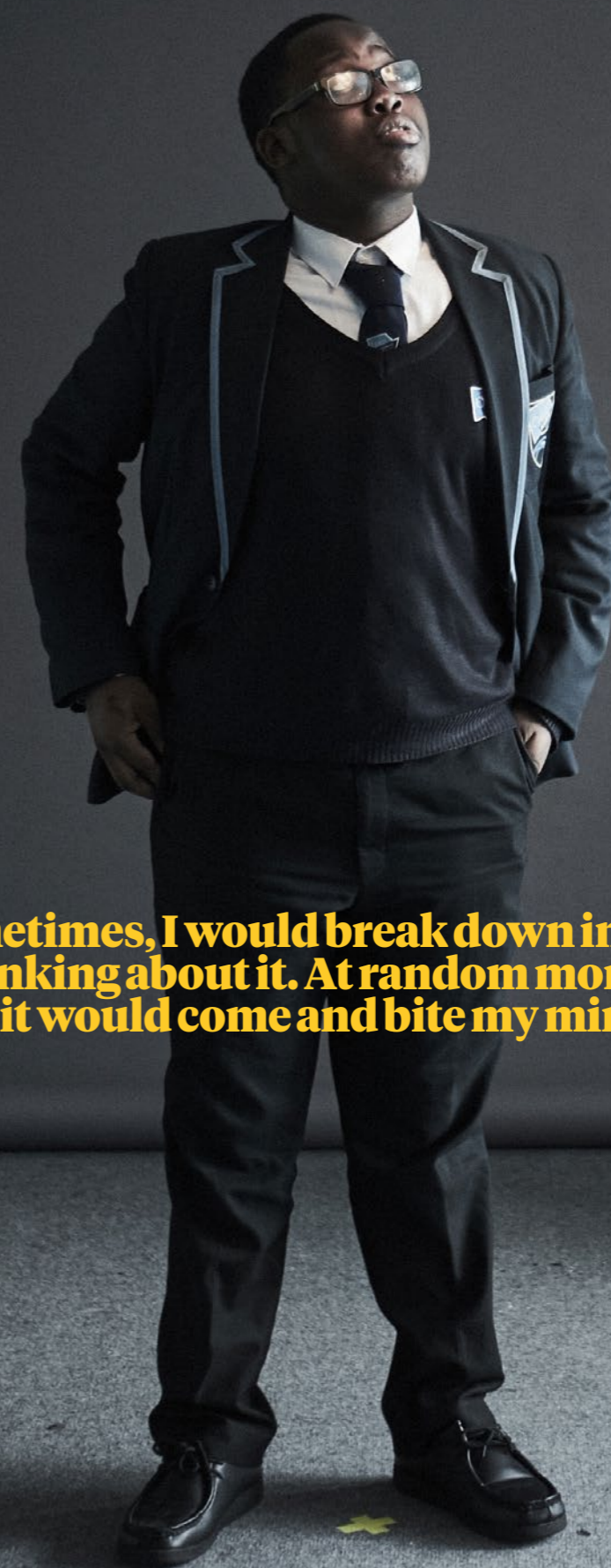
Chain Reactions

Place2Be may be well regarded within the school, but convincing kids – and young men in particular – to access such services can still prove challenging. For all the many intellectual conversations around changing notions of masculinity and the erosion of traditional macho tropes, there are still obstacles at a grass-roots level. Every boy we spoke to over the course of our investigation – all of whom had accessed support from Place2Be and spoke highly of the help they received – nevertheless espoused old-fashioned ideas about toughness and expressed their reluctance to open up about their problems.

What's more, male friendships tend to centre on play. When you're an adult, that might involve a game



"Sometimes, I would break down in lessons, thinking about it. At random moments, it would come and bite my mind"





Ibrahim, age 16

"I started seeing Guy in year nine. He'd come by but I'd hide: I thought talking to him was a waste of time. Then, when I was in year 10, my brother went to prison. A lot was going on. The school said I should try [Place2Be]. I wasn't really thinking about how miserable I was, but Guy let me express myself.

"My mum's gone through a lot, so me and my brother tend not to talk to her about our problems. We don't want to worry her. It's been easier talking to Guy. Now, I feel more comfortable sharing my problems with people.

"A lot of children are depressed, but they don't even know what depression is, because nobody talks about it, especially boys. A lot of my friends find it embarrassing. What I used to think – and still think – is that everybody has their own problems, so there's no point adding my problems to theirs. Boys just shrug it off, as if it's not a big thing. Maybe it's because of the way we've been brought up. Superheroes and stuff. And football: you get fouled, you stand up, you don't cry.

"Over the summer, one of my friends was stabbed. When he died, I didn't cry. But at school, people kept asking me, 'Are you OK?' So, I was forced to think about it and started to get upset. If I'd expressed myself earlier, maybe I'd feel better about it now. That's why we need to talk. If I didn't, I wouldn't know what to do. You need to share your pain. It's the most important thing. Once you talk to one person about your feelings, that allows you to talk to other people, too. That's how it happened for me. You need a lot of support, especially at school, because that's where you spend half of your childhood."

of five-a-side, or drinks down the pub, or endlessly repeating in-jokes. Interrupting the fun with a serious discussion about depression – well, that can be hard. It's one of the reasons that you might not realise that a friend is suffering until it's too late. And it's among boys that these chronic group dynamics are first formed.

Sitting in on our group discussion earlier was Chris Brown, 36, from south-east London. Dressed in tracksuit bottoms and layered technical T-shirts emblazoned with the school crest, Brown looks more like a PE teacher than what he actually is: a kind of professional big brother and qualified counsellor, who is always on hand around the school for informal chats and advice. Later, he reflects on the groupthink that prevents young men from revealing their vulnerabilities.

"What we saw [in the group session] was that, as soon as one person opens up, everyone goes, 'I can say it now.' Before that, they might think, 'How will the others react if I say this? If it doesn't go well, I'm going to look a bit silly. I've shown too much of my heart right now.' But then you see [a leader] do it, and he didn't look silly, so it gives you the confidence to speak up." This, Brown believes, is the added value of having Place2Be in the school: the greater the number of kids who access that support, the more normal it becomes to talk about having done so.

This school has channelled its stretched financial resources into a home for Place2Be, into a salary for Brown and into training for the rest of the staff. Yet Oasis Academy South Bank is very much an exception, not the rule. What about the 30,000-plus schools where Place2Be does not have a presence? Happily, it seems, the authorities are beginning to take note.

The Change Makers

Amid all the Brexit pandemonium, the back-bench revolts and front-bench resignations, something significant has happened on a domestic policy level – something potentially as important to the future prosperity of the country, at least as far as its youngest citizens are concerned. In late 2017, a parliamentary green paper was published proposing £300m in new funding towards mental health support in schools; earlier this year, the Department of Health and Social Care unveiled its new NHS Long-Term Plan, in which it pledged to boost mental health support for young people.

One of the architects of this green paper was Jackie Doyle-Price, the parliamentary undersecretary of state for mental health, inequalities and suicide prevention. The idea, she says, is for the funding of mental health provisions in schools not to be "accidental", left to the whims of individual head teachers. "We want all schools to be offering their pupils some degree of mental health support," she says. "So, we're essentially creating a new workforce to go into schools – 8,000 [people] in total, once we've rolled it out completely. Obviously, [something of this scale] will take time to roll out, so I think a lot of

"Boys shrug it off, as if it's not a big thing. Maybe it's because of the way we've been brought up. Superheroes and stuff"



“Once you talk to one person about your feelings, that allows you to talk to other people, too”

people might be impatient at the pace at which we can deliver it, but over time we want every school to have access to a kind of external mental health support, like Place2Be.

“[The goal is to] equip people with the tools to look after themselves... [and] to stop mental health challenges from festering,” she says. “It’s just like any other kind of disease: if you get to it early, you can fix it; if you let it develop, it becomes more chronic. We’re seeing a much higher demand for mental health services precisely because we haven’t had enough support early on... It actually makes financial sense, as well as being better for everybody concerned, because we can try to prevent those problems from becoming worse.”

Mental ill health is estimated to cost the UK economy £105bn a year. If an investment of a few hundred million can stop the young people of today from requiring more severe – not to mention expensive – interventions in later life, that is surely an investment worth making. Critics, however, have argued that

these measures do not go far enough. Children’s commissioner Longfield estimates that the investment required is closer to £1bn than £300m. There are 32,000-plus schools in the UK. The government plans to train and roll out 8,000 practitioners. You do the sums.

One of the most vocal charities campaigning for change in this area is YoungMinds. Marc Bush is the group’s director of policy, and while he welcomes the commitment from government, he’s quick to point out that it is far from a quick fix. Historic underfunding has created a notable deficit of resources. But Bush believes that the onus for recognising and supporting mental health concerns in kids should not fall on the government alone, nor even schools, but on all of us. “Schools should have it as part of the curriculum,” says Bush. “The NHS should have good clinical services and access to good therapy, and the charity sector should be providing really good youth and community services.” The list goes on: “Private businesses can make sure that they’re supporting people in their first experiences of work or traineeships;

gyms and other places can cultivate spaces where people can learn to manage their mental health in a more constructive way...”

A child’s mental health is not something that exists only during school hours, or during term time, or while they’re at home. It is perpetual, and requires holistic support. “Yes, we need those crisis services,” says Bush. “But why intervene at the moment of crisis? Why not go in earlier, give people those core skills and set up a society in which we really embrace the fact that everyone [needs to look after their] mental health?”

Our children’s future, at least in terms of their mental well-being, is looking brighter. But we cannot afford to be complacent. Today, we are still at crisis point. At present, the numbers are still heading in the wrong direction. Too many young men – and young people in general – are suffering from anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Too many are self-harming and having suicidal thoughts. Too many are acting on those thoughts. Many of these young men can’t yet vote to improve their lot, and many don’t have the confidence to talk about it, either. Their happiness is in our hands. ☘

Men’s Health

Give Them a Head Start

Our Commitment to the Next Generation

Shining a spotlight on young men’s mental health is just the beginning. For meaningful change, we need solutions, not just conversation. That’s why Men’s Health is proud to support YoungMinds in a call for reform at a societal, institutional and governmental level. **The statistics may seem bleak – but they are reversible**

While the government’s pledged investment in young people’s mental health is auspicious and timely, it is not sufficient to reach the thousands of school children in urgent need of support. It is estimated that one in four students are currently struggling with some form of emotional distress; meanwhile, suicide remains the biggest cause of death for boys and young men between the ages of five and 19. The average person will spend more than 7,000 hours of their life in school, so young people are a captive audience for positive messages about mental health. Schools represent the ideal platform for identifying the first signs of distress and instilling good habits that will help young men to safeguard their wellbeing for a lifetime.

The problem? Schools are currently not incentivised to prioritise their students’ emotional well-being. And with the system so drastically underfunded, directing resources towards initiatives that favour health and happiness, rather than academic achievement, now presents more of a challenge than ever. We need a shift in our national priorities. After all, leaving school with good mental well-being – and the tools to keep it that way – will have a greater impact on a person’s future than any grade or qualification.

Men’s Health is supporting YoungMinds in its call on the government to rebalance the education system in order that the well-being of students takes equal precedence to academic achievement. Most recently, the charity has focused on overhauling Ofsted’s school inspection framework. Here are some of the measures YoungMinds is campaigning for.

These are our calls to action:

01 Ofsted inspections should emphasise the importance of good mental health. Schools should be assessed on how effectively they promote the well-being of their students, as well as academic results.

02 An understanding of well-being and mental health should be part of teacher training – both at the start and as part of teachers’ continuous professional development.

03 The government must make sure all schools have designated funding for mental health. With budgets under pressure, it’s vital that they have the resources they need to enact a cultural change.

We are encouraging Men’s Health readers to keep the conversation going to ensure that discussion translates into action. What changes would you like to see in schools? Post your thoughts, tagging **@MensHealthUK** and **@YoungMindsUK** with **#GiveThemAHeadStart**. You can find out more about YoungMinds’ ongoing Wise Up to Well-Being in Schools campaign, and how you can support it, by going to **MensHealth.com/uk/GiveThemAHeadStart**

