

THE A-TEEN

Overworked, overwhelmed and CRUSHED by their own AMBITION... There are increasing concerns about MENTAL HEALTH and suicide rates in SILICON VALLEY – but it's not the adults people are worried about.

WORDS AMY MOLLOY

Is suicide a problem in Silicon Valley? This was the simple, but incredibly complex, question posted on online forum Quora by someone who heard that three people from a prominent incubator had recently taken their own lives. But the first response posted wasn't written by an adult working in the tech industry – it was posted by a teenager.

"I'm going to come at this question from a slightly different perspective," wrote Daniella Maydan, who describes herself as a 'teenager for now' in her Quora profile. "I don't know whether or not Silicon Valley as a whole has a suicide problem. However I do know that the Palo Alto high schools have a huge suicide problem."

This was not the first time the Palo Alto teen had tried to raise awareness of the problem. In her Quora answer she linked to a series of other posts on the site about what it's really like growing up in the tech mecca.

"Going to high school here is extremely hard and stressful," revealed Daniella. "The standard is very high.

People that would be top of their class in any other school are completely lost in the middle. They sometimes barely even make the top 20 per cent of their class. It makes you feel petty worthless... People that went to your middle school, and yet now attend a world-class university such as Berkeley or Stanford at the age of 14. People that have founded their own companies at the age of 15. There are so many of these people that it's become normal. These people aren't the exception... Many times it gets to be way too much."

Her anecdotes are backed up by disturbing figures. In 2009, there was a suicide cluster when three Palo Alto teenagers from the same high school killed themselves. Between October 2014 and March 2015, three students and one recent graduate from Palo Alto's two high schools took their own lives. The two schools have a 10-year suicide rate four to five times the national average.

At a public meet in March 2015, Denise Herrmann, the principal at Henry M. Gunn High School, revealed the extent of the mental health issues on her school's campus. In the first three

months of the year, she reported 42 Gunn students had been hospitalised or treated for significant suicide ideation. At Palo Alto High School, principal Kim Diorio reported that 16 students had been hospitalised and 212 had been identified as high-risk or at-risk in the four days after another student's suicide.

All of which raises the question: could the young residents of Silicon Valley be inheriting the pressure of the region's ambitious culture?

In the wake of one death, Carolyn Walworth, a teenager at Palo Alto High School, wrote an open letter in Palo Alto Online in which she spoke about the "sorrows of young Palo Altans".

"I could go on in detail about the times I've had to [seek] urgent care because my stress and ensuing physical pain have been so concerning," wrote Carolyn. "I could tell you how I've missed periods because I've had so many tests to study for. I could express what it feels like to have a panic attack in the middle of a 30-person class and be forced to remain still.

"Students are gasping for air, lacking the time to draw a measly breath in."

Janelle Bull, who works at a family therapy clinic, says many of the young clients who come to her Silicon Valley office are struggling with troubling self-esteem issues.

"Suicide is something I deal with in my private practice on a daily basis," says Janelle. "Self-harm and cutting is also huge in the Valley. Recently, we have had two teens commit suicide from a high-end school because they did not get into the college of their choice. Ambition is an understatement. Drive, competition, winning and unique thinking is honoured here."

On online forums like Ask.fm, teens talk about the exhaustion they feel from trying to 'do it all'. It's not just about graduating with perfect As, but also being the best at a host of extracurricular activities, from coding classes and junior hackathons to activities like "underwater distance training" (in June 2015 a teenage boy nearly drowned in the swimming pool at Palo Alto Hills Golf and Country Club practising the latter).

Being top of your class doesn't just mean acing a maths test – it means making your first million. In a 2014 LinkedIn blog post, a US venture capitalist at Foundation Capital, Paul Holland, observed that "15 is the new 25" as Gen Y enter the rat race earlier and earlier.

"Last month, Foundation Capital hosted FCT3, an event where more than 20 high school kids got a platform to talk about their vision for the future of technology," wrote Paul. "As we sat and listened to them, it crossed my mind that these kids sounded a lot like the 25-year-olds I used to know back when I started my career... They're building apps, starting companies, creating working prototypes and getting the biggest names in Silicon Valley to hire them."

Whilst an entrepreneurial streak in anyone of any age is laudable, is every

teenager ready to enter the cut-throat world of business – or could it be a case of too much, too soon?

Jenny Du, 18, lived in the valley between the ages of two and 12, when her mum worked for a tech company and her father was a post-doc researcher.

"When I was little, my mum always told me about workplace dramas," reveals Jenny, "like the time her co-worker conned their three team members. She told me about how project managers took credit for other people's work. [It seemed like] you had to be dishonest to get ahead."

Jenny also believes the speed of Silicon Valley can affect the wellbeing of youngsters who live there.

"In the Bay Area, everything moves faster," she says. "The curriculum at school is more advanced than in other regions, companies rise and fall quickly and even the traffic can be stressful. My advice to parents would be to make time for family. Work is the most common reason people move to Silicon Valley, but it can eat up your time to the point where kids may feel neglected."

So, what can be done to ease this sense of isolation and anxiety? At the Valley's Monta Vista High School, a group of students run a monthly magazine called

Verdadera, dedicated to promoting honest expression and mental health amongst classmates. Articles have investigated topics such as, "Are we overscheduled" and "Where do our fears for the future come from?"

They aren't the only teens finding creative ways to spread a positive message. In September 2015, a group of Palo Alto and Gunn High School students premiered *Unmasked*, a documentary about mental health they had created.

Meanwhile a 16-year-old student

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from Gunn High School, Martha Cabot, became a local sensation with 84,000 hits when she recorded a three-minute YouTube video criticising her school's high expectations.

"The amount of stress on a student is ridiculous," said Martha. "Students feel the constant need at our school to keep up with all the achievements. Even if we do get into a great university, who says we can even pay for it once we get in?"

Since then Martha, along with Gunn High School English teacher Marc Vincenti, launched a campaign called 'Save the 2008' (the number refers to the combined total of Gunn students and teachers at the school). As part of a six-point plan they advocate for "friendlier" class sizes, for teachers to moderate the amount of homework and to end the "climate of rampant cheating". >

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They also, controversially, asked for the school to ban mobile phone use in an effort to make classrooms more lively and personal.

Of course, it's not just Silicon Valley where young people are vulnerable. Parents everywhere face a difficult dilemma – how do you encourage ambition without damaging an individual's self-esteem? How can you push without pushing too far?

The answer seems to be all about balance. A growing number of schools within the wider Valley and beyond are now including meditation classes in their syllabus.

Sydney-based personal trainer Ben Ezekiel believe it's essential to provide young people with outlets for stress. He is working with Sydney schools to implement a 'BeFit Teenz' program to encourage children to put the word 'friendly' back into competition. After visiting schools with a team of mental health professionals, he noticed that children fell into two camps – the naturally sporty kids, or children who avoided sport all together.

"There didn't seem to be the same passion for sociable exercise we had as children," says Ben. "We know there is a correlation between endorphins and positive mental health benefits, but we had to find a way to encourage exercise without just adding another pressure.

"The biggest message we push is that it's not about competing with the person next to you. It's not about competing against the campaign of the soccer team. It's about what benchmarks you can set yourself which you can then overcome tomorrow and the next day. It's about

trying to exceed your own expectations rather than someone else's."

It seems clear that, just as with adults, every child has a different level of resilience. Some will respond to tough love, whilst others need a gentle approach, just as some will thrive under pressure and others will flounder.

And despite the serious issues, every student and expert interviewed for this article was also quick to applaud certain aspects of living in the Valley. In fact, the reasons they love Valley life seem to overlap with the reasons they sometimes struggle to live there.

"Even though it has its drawbacks and does take a toll on some of its residents, it's the only place in the world where you can find that level of ambition, talent and opportunity," says Jenny, whose family moved to a small town near St Louis before settling in Los Angeles. "If you want to try ballet dancing, fencing, Chinese brush painting, or literally anything you could possibly want to try, you can find it in Silicon Valley. If I had a choice I'd go back there in a heartbeat." 📌