Introducing Natasha Devon, MBE

Natasha Devon MBE is a mental health campaigner, writer and speaker. Natasha delivers talks to schools and colleges across the UK as well as conducting research on mental health, body image, gender and social equality. Currently Natasha has a weekly column in the Times Educational Supplement and writes regularly for the Guardian. In 2015 she was awarded an MBE for her services to young people and in 2016 the Sunday Times and Debrett’s named her one of the 500 most influential people in Britain. Natasha also regularly speaks at Parliament and gives evidence to the Education and Health Select Committees, representing the interests of teenagers and teachers.

As a member of the Men & Boys Coalition, Natasha specifically consults with them on reducing the rates of male suicide in the UK. Natasha is also a patron for the charity No Panic, which provides advice and support for people struggling with anxiety, and she is a certified instructor for Mental Health First Aid England and the eating disorder charity Beat.


Top 12 Takeaways from the ‘Get a Grip’ Blog with Natasha Devon, MBE.

1. From Natasha’s extensive experience she strongly feels the label ‘snowflake generation’ is divisive and unfair. She feels young people have more awareness and vocabulary around mental health and also face new challenges which make it more difficult for this generation to enjoy good mental health.
2. Natasha highlights research reported from the University of Bath in 2018, which found young people are terrified of failure. Natasha explains young people find the world incredibly competitive and that their every move is documented and recorded on social media. This means that there is no room for mistakes or experimenting and teenagers feel they must get it right first time.
3. Since the education reforms in 2010 – when core subjects were pushed and sports, arts and PSHE were squeezed – if a child is not traditionally academically bright, their talents are no longer recognised in school, undermining their self-esteem. These reforms were introduced alongside more testing and more stringent methods of school assessment, meaning that schools’ reputations hang on the performance of the children in tests. This has led to many children telling Natasha that for them school feels like an exam factory.
4. Parents can help children navigate this toxic mix of school pressure, fear of failure and social media by working in tandem with schools. In some schools for example they have held a meeting for parents in each year group and collectively agreed a switch off time for social media so that parents across a year group consistently have the same rule about when devices are turned off.
5. Natasha advises that parents ask the children and young people to show them what they are looking at on their devices. At a young age children typically enjoy showing and educating their parents.
6. It is important to talk to children about mental health including self-harm and suicide. Natasha highlights that there is no evidence to suggest that talking appropriately about self-harm or suicides increases risk. However, talk about suicide or self-harm should be about why it happens not the mechanics of how it is done, as this can be triggering.
7. Building on advice from Samaritans, Natasha suggests explaining that suicide not a decision but is a result of illness. We can explain to children and young people that if we try to think our feelings away they tend to build and build increasing in distress until a crisis point is reached. If the build-up of distress exceeds someone's resources to manage the distress then they can feel overwhelmed and think they have no way out. Without the right support or treatment the illness, in the worst case, can lead to death, just like if a cut is not treated it can, in the worst case, lead to blood poisoning and death.

8. Keeping the doors of communication open and, early on, getting into the routine of talking about feelings is incredibly important. Natasha gives an example of a Dad asking his primary school aged daughter every day ‘what was the best thing about today? What was the worst thing? How can we make it even better?’ This sends a message to his daughter that she can talk about the best and worst parts of her experience and he wants to support her in overcoming any difficulties.

9. Natasha also advises that due to our limited vocabulary for emotional states we sometimes assume we know what children mean when they say ‘worried’ or ‘upset’. Never assume, be curious and ask questions ‘so what does that feel like?’ or ‘can you feel it in your body’. Often tummy pains in children can be a sign of anxiety. Sometimes we think mental health is only relevant to those with mental illness, but by attending to our mental health we can reduce mental illness. Natasha often finds the term ‘Mental Fitness’ is helpful when talking to young people, especially boys, and teaching them ways to keep good mental fitness.

10. For adolescent girls, Natasha observes that there is a close correlation between body image and mental health and stresses that it is important for girls to know they are more than their bodies, as well as appreciating and valuing their bodies. Natasha highlights that in our culture girls are likely to be socialised to outsource their self-esteem. Through the way we tend to praise girls for being helpful or looking a certain way, we teach girls to search for compliments and validation. Then with social media girls are very often desperate for 'likes'. In world where girls feel like the main thing they are valued for is their appearance (a recent Girl Guiding study showed this), parents need to repeatedly contradict this message – so if a girl is praised for looking beautiful also add praise for an achievement or character trait.

11. For adolescent boys, shame triggers are more strength based than appearance based. Therefore most boys want to be perceived as strong. Talking about feelings or asking for help is often not regarded as strong, however, parents need to repeatedly redefine strength. For example, find ways to send the message ‘it takes courage and is strong to talk about feelings and to reach out for help’.

Follow Natasha Devon, MBE:

✓ Website: https://www.natashadevon.com/

✓ Latest Book: A Beginner's Guide to Being Mental, an A-Z by Natasha Devon


Resources Recommended by Natasha Devon, MBE:

More are listed on Natasha’s website, but those mentioned in the Get a Grip Blog -

Childnet Resources: https://www.childnet.com/resources

Time to Change: https://www.time-to-change.org.uk