

THE TROUBLED TEEN EPIDEMIC

As figures reveal that 10 per cent of young people are diagnosed with serious mental disorders, Fabulous investigates the teen health crisis **By Eimear O'Hagan**

Katie Bambrough is an 18-year-old trainee nursery nurse who likes shopping at New Look, watching *Gossip Girl* and hanging out with friends. So far, so typical teenage girl. But Katie has also attempted suicide five times, been hospitalised, and has been under psychiatric care since she was 14.

She has self-harmed, suffered from anorexia and depression, and been diagnosed with mood and temperament disorders, meaning she struggles to control her emotions, is impulsive and is prone to severe mood swings.

Her story, though shocking, is not unique. Katie, from Southampton, is one of tens of thousands of UK teens struggling with mental health issues.

According to mental health charity YoungMinds, in the UK 850,000 children and young people aged 5-16 have a diagnosed mental health problem. That's around 10 per cent of young people, or three in every classroom, who are being treated for conditions including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. And, worryingly, these figures are on the rise – research found that teens in the mid '00s were twice as likely to frequently feel depressed or anxious than those growing up in the mid '80s*.

Dr Richard Graham, a child and adolescent consultant psychiatrist at the Capio Nightingale Hospital, London, says that never before have young people in this country been under such pressure at what is a naturally vulnerable time of their life. "With most mental health disorders, there is a genetic influence, but genetics can't be solely responsible for these high rates of diagnosis. There's a definite relationship to the world young people are living in," he says.

"Academic demands, concerns about body image and family issues like divorce are all massive pressures. But now social media – and the competitive popularity and online bullying that goes with it – can add to their worries. Some teenagers can't cope and their mental health suffers."



Katie is one of the 850,000 young people in the UK suffering with mental health issues

For Katie, it was a desire to do everything perfectly that triggered her problems. "From the age of 11, all that mattered was being the best I could be," she says. "I was at the top of the class, but I wanted not just to be clever, but to have lots of friends and a good image, too."

"When I was 13, the pressure I was putting myself under just got too much and cutting myself with a razor became my way of coping," she says.

Katie's parents, Nicola, 41, a stay-at-home mum, and Alan, 46, a tyre fitter, found out about her

self-harming when she was 14, after a friend spotted her scars and told a teacher. They begged her to stop, so Katie began to restrict her eating as a new way of controlling her feelings.

"In five months, I dropped 2st, going from 8st 7lb to 6st 7lb – too small for my 5ft 3in frame. My GP diagnosed me with anorexia and referred me to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), which is run by the NHS."

For two years, Katie was treated by psychiatrists and teen mental health specialists for anorexia, and was diagnosed with depression.

"I wasn't prescribed medication – instead, I had to go to therapy sessions twice a week, one with a counsellor and one with a mental health nurse," she says.

"I missed a lot of school and had no social life, as I was too low to leave the house. I felt as if I was on the outside of teenage life, looking in."

When Katie was 16, she began experiencing very high and low moods, which left her suicidal. "One day I was manically happy, the next I was inconsolable or angry, screaming at friends or family," she recalls.

She took five overdoses between the ages of 16 and 17, and had to be hospitalised each time.

"I didn't want to die, I just wanted an escape from my feelings," she explains. "I hated the life mental illness was forcing me to live."

"I could see my parents and younger brother Thomas, now 15, were worried. They explained they were scared and confused, and didn't know what to do to help. Like most families, they had no idea problems like this could affect us. But I felt helpless – I wasn't choosing to behave how I was. I felt guilty, but I didn't know what to do."

Katie missed a lot of school and also lost friends. "I frightened

people because I'd have unpredictable moods, and when I was angry and upset, I'd end up screaming, crying, or locking myself away. So, some of my friends cut off contact," she says. "It did make me sad, but I was so trapped in my own world that it was hard to fully understand it."

Lucie Russell, a spokesperson for YoungMinds, believes that early recognition and treatment of mental health issues is essential in cases like Katie's, and is the key to not only helping today's teenagers, but to preventing future generations from suffering needlessly.

"The longer mental health problems go untreated, the more deeply entrenched they become," she explains. "Without access to early treatment,

'WE NEED TO TEACH YOUNG PEOPLE HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS'

teenagers will turn into mentally ill adults who can't lead normal lives or contribute to society, and it will cost the country a fortune to care for them.

"But often, the early signs of struggles can go unnoticed by parents, teachers and youth workers, because it isn't on their radar to look out for mental health issues. We need to make adults more aware."

Lucie adds that there's also preventative work to be done long before a young person becomes unwell.

"We need to start by teaching young children how to cope with stress, give them skills to be emotionally resilient, and to make it OK for them to admit how they're feeling," she says.

Danni Leadbetter would have been a prime candidate for such preventative work. The 16 year old from Warwickshire was diagnosed with severe depression in April 2011, following the breakdown of her parents' marriage and her dad's move to another part of the country.

"At first, I thought my constant crying was just a reaction to Dad leaving, but soon I could see it wasn't a normal sadness," says Danni. "It felt like I was being suffocated by a darkness and there didn't seem to be a point to anything. My mum was worried and confused, and unsure of how best to help me."

After a month, Danni's mum, Jo, 41, a stay-at-home mum, took her to see her GP, who diagnosed Danni with depression and referred her to a psychiatrist.

"I was put on antidepressants and had to attend weekly therapy sessions at a psychiatric clinic for seven months before I felt well enough to stop both," says Danni. "In the sessions, we talked about my feelings. I thought I'd let my parents down by not being able to cope, but the treatment helped me see I'd reacted to a very traumatic experience, and the depression wasn't my fault."

"I still went to school most days, but I rarely socialised because I couldn't pretend I was happy. Before I became ill, I'd heard people at school make nasty comments about mental illness, so I only told my best friends what I was going through. But they were kind and supportive – and I've realised keeping quiet isn't good. That's why people like me need to show other teens they're not alone. Adults need to take teenage mental health seriously, too, as often they're not aware of the warning signs that a young person is struggling."

"I feel back to my old self now, and am studying hard at school because I want to become a psychologist and help other teens like me." ➔



Katie aged 13, when she began self-harming