Lifelines (Kapaszkodók) for Preserving Young People's Mental Health

Concerns over young people's mental health are on the rise, as a host of statistics demonstrate. Our foundation has witnessed the severity of these issues firsthand, and we feel we cannot ignore these troubling trends. Committed to halting adverse developments, we will publish several articles each month until July under the banner of **KAPASZKODÓ**, providing practical advice—literal lifelines—for parents, teachers, and peer supporters seeking to safeguard young people's mental well-being.

Our introductory article explains why we launched this series in the spirit of social responsibility and outlines the themes readers can expect in the future.

A Shocking Snapshot of Young People's Mental State

Regrettably, statistics documenting anxiety symptoms and deteriorating mental health among adolescents are worsening worldwide, across the European Union, and here at home. The pandemic has exacerbated depressive symptoms across all age groups in Europe, yet the rise among young people was twice as high as in older generations. (*Health at a Glance: Europe 2022 | OECD*) Similarly troubling findings appear in the UNICEF 2024 report: among children in the EU, 13%—i.e., one in five respondents in the 10–19 age group—were found to have some form of mental health issue. Four percent of those aged 15–19 suffer from depression. In 2020 alone, 931 young people in the European Union took their own lives—about 18 deaths per week. In Hungary, since COVID, there has been a drastic increase in self-harm (cutting) and suicidal tendencies among young people, adding to the longstanding challenges posed by incidents of aggression and bullying, both online and face-to-face. TikTok challenges often lead teenagers into life-threatening scenarios—situations they accept rather than risk social isolation within their peer groups. A 2022 health behavior study conducted by ELTE showed that problematic social media use affects nearly 13% of students. The same study found that one in six young people—14.4%—are at risk of depressive moods, with an even higher proportion (25.2%) experiencing general distress in 2022. The research also indicates that 20.1% of students are less satisfied with their lives than average. Some

argue that the public education system places overwhelming pressure on adolescents, while others believe Generation Z simply lacks the coping skills of earlier generations. Whatever the root cause, nearly two-thirds of school-age children feel at least somewhat burdened by academic expectations, and every tenth student (especially girls) finds them highly distressing.

Adding to the overall picture, school psychologists and family support services are overburdened, as is the broader system meant to address these problems. Under current conditions, there often isn't even enough time to recognize when a child is in crisis. Additionally, early prevention and the teaching of life management or preventive techniques have not become an established part of teacher training.

We Heard Young People's Message at the Foundation

Warnings from those close to young people reached us through multiple channels, but it was our most recent youth video essay competition that gave us direct insight into the significance of these issues for young people's lives.

In our 2024 competition, **"May the Future Be with You 3.0,"** we noticed a marked increase in submissions focusing on well-being compared to previous years. These short films, created by young producers, depict a notably darker overall picture of the challenges facing the emerging generations. According to the filmmakers, almost all of these obstacles relate to being online. Their work frequently addresses fear of the future, cybercrime, online abuse, manipulation, and cybersecurity. The problems of alcohol and drug use also appear, alongside the mental health ramifications of "always being online," including digital addiction, chasing likes, social isolation, depression, panic disorders, disordered behavior, and sleep disturbances. We particularly recommend two winning entries that convey messages from and to young people—in a language their peers and the adult world alike can understand. (*"Akarsz róla beszélni?" ["Do You Want to Talk About It?"], "A jövő gonoszAI" ["The Evil AI of the Future"]*)

The Foundation's staff took these messages to heart. We refuse to turn a blind eye to the problem and, within our means, are actively exploring interventions that could help reverse these negative trends. We believe school support staff, teachers, and peers should do the same.

What We Can Do: Offer a Lifeline

We believe in thinking collectively. Apart from family, both the school setting and peer groups can (and should) serve as mental health resources. No one is alone—yet we also see that even the most supportive environments often lack clear knowledge of warning signs or an understanding of what to do, where to turn, and how to act when trouble arises—or how to prevent crisis situations in the first place. With this in mind, we are launching a series of articles titled **Lifelines** for anyone unwilling to remain passive and who is determined to act. Our articles will address a variety of questions, ranging from preventive mental health techniques and self-help strategies to classroom-based life skills instruction and possible therapeutic interventions. Our authors are not mental health professionals; they are teachers who work with expert materials, gathering essential information, resources, organizations, websites, and online content that can guide parents, teachers, and peer supporters in taking action.

With a practical, user-focused perspective, we explore questions such as:

• What should a parent do if they suspect their child's mental health is faltering?

• What are typical warning signs?

• What can a teacher do upon noticing a student with mental health challenges in class?

• How can a homeroom teacher promote students' mental well-being?

• What steps can young people themselves take if they notice a classmate in emotional distress?

• How can a teenager help themselves? Are there tried-and-tested methods for self-help and fostering mental health?

After studying the Carpe Diem Foundation's *Arany Iránytű* ("Golden Compass") program, which supports youths dealing with mental difficulties, we realized the following: teenagers who are persistently anxious or struggling with academic or family trauma, sometimes experiencing full-blown depression, invest their mental energy in an invisible inner battle. They are not in a receptive state for learning, community engagement, or adopting the post-material values of well-being. As long as they remain in this condition, they cannot develop a stable vision of the future or succeed academically, and any social effort to integrate them is bound to fail. (See Glashütter Melinda – Bognár Roman: *The Compass of Love. The Golden Compass Program*, p. 131.)

The next two articles in our series will examine why children and adolescents today experience so much anxiety, which typical stress factors the literature identifies, and what actions we can take at home, in school, and among friends to alleviate these pressures.

If you appreciate our work and support our goals, please share this information with parents, educators, and young people. Let's join forces to strengthen the bonds of responsibility we share for one another!

We wish everyone an informative and rewarding read!

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References and Sources

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