

'It's so easy for people to turn a blind eye as it's not a visible illness'

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A young man from Liverpool wants more support to be given to teenagers who experience depression.

Fixer Michael Aston, 19, feels this serious illness is too often dismissed by adults as "typical teenage rebellion".

Now, with support from Fixers, the national movement of young people 'fixing the future', he is campaigning to help teachers get a better understanding of the illness.

"I first experienced depression when I was 15," says Michael, a performing arts student at The Arts Centre, Liverpool Community College. "At school they just didn't understand what was wrong with me. And they didn't offer me the help that I needed.

"When I was at my lowest I didn't understand that it was depression. I think because so many people had said to me, 'Oh, you're attention seeking', 'You're a drama queen', 'You're a crank', I just believed it myself.

"Eventually my parents sent me to a psychotherapist which helped a lot. I went to therapy for a year and it was then that I realised properly that I was depressed and not just being a drama queen."

A report about Michael's campaign will feature on ITV Granada Reports on Thursday 6 June from 6pm.

Dr Mike Smith, Clinical Director of Mental Health Services at Alternative Futures Group, says depression in teenagers is a growing problem.

"With teenagers we know that the severe depression exists in 12 per cent, that's one in eight people, and we know it's just the tip of the iceberg," he says.

"Confusing the normal angst and turmoil of emotions that is being a teenager with moderate and severe depression is a problem. It is very important that people understand it, because the third biggest killer of children in the UK is suicide."

Michael says depression often isn't treated as a serious illness – but should be. "If someone has a broken leg or an eating disorder you can see a change in them and know that they are unwell and you wouldn't look at them negatively.

"But depression has such a negative stigma attached to it – and it's so easy for people to turn a blind eye as it's not a visible illness.

"Schools in particular need to be more aware of the symptoms of depression in young people. With me, teachers and school friends just thought I was being a dramatic teenager – but actually it's a very serious mental illness."

Fixers is a charity which supports thousands of young people across the UK to take action and change things for the better, addressing any issue they feel strongly about.

How each Fixer tackles an issue is up to them – as long as they benefit someone else.

The award-winning Fixers project has already supported 7,700 young people across the UK to have an authentic voice in their community.

Now, thanks to a grant from the Big Lottery Fund, Fixers aims to work with a further 20,000 young people over the next three years.

Fixers is a project of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), a charity that brings together mainstream broadcasters, public and voluntary sector services, and viewers.

"Fixers started in 2008 as just an idea... an idea given a voice by 7,700 young people over the past five years," says Margo Horsley, Chief Executive of PSBT.

“They have reached thousands of people with their work, on a national stage as well as in and around where they live. They choose the full array of social and health issues facing society today and set about making their mark. Fixers are always courageous and their ideas can be challenging and life-changing, not just for themselves.”

Peter Ainsworth, Big Lottery Fund UK Chair, said: “The Big Lottery Fund is extremely proud to be supporting Fixers to engage with more young people to change things for the better. Fixers has a tremendous potential – one young person’s initial idea can be transformed into reality, spread across a community and make a positive influence on a wide range of people. There are thousands of young people campaigning to make improvements in their neighbourhoods and Fixers provides a platform to highlight their voluntary work and many achievements.”

For images, interviews or more information, please contact Sue Meaden in the Fixers Communications Team by email sue@fixers.org.uk or phone 01962 810970.

There are lots more stories about young people doing great things on the Fixers website, Twitter and Facebook pages:

<http://www.fixers.org.uk>

<http://www.twitter.com/FixersUK>

<http://www.facebook.com/FixersUK>

Notes to editors:

- Fixers started in England in 2008. Now with a £7.2 million grant from the Big Lottery Fund, Fixers is extending into Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. To date, over 7,700 young people across the UK have become Fixers and created over 900 projects.
- The Public Service Broadcasting Trust is a charity that brings together mainstream broadcasters, public and voluntary sector services, and viewers.
- The Big Lottery Fund (BIG), the largest distributor of National Lottery good cause funding, is responsible for giving out 40% of the money raised for good causes by the National Lottery.
- BIG is committed to bringing real improvements to communities and the lives of people most in need and has been rolling out grants to health, education, environment and charitable causes across the UK since June 2004. The Fund was formally established by Parliament on 1 December 2006.
- Since the National Lottery began in 1994, 28p from every pound spent by the public has gone to good causes. As a result, over £29 billion has now been raised and more than 383,000 grants awarded across arts, sport, heritage, charities, health, education and the environment.

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