

ADOLESCENT BREAKDOWN AND BEYOND

edited by
Moses Laufer

for the Brent Adolescent Centre/
Centre for Research into Adolescent Breakdown



ADOLESCENT BREAKDOWN AND BEYOND

Also from the Brent Adolescent Centre/Centre for Research
into Adolescent Breakdown:

The Suicidal Adolescent, edited by Moses Laufer

Also by Moses Laufer (with M. Eglé Laufer):

Adolescence and Developmental Breakdown

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Moses Laufer

for the Brent Adolescent Centre/
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INTRODUCTION

This monograph includes chapters addressing the theme of adolescence and developmental breakdown, together with the proceedings of a conference on "Adolescent Breakdown and Beyond", held in October 1995 in London.

Acute mental breakdown in adolescence can have profound consequences for the whole present and future life of the person. However, it often goes unnoticed or ignored, in the silent hope that the person will "grow out of it". But this is a hope that is unrealistic. From our work with adolescents who have experienced a breakdown, it is clear that they are in urgent need of psychological help. To "wait and see" can mean that a vital or last chance to help has been lost.

The guilt and the fear about breakdown that is present in the lives of many young people and in their parents often stand in the way of acknowledging the urgency of appropriate help.

The Brent Adolescent Centre is a preventive mental health service, which is supported by public funds and by private Trusts

and Charities. The Centre for Research into Adolescent Breakdown aims to study adolescent mental health problems and ways of preventing mental disorder among young people.

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Editor's note

For the sake of simplicity, we have used the masculine pronoun where adolescents in general are discussed.

PART ONE

THE ADOLESCENT
AND DEVELOPMENTAL
BREAKDOWN



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CHAPTER ONE

Developmental breakdown in adolescence: problems of understanding and helping

Moses Laufer

“Developmental breakdown” represents a concern that remains central to our work at the Brent Adolescent Centre. And this concern, which must certainly be shared by anybody who works with the troubled adolescent, can be summarized as follows: how do we know when to be worried, and when is help urgent? Implied in this is that there are adolescents who may be troubled but about whom we need not be especially concerned, whereas there is a group of adolescents whose troubles represent signs of a serious disorder or, at least, of the likelihood of severe mental disturbance in the near-present or in the future. It is this latter group on whom I would like to concentrate, because they are the ones whose emotional lives—and often actual lives—are seriously at risk, and who must not be left with the unreal hope that they will grow out of it. Our experience shows that these adolescents do not “grow out of it” but remain emotionally damaged at the least and actually develop towards mental illness at the worst, if they are left on their own. With help at the right time, we think that some of these adolescents can be helped greatly, often with the possibility of reversing the move towards the firm establishment of severe disorder.

I would like to begin with an observation that ultimately brought me to the idea of "developmental breakdown" and has, over a period of years, made me dissatisfied with the often-used explanations or classifications when describing certain serious signs of mental disturbance among adolescents. Some time ago a very simple fact impressed me, a fact that I had obviously known about for many years but one that I—as many others—preferred to deny and avoid understanding. It was this: it seemed that the reported incidence of suicide or attempted suicide increased rapidly in adolescence and, linked to this observation, it seemed also that the conscious decision to kill oneself did not exist as a "social problem" before adolescence. From this, and from our shared experience at our Centre, I realized that the same observation or question could be asked about so many adolescents: why the sudden signs of mental illness, which are diagnosed as schizophrenia; why anorexia in adolescence, and not at all the same incidence in childhood; why drug addiction in the adolescent, or promiscuity, or severe depression, or signs of sexual abnormality, or the violence that is not the result of a social norm but is given impetus by the private "voices" or by the need to keep out of consciousness the feeling of being abnormal—and the list can certainly be extended. But by saying that the list can be extended, I do not mean that we should include every form of stress in every crisis, with the likely result that we do not then differentiate between normal stress and signs of developmental breakdown. I will come back to this when talking about criteria that can help us judge when to be worried.

It was the observations to which I referred a moment ago that made me think that there are not only new stresses following physical sexual maturity but that it may well be that the period which we call adolescence is a time of special vulnerability to breakdown. When I talk of the period of adolescence, I have in mind the time from puberty to about the age of 21. I begin with puberty because it is the time when the person not only has a physically mature body but is able either to impregnate or become pregnant—a fact that must always be kept in the forefront of our thinking when trying to make any sense of behaviour, thoughts, wishes, fears, or hopes of the adolescent. I date the end of adoles-