

## Interview with Ernesto Gutiérrez Crespo, the facilitator of the workshop on managing anxiety and emotional distress: tools for working with young people



### **Is emotional distress among adolescents really as worrying as it seems to be nowadays?**

Indeed, this problem has become more pronounced after the COVID-19 epidemic. The figures are clear: according to a survey of more than 40,000 young Spaniards, 15 per cent of Spanish adolescents have symptoms of severe or moderately severe depression (UNICEF 2022). In the Basque Country, according to data from the Youth Observatory (2022), one in ten young people aged 15 to 29 say they have symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. The evidence is there, and not only the institutions but society as a whole needs to reflect deeply on this issue. There is also the underlying problem of a shortage of public resources to care for young people with mental health and emotional distress issues. This problem affects professionals working in formal and non-formal educational institutions, who often feel overwhelmed by this issue and do not know how to deal with it.

### **Is it possible to work on the prevention of emotional distress and anxiety?**

Of course. There is a perceived urgency to address emerging emotional problems, but we need education in socio-emotional management from the preschool stage onwards so that young people have a sufficiently solid toolkit to deal with emotionally challenging situations by the end of compulsory secondary education. Socio-emotional skills can and should be developed in the educational environment because the laws in this sector support this (LOMLOE). However, this type of

education has not yet become sufficiently widespread in day-to-day school life. In addition, a significant percentage of teachers and educational agents working with young people lack training in this field.

### **Can we help young people cope with hard times in life?**

We all know that life will be challenging at times, on an emotional level, due to various circumstances. We cannot control many of these circumstances (loss of loved ones, physical illness...), but other situations generate excessive discomfort unrelated to the objective event that has caused them. There is a well-known saying: "Things are not as they are, but as we are".

In these circumstances, young people must have tools for emotional self-management to help them deal with situations that generate frustration or anxiety. In particular, it is important that they develop resilience to frustration, which is also something that can be learned.

These tools are as necessary for life as acquiring intellectual skills. Neuroscience has also proven that there can be no learning without emotion: emotion and learning are not watertight compartments. Research has shown that developing student skills linked to social-emotional well-being and mental healthcare are key factors in protecting students from suicide and promoting personal well-being.

### **What are the main aspects to consider to prevent emotional distress and anxiety?**

On the one hand, young people need to be aware of the circumstances that cause their emotional discomfort and how they react to them. In other words, they must learn to be self-aware. That is the first step. Then, they must also learn prevention and coping strategies to deal with emotional distress when it overwhelms them. We can also help with this, and we must also stress the importance of asking for help because many people fail to do so due to the social stigma attached to mental illness or emotional distress.

In addition, we will discuss how to work with young people on some variables that have been shown to promote resilience and coping with distress, including self-esteem, cognitive flexibility, self-control, conflict management, empathy and others.

We shall provide psycho-educational guidelines and strategies to work on these aspects with young people.