

SOUSTER YOUTH ISSUE #5

ARTICLES, NEWS & INSPIRATION

Meet Ian

Open
the jar

No drama,
it's drama!

Anxiety
and the
smoke
alarm

The
ask-it
basket

We're
hiring!

JUNE 2023



Director's Letter

Welcome to our latest newsletter, packed full of engaging stories from our recent work with young people and our latest thinking.

In "Open the Jar", Anna explores the power of empathy in helping young people. It's not about taking sides; it's about fostering an environment for growth and understanding.

Tim shines a light on anxiety, particularly performance anxiety in "Anxiety and the smoke alarm". He offers practical advice and reassures us that feeling anxious sometimes is part of being human.

"No drama, it's drama", takes you to our drama group at Prince William School. Here, a shared passion for drama has sparked important conversations about life, relationships, and wellbeing among our young people.

"The ask-it basket" details our journey from a casual question about pasta to profound discussions about life, wealth, and faith. It underscores that the power of questioning can inspire young minds and stimulate curiosity.

These articles have a common thread. They highlight the importance of engaging young people in meaningful conversations. Whether seemingly trivial or complex, their questions unlock new understanding. Responding with empathy and respect allows us to foster trust and mutual learning. It all starts with listening well.

We are proud of our work and its positive impact. We know the value of fostering open



conversations, promoting mental well-being, and supporting young people in their flourishing.

We're also excited to announce a job opening for maternity cover for my PA. This is a wonderful opportunity to join our brilliant team. You'll find more info on page 12. Do share this with others who may be interested.

Thanks for your support and interest in our work,

Jason

Jason Royce leads the work of Souster Youth.

Meet Ian



SY: Tell us about yourself.

I am married to Claire and we have three children in their 20s. I like running and am about to run my first half-marathon, as a late starter at the age of 57! I'm an optician and I attend a church in Raunds.

SY: What do you enjoy about volunteering?

I like being with the young people: having fun, engaging in conversation and hearing their stories, as well as listening (and sometimes madly dancing!) to music. I also enjoy being part of a fun team with a collaborative leader.

SY: So why Souster Youth?

Souster takes a holistic view of the wellbeing of young people: socially, spiritually and emotionally. This ties in with my own beliefs as to how to help a young person be the best person that they can be.

SY: What's been one highlight for you?

Through volunteering with Souster Youth I helped lead a course on 'sex and relationships' at a local school.

SY: What's one random/funny thing that has happened?

I invented a silly game involving a table tennis table and a large sponge football. The young people got so overexcited with it that they accidentally broke my glasses!

SY: Working with young people is like being an optician because...

No two eyes are ever exactly the same and no two young people are ever the same either!

“The young people got so overexcited with it that they accidentally broke my glasses!”

Could you be a volunteer?

Visit sousteryouth.org for more information or call us on 01832 735999.

“IT WAS LIKE BEING ABLE TO OPEN THE JAR”

Each term we support the social and emotional wellbeing of young people in schools. The Grow Intervention helps young people to open up and find coping strategies for the challenges that they face in life. **Anna Freij** shares about the impact upon one young person this term. >>

>>When Freddie* was referred to Souster Youth, he had been through a number of difficult circumstances over the past few years that were having a profound impact upon his wellbeing.

Freddie first started experiencing acute anxiety when he was in year 4. The pressures from his peers over social media left Freddie feeling worried that he could not be accepted by others. To make matters worse, someone who had previously been a friend to Freddie began severely bullying him online during the CV-19 lockdown.

Freddie had to move schools as his parents separated and each moved to a different part of the country. Freddie said their eventual divorce left him with "a black hole inside of me — I felt empty." Freddie found the move of location really difficult, especially leaving his friends behind. And then Freddie's grandfather passed away, compounding his experiences of grief and loss.

All of these experiences had a profound impact upon Freddie's wellbeing. When we began working with him he was having difficulty sleeping and our assessment indicated probable depression. He wanted to feel less anxious and to be more confident. We helped him process all that he had been through by giving Freddie space to mourn. He described this process as like "being able to open the jar [of grief]".

We also shared with Freddie techniques for helping with sleep and anxiety. He put these into practice very creatively, even imagining situations in which he might be anxious in order to try out the techniques. His sleep began to improve and this had a positive effect upon his mood and outlook.

Being part of an accepting group was also a significantly positive factor for Freddie. He told us afterwards: "It's really helped me having people I can trust." The group element is a powerful dynamic of the Grow Intervention. Freddie's experience reminds me of the importance to *mourn with those that mourn*¹.

Freddie sums up the changes in him like this: "I feel more confident and wake up looking forward to my day. I used to be upset every day before school but since this group I've not been upset before school once. I feel really hopeful."



Anna Freij is our Psychological Health Lead.

¹ Romans 12:15

QUOTES FROM THIS TERM

"It's been really helpful: it helps me control my anger using methods to relax. I have started to slow down when I feel angry; I understand what to do when that happens now."

"Before Souster, I had lots of behaviour points at school, but since this group I've hardly had any. I've been walking away from people that annoy me. My Mum is so pleased with me that she bought me a big tube of sweets!"

"Letting it all out has been good. It feels so much better talking about problems. It's been helpful knowing that it's okay to be sad, because other people get sad too."

"I used to be aggressive 24/7, but I've been more calm, chilled out. I've started to stop and think what I want to do and what decision I want to make. If it's my fault, I apologise. If it's not, I try to speak to the other person."

"It's been good, amazing. It's the best thing we have done in this school!"

*Name changed to protect anonymity.

ANXIETY AND THE SMOKE ALARM

When I was 7 years old I took my first piano exam. Can you remember being seven? I'd not long progressed from velcro to shoe laces. I opened the exam room door and I saw the biggest room I had ever seen in my life. It was a theatre hall, and it felt like... >>

>>...there were hundreds of steps down to reach a stage which had a piano and a piano stool. Next to them both was the examiner, watching, waiting for me.

I walked down the steps one by one. It felt like it took forever just to reach the stage. By the time I got there I was an anxious wreck. My hands were shaking. I felt lightheaded. I could feel my heart beating inside my chest and I was breathing so, so fast. I could barely remember my name, never mind how to play *Rondo alla Turca*¹.

What was happening to me? I was experiencing anxiety and it's actually a normal part of life. We all face things that make us feel anxious: whether it's an exam, or a sports game, or a school performance, or simply being in an unfamiliar situation. And anxiety in itself isn't bad— it's part of the *fight or flight* response that we all have as humans; it's the body's way of calling our attention to something that might be threatening to us, much like what a smoke alarm does.

A lot of the time this is a good thing. After all, smoke alarms save lives². The problem is that they sometimes also go off when we've simply burnt our toast. In the same way, anxiety becomes a problem when it becomes too intense or lasts too long— when it starts to interfere with our daily life.

Around 8% of 11-16 year olds have an anxiety disorder³. Anxiety disorders are more commonly diagnosed in girls than in boys and prevalence tends to increase as young people grow older. At age 18, a staggering 13% of young people are likely to be experiencing an anxiety disorder of some kind². This is when young people could be sitting their A-levels, college exams or doing an apprenticeship, for example.

I once actually called the police out at 3 o'clock in the morning to deal with a faulty smoke alarm. In the middle of the night, I heard a strange intermittent high-pitched beeping sound coming from my neighbour's garden. I tracked down the source of the sound to a black bin bag. My neighbour had moved out. No-one lived there any more. For some reason I suspected that it might have been an explosive device. Yes, that's right:

I thought it was a bomb! (The police officer reassured me that I'd "done the right thing"... what do you think!?).

We don't always think our clearest when we are experiencing anxiety. In fact, we're hardwired not to. When we're in the midst of that fight or flight reflex, we can't engage the more critical thinking processes that our brain usually does so well.

To think more clearly we need to reduce our anxiety level. There are things that you can do in the long term like talking to friends and loved ones, spending some time outdoors, doing hobbies that you enjoy, getting plenty of good rest, and chilled out activities like listening to music, doing some creative art or cuddling a pet. All of these activities can help lower our overall anxiety level so that when something comes along that might usually make us feel anxious, we feel more able to cope.

There are also things that we can do in the moment such as taking slow, deep breaths. We can bring our thoughts back into the present moment by using our senses and giving our brains something to focus upon. As an example, try listening out right now for five different sounds that you can hear.

Counter-intuitively, we often also need to face up to the things and situations that are causing our anxiety, but in a controlled bit-by-bit way. Avoiding situations because we are feeling anxious reinforces the danger of that situation to our brains, increasing the anxiety. When we face our fears (in a safe way and with the support of others), we conquer them.

If you know a young person who is affected by anxiety, there are many great sources of information and help out there. Souster Youth works with young people in local secondary schools who are experiencing anxiety. You can also get support and advice from charities such as Young Minds⁴, as well as going to see your local GP.



Tim Sandford is the Schoolswork Lead for Souster Youth.

¹ K. 331/300i. *This wasn't really one of my exam pieces, I can't remember what they were!*

² firekills.campaign.gov.uk

³ NHS Digital: *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England (2018)*.

⁴ www.youngminds.org.uk



THE ASK-IT BASKET

Many people think of Italy as the birthplace of pasta. Our Italian friends have certainly done some beautiful things with pasta; lasagne, ravioli, pasta al forno, gnocchi... they're all so good! However, pasta was most likely born in China and has a history spanning thousands of years.

I wonder, have you ever stopped to consider your favourite pasta shape?

This isn't a new cookery section in our newsletter. I've been thinking about pasta because a young person asked me a question about it. My favourite type of pasta is fusilli, mostly because of the pasta-based puns you can make whilst eating it ("*don't be so fusilli!*").

A question about favourite pasta shape, while seemingly light-hearted, suggests an inquisitive mind and indicates an interest in others.

Just like considering your favourite pasta shape can lead to a fascinating culinary journey, asking thought-provoking questions can guide our young people to important life realisations. Whether they are about pasta, personal beliefs, or the quest for success, questions pave the way for learning and growth. Let me share a recent experience we had in a classroom of a local school.

We asked year 9 students at a local school to send us questions they wanted to discuss. They came back with all sorts of brilliant questions, from questions

about pasta, to get-rich-quick schemes. The students also asked lots of questions about life and faith.

There were definitely some mischievous questions in there (and some that can't be repeated in a respectable publication like this one!). However, we tried to engage seriously with as many questions as possible. We found no reason why an enriching conversation shouldn't include topics as varied as hair care tips and the meaning of life!

Here are some of my favourite questions:

- Why did God create dangerous animals but does not want us to harm them?
- Can you have faith if you have doubts?
- What do you think about Qatar?
- What do you do when you question your faith?
- How do I become rich at a young age?
- Why should I have faith when there's no evidence for God?

These questions prompted conversations that don't seem to happen without a bit of encouragement. In the classes, we had free-flowing conversations as students responded to our answers. Instead of trying to get the students to think in exactly the same way as us, we were trying to stimulate their curiosity and give them food for thought.

In the first class, I was asked the question about becoming rich at a young age. I started by asking the students to draw themselves living 'the good life.' This



provoked a conversation about what matters most to them and whether the most valuable things in life can be purchased. Then I introduced them to the five different types of wealth (financial, social, physical, mental, and time) and had them rank themselves on each one. I asked the students if they might already be rich by virtue of living in the Western world. Some agreed, others still felt that a Bugatti would measurably improve their lives. At the end of the lesson, many still felt that wealth is an important aspect of a good life. Others left with an expanded view of what might bring value to life.

Another class spent more time discussing the evidence for God. We offered them two ideas that many Christians would find compelling; the natural world and the resurrection of Jesus. I asked the students what evidence would be enough to convince them—most said that seeing God face to face, or witnessing a miracle would remove all doubt.

Some of the students were even keen to carry on the conversations during breaktimes and lunches. It made me wonder whether more of these conversations would happen if there were more opportunities to have them in a safe way.

Our question and answer sessions with young people reminded me of a study by our friends at Youthscape and our experience chimed with much of what they found.

No Questions Asked¹ was a small-scale study, exploring 16 young people's big questions about God and religion. The study found little curiosity about these at first, with young people expressing little interest in some of the more abstract ideas we associate with apologetics and

evangelism. However, over the course of the interview (and with some gentle persistence) young people did engage with some familiar questions around God, life after death, evil and suffering, and the purpose of life.

The research confirmed previous studies that showed young people had low religious literacy, confused ideas about God, and were focused on the happiness of themselves and their immediate friends and family.

Another aspect of this study that resonates with us is the idea that many young people think that questioning beliefs is disrespectful. In our work, we find that many young people have learned the importance of respecting the beliefs and opinions of others. Yet it also seems to me that questioning beliefs is a really important part of finding the truth about almost anything. That's why I was keen to engage with as many questions as I possibly could, even the less serious ones. By engaging with the trivial questions, I think we earned the right to lead discussions on the questions that seemed to matter more. We created a safe and trusting environment.

This makes me ponder whether creating safer and more trusting spaces could enhance many conversations about the 'hot topics' in our culture. Respectful dialogue is so important, but perhaps it doesn't need to stifle proper debate (whether about pasta, or the existence of God).

For me, it highlights two things that seem important in these kinds of conversations; first, the importance of respectful dialogue and, second, a willingness to take the risk of sharing our opinion and opening up to challenge and debate. My experience in classrooms recently gives me hope for the future of these types of conversations and confirms the willingness of young people to have them.

Much like how a playful question about favourite pasta shapes can open doors to deeper discussions, the questions from the young people around you may be leading towards insightful conversations about life's significant issues.

What kinds of questions are being asked by the young people in your life?



Jason Royce leads the work of Souster Youth.

¹You can download and read 'No Questions Asked' at the website <https://www.youthscape.co.uk/research/publications>

WE'RE HIRING!

Ready for the next **step?**

PA/Office Manager
(Maternity cover from September)

£18,525-£21,000

We would consider part or full time, as well as flexible hours.

Could this be the moment for you to join us at Souster Youth?

Our Office Manager is going on maternity leave in September, however we know the value of good systems, procedures and administration. In fact, we see how it directly supports the work we do with young people.

As part of the job we want to help you to:

- Grow and develop
- Maximise your experience and talents
- Deepen your Christian faith
- Reach your full potential
- Thrive in this role

You'll find more information about this role on our website:
sousteryouth.org/work

Application deadline: **7th July 2023**
Interviews to be held on **19th July 2023**

SOUSTER YOUTH DEVELOPMENT YEAR

A voluntary year packed with youth ministry experience, theological development and character shaping.

sousteryouth.org/sy-development-year



Can you help us?

Souster Youth is on a mission to transform the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of young people aged 11-19 in east Northamptonshire.

Why? Because we know from recent academic studies that in the UK 1 in 6 young people have a mental health disorder; 1 in 5 girls, and 1 in 10 boys, self-harm, and 40% of young people often feel lonely.

Young people have incredible potential, but many won't achieve that potential without the help they need right now. Your support can help us increase what we are doing locally for young people.

Would you help us by giving to the work of Souster Youth? To do this, click [here](#) or [contact us](#) so we can send you a giving form.

Support us as you shop!

You can also support our work as you shop, and at no extra cost to yourself. We are signed up with Give as You Live.



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When you shop at over 4,000 top stores including John Lewis & Partners, Expedia and Marks & Spencer via Give as you Live Online, they'll turn a percentage of your spend into free funds for us! Simply sign up, search for the retailer and start shopping. It's that simple!



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