

## Project 3: Me and my anxiety: Understanding diagnosis-as-identity in adolescence.

### **Proposed supervisory team**

- Dr Lucy Foulkes
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### **Background and rationale**

Receiving a diagnosis is often a profound event, whether it is for a physical health problem, mental health problem or neurodevelopmental condition. When it explains longstanding, long-term symptoms and challenges, it can transform one's understanding and interpretation of the past, present and future. Existing research shows that such a diagnosis often becomes incorporated into a person's identity, becoming a fundamental part of who they are.

There has been limited research assessing this phenomenon relating to anxiety, particularly in school-age adolescents (11-18 years). This is surprising, given that this is a rapid period of identity development and given the specific context for adolescents today: adolescents receive an enormous amount of information about potential diagnoses, particularly anxiety, and many now self-diagnose. In parallel, stigma remains high, and adolescents are often judged by their peers for self-diagnosing, suggesting adolescents will have mixed feelings about any diagnosis. Academics and clinicians remain divided about to what extent the diagnosis-as-identity phenomenon is helpful or problematic for an individual, and very few studies have asked adolescents themselves what they think.

### **Proposed Research Aims**

This DPhil seeks to build a clearer, in-depth picture of the relationship between diagnosis and identity in adolescents. The focus is specifically on anxiety, a common mental health problem that leads many young people to self-diagnose and/or seek professional help. The wider aim is to generate findings that can help clinicians, parents and school staff support adolescents who self-diagnose or receive a clinical diagnosis of an anxiety disorder.

### **Potential Methodologies**

This is a mixed-methods project, using a combination of qualitative and experimental methodology. A particularly novel element is the use of longitudinal qualitative data, in which a small group of participants are interviewed at multiple time points across several years.