

# Could studying human origins help teenagers understand their complex emotions?

July 10 2019

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They were once considered our inferior, brutish relatives, but now researchers are using the story behind early humans to help teenagers understand their emotions.

A new web resource, developed by researchers at the University of York, is providing schools with the tools to allow young people to see what challenges the earliest human ancestors, or later relatives like the Neanderthals, would have faced in keeping their community healthy and fully functioning.

Dr. Penny Spikins, from the University of York's Department of Archaeology, said: "The web resource challenges our perceptions of the past as competitive, populated only by the strong and invulnerable, towards a more realistic version of prehistory in which individuals genuinely cared for each other, and where the support of differences and vulnerabilities made humans successful.

"The website includes an animated film which shows the distant past as imagined by a teenager living today, and then their journey to a real past, prompting them to think about the assumptions they make about what it is to be human.

"It also provides access to a series of teaching plans designed to be used or adapted in schools."

## **Depression and self-harm**

Rates of depression and [self-harm](#) in adolescents are at a global high. In the UK the proportion of 15/16 year olds reporting that they frequently feel anxious or depressed has doubled in the last 30 years.

Research has shown that it is in the adolescent years of life that complex emotional capacities and capacities for complex moral judgements develop. Experiencing gratitude, for example, is dependent on a complex system of mental abilities, and doesn't develop until around 11 years old, whilst self-control continues to develop into early adulthood.

Archaeologists at York investigated whether understanding these complex emotions could be better understood if schools could help young people explore where some of our emotional processes came from.

## **Cultural practice**

Dr. Spikins said: "Our research into our Neanderthal relatives, for example, revealed that they were not as brute-like and unfeeling as popular culture would have us believe.

"Findings related to cultural practices as well as evidence from skeletal remains, suggests that Neanderthals had a system of care for their sick and injured, as well as women who needed help in childbirth.

"This sort of care would have meant difficult strategic, as well as emotional, decisions had to be made, which impacted on an individual's relationship with others and ultimately their survival as a species.

"This made us wonder whether dispelling the myth that our evolutionary

past was defined by uncaring behaviours, would make us think differently about how we understand the decisions we make that impact on our own personal health and wellbeing today. In many ways talking about the distant past can also provide a safe place in which to discuss how complicated and difficult our emotions can be.

"Could understanding where your emotions come from validate the difficulties young people in particular face in making sense of how they feel?"

## **Archaeological record**

Dr. Spikins, project research assistant, Taryn Bell, and Animator at Hairy Stick Man Productions, Alexis Pantos, created a website with resources for schools and young people, covering topics such as diversity, support networks and overcoming difficult feelings.

School students, for example, can find a description of a Neanderthal suffering from severe disabilities along with evidence of the challenges faced, as noted in the [archaeological record](#), under the heading 'Did anyone care if someone was ill or vulnerable'?

These resources are designed to be used or adapted by teachers and educators with no prior knowledge of prehistory or archaeology. The website also includes lesson plans, Powerpoints and printable evidence for schools with fewer IT resources available.

## **Emotional complexities**

Dr. Spikins said: "With this resource, we want teenagers to come to their own conclusions rather than being told what to think. We want them to look at the evidence we have in the archaeological record and see what

they take from it that helps explain some of the emotional complexities of human beings today.

"For example 1.6 million years ago it would have been so much easier for the group of Homo ergaster to abandon a woman with hypervitaminosis—a condition where high levels of vitamins can prove toxic. We know, however, that they were prepared to risk being attacked by predators to look after her.

"We hope that this resource will task [young people](#) with asking—why? – and give them a chance to think about what this tells us about human life today."

**More information:** The project is available online:  
[www.hiddendepths.org/](http://www.hiddendepths.org/)

Provided by University of York

Citation: Could studying human origins help teenagers understand their complex emotions? (2019, July 10) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-human-teenagers-complex-emotions.html>

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