



# Silence as a support for adolescent mental health<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Contemporary youth is growing up in a reality shaped by noise, excess, and acceleration – both technologically and culturally. This noise is not confined to the acoustic dimension; it encompasses informational, emotional, and social overload that leads to disorientation, fatigue, and a diminished capacity for reflection and mindfulness. Drawing on Byung-Chul Han's (2022) conceptual framework, this article explores the conditions of youth within the paradigms of the society of exposure, control, dopamine, and intimacy – contexts in which young people are subjected to constant pressure to remain visible, reactive, and permanently present. Particular emphasis is placed on analyzing noise as a phenomenon that transcends sound, manifesting also as informational, emotional, and existential disturbance. Such pervasive noise destabilizes identity development and weakens the ability to engage in self-reflection. In this context, silence is proposed as both a pedagogical and existential alternative – a space that not only offers respite from overstimulation but also enables profound experiences of presence, relationality, and meaning. The text presents silence as a developmental resource that can serve regulatory, supportive, and transformative functions – psychologically as well as educationally. Drawing on contemporary pedagogical theories and a psychosocial-cultural framework, the article highlights silence's potential in cultivating resilience, grounded subjectivity, and emotional robustness. Silence is depicted as a space for pause, internal organization, and contact with personal experience – thereby supporting the development of reflectivity, agency, and emotional competence. Practices of silence are described as a tool for educational mental health prevention, not only at the individual level but also within communal dimensions. From a pedagogical standpoint, silence is not a lack of action but rather an intentional educational environment which – within a world of incessant noise, excess, and digital stimulation – facilitates cognitive, emotional, and existential processes. It enables deeper learning, the development of self-awareness, and the creation of spaces for encountering the Other without the violence of words or the pressure of constant communication. The article advocates for recognizing silence as an integral element of educational practice, particularly within the context of youth mental health promotion. It argues for the implementation of silence not only as a concrete pedagogical strategy but also as a shift in educational paradigm – towards greater attentiveness, presence, and humanistic care.

**Keywords:** , mental health, silence, silence practices, youth

## Introduction

Modern youngsters are growing up in a reality dominated by over-stimulation, constant acceleration and digital presence. Their daily experiences are shaped by noise, and not only in an acoustic sense, but also in an informational, emotional and social sense. We live in an age in which silence is increasingly treated as a disturbance, a glitch, something unusual, and quiescence as a void that needs to be filled immediately with sound, movement, images or interaction. In such a world, young people in particular experience difficulties regulating their emotions, maintaining their attention and building a lasting identity for

themselves. They increasingly suffer from anxiety, depression and a sense of emptiness, the sources of which cannot be reduced to individual or clinical factors alone, as they are also rooted in profound cultural, technological and educational changes (Haidt, 2025; Twenge, 2019).

This text offers an attempt to understand the role of silence as an existential experience, a psychic resource and an educational practice in a world that constantly demands response, presence and exposure. The analysis will focus on the challenges faced by today's "restless generation", young people

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functioning in conditions of information overload, addiction to stimulation and the disappearance of intimacy (Haidt, 2025). The importance of silence in the formation of resilience, identity and the relational and reflective dimensions of education shall also be presented. In the face of dopamine culture, algorithmic control and the pressure of exposure, silence ceases to be a lack and turns out to be a necessity and an act of pedagogical concern.

## **1. Culture of ruckus, excess and dopamine as a space for youth functioning**

Modern youth live in a world dominated by constant noise – multidimensional, insistent and ubiquitous. This noise is not limited to physical sounds, but becomes an existential experience that exhausts, distracts and destroys the ability to reflect. The social and cultural changes of recent years have transformed the way young people function relationally and in terms of identity.

One of the key phenomena affecting the experiences of young people described is the subordination of social life to the logic of acceleration (Gleick, 2003; Han, 2022), which prevents a deeper experience of reality and leads to chronic exhaustion (Han, 2022). In such a world, it is difficult to find inner peace – every pause seems like a loss, and every break – a risk of being overlooked. The rhythm of life in a society of constant acceleration has radically intensified. Young people are constantly in pursuit of relevance, novelty, real-time presence. The future is gradually losing its importance as a planning space, what matters most is the ‘here and now’, the constant reacting and updating (Gleick, 2003).

Closely linked to the acceleration phenomenon outlined is also functioning in an information society, in which information has become the dominant value, not so much as content carrying meaning, but above all as an impulse, a stimulus, data for immediate processing. Young people function in a space saturated with communication stimuli – notifications, messages, headlines – which leads to “infotoxicity” and cognitive overload (Han, 2022; Twenge,

2019; Ledzińska 2002; Ledzińska, Postek, 2017). Their minds work in a mode of constantly jumping between topics, constantly reacting, without the possibility (and necessity) of deeper concentration. The described “phenomena of information overproduction and the onslaught of acceleration can be put in terms of psychological stress” (Ledzińska, 2002, 89) and can increase a relevant risk of development especially among children and young people, as Maria Ledzińska points in her texts (Ledzińska, 2002; Ledzińska, Postek, 2017). Information stress disrupts not only the daily functioning of young people, but also significantly reduces their ability to contemplate and build a lasting identity (Ledzińska, 2002; Haidt, 2025). Psychological literature increasingly emphasizes that chronic overstimulation can lead to the depletion of attentional resources and a reduced capacity for emotional self-regulation. These phenomena carry long-term developmental consequences, affecting the quality of interpersonal relationships, psychological resilience, and even cognitive functioning (Ledzińska, 2002). In extreme cases, information overload may contribute to psychological burnout, anxiety disorders, and depression – effects that are particularly evident among adolescents who engage intensively with digital technologies (Haidt, 2025; Twenge, 2019).

Building a permanent identity is also not conducive to functioning in a space created by the need or compulsion of constant exposure, even obscene transparency (Han, 2022). The society of exposure, which is a radical development of the society of transparency, requires constant self-disclosure – physically, emotionally, biographically. Young people are growing up in a culture of exposure, where it has become the norm to share every aspect of life, every photo, opinion, mood, reaction. Lack of exposure means nonexistence. In this society, silence – understood as absence, withdrawal, privacy – becomes suspicious and even socially exclusionary. “What is missing (...) is any kind of breakthrough that could provoke some kind of reflection, a look back, a thoughtfulness. (...) transparency goes hand in hand with a vacuum of meaning, accompanied by a sensual emptiness’ (Han, 2022, p.107). This is why noise becomes an everyday experience – without it, the individual loses touch with his or her surroundings.

In the society of intimacy described by Han (2022), the traditional boundary between private and public domain is disappearing. Young people, by “living” online, make their emotions, relationships and experiences public in a digital space that enforces performativity and shortens the distance. Intimacy, which used to be based on silence, trust and time, is now becoming a superficial exchange of emotional signals. In this context, noise is also an external pressure to make public what should remain internal – emotions, experiences, reflections (Han, 2022). Young people lose the space to be alone with themselves, resulting in confusion and existential anxiety.

Finally, we also function in a control society (Han, 2022) that no longer operates through prohibitions and restrictions, but through algorithms, data, and “invisible” behavior management mechanisms. Young people live under constant surveillance, not in the sense of traditional oppression, but as participants in systems that track, analyse and model their activities. It is control that ostensibly offers freedom, but in fact limits choices, reinforces conformity and creates an internal sense of pressure (Han, 2022). The noise of this society is not so much a scream of power as a murmur of data, algorithms and digital impulses that affect the decisions of a young person, without giving him space for autonomous reflection.

The analytical categories cited by Han (2022) to describe contemporary societies (society of fatigue, society of exposure, society of information, society of intimacy, society of control) provide a better understanding of why young people today live in constant tension, are overstimulated, distracted, distracted and tired. The noise of modernity is not only the result of modern technology, but also a manifestation of profound cultural changes, a shift away from narrative, a blurring of identity, a redefinition of privacy and a lack of space for tranquillity. Jonathan Haidt (2025) and Jean Twenge (2019) point out that this state of affairs results in a sharp increase in anxiety, depression and loneliness among young people. In the reality of excess, where everything is in plain sight, young people increasingly feel invisible – even to themselves.

The modern culture in which young people are growing up is also a dopamine culture – the culture of instant reward, constant stimulation and com-

pulsive pleasure-seeking. Mobile apps, social media and streaming platforms are designed to induce rapid ejections of dopamine, the neurotransmitter responsible for motivation, attention and feelings of satisfaction. In practice, this means that young people are exposed to constant microaggressions, i.e. likes, notifications, scrolling, which keep their attention in a state of tension and attachment (Lembke, 2021; Alter, 2019).

The absence of silence in such a context is no accident – it is part of the systemic design of the digital environment. For silence does not bring immediate gratification; on the contrary, it can provoke restlessness, boredom and even existential anxiety. Adolescents, whose nervous system functions under constant stimulation, begin to experience emptiness in moments of stimulus deprivation (Twenge, 2019; Alter, 2019). A space free of notifications, screens and sounds becomes difficult to endure, not because it is objectively unpleasant, but because it requires deeper contact with oneself. Unaccustomed to being ‘offline’, not only technologically but also existentially, young people avoid tranquillity because it requires them to subject their own thoughts, emotions and perhaps the emptiness masked by the noise of digital excess to reflection (Twenge, 2019).

The dopamine reality is that pleasure replaces meaning and distraction replaces attentiveness. As Lembke (2021) notes, modern youth function in a state of almost permanent behavioural addiction, where every moment without a stimulus triggers a kind of micro-abstinence. The lack of silence is thus becoming not only a result of technological change, but also a neurobiological effect resulting from the constant need for stimulation. These mechanisms reinforce a culture of noise, strengthening mechanisms of control and acceleration, while at the same time weakening the capacity for self-reflection and inner grounding (Han, 2022).

Silence, which was once a prerequisite for understanding oneself and the world, is now becoming unattainable. The life of young people in noise is not only an individual problem, but a sign of a deep cultural crisis. A lack of space in which to really ‘be’ and not just ‘function’ and ‘react’. In this context, silence may be the only space in which a person – especially

a young person – can realistically rest from forced (incessant) performance and excess. It is difficult because it requires putting up with oneself without stimulation, but at the same time it can be the beginning of a process of reclaiming oneself and one's identity. In a world that requires constant activity, silence becomes an act of resistance and courage.

## **2. Silence as a developmental, therapeutic and existential resource in the life of the “restless generation”**

In the era of constant information noise, overloading with stimuli and digital presence, silence becomes a rare good, and at the same time increasingly necessary for maintaining mental and existential balance. For the so-called ‘restless generation’, i.e. children and young people growing up in the age of the digital revolution, silence is not only disappearing from everyday experience, but is sometimes misunderstood and even rejected as something alien, uncomfortable. Meanwhile, as modern research in the field of developmental psychology, neurobiology and existential psychotherapy indicates, silence can play a fundamental role in shaping mental resilience, deepening (crystallising and consolidating) identity and supporting mental well-being (Haidt, 2025).

Jonathan Haidt (2025) describes young people as victims of the ‘great reprogramming of childhood’, a process in which free play, contemplative space and real relationships have been replaced by shallow digital interaction, constant online presence and exposure to social evaluation (*ibidem*). Lack of silence, understood not only as a lack of sound, but also as a state of mental calmness and reflexivity, is one of the most overlooked deficits in this context. As a result, young people show difficulty in regulating emotions, thinking more deeply and critically and constructing an internal narrative, which negatively affects their ability to cope with stress and crisis (Odgers, 2024).

Silence, in psychological terms, creates the conditions for the integration of experience, allows one to stop, experience emotions, arrange thoughts and

regain a sense of agency. In this context, one can speak of its existential significance. Silence enables you to get in touch with yourself as a thinking, feeling, active and decisive person. As T. Radcliffe (2016) points out, silence is not an emptiness but rather a ‘fullness of expectation’ – a space in which people can find meaning and sometimes experience transcendence.

Developmental psychology emphasises that adolescents need the space to temporarily withdraw from social and digital interactions in order to be able to recognise and process their own emotions, form autonomy and identity, and strengthen their ability to mentalise (Fonagy & Campbell, 2017). Lack of access to silence can lead to chronic sensory overload, exacerbated anxiety and difficulties in affect regulation, which is associated with the increasing number of depressive and anxiety disorders observed in young people (UNICEF, 2025; NIK, 2024).

Resilience, understood as an individual's ability to adapt in the face of difficulties and stress, develops under conditions that foster self-reflection, a sense of control and internal integration (Masten, 2018). Silence, as an environment that enables distance from experiences, can support the formation of narrative self-understanding and allows for the construction of constructive coping strategies (Kinnunen et al., 2021). Neuroscience research shows that calming practices – such as meditation, mindfulness and reflective practices – positively influence the activity of brain structures responsible for emotional self-regulation, memory and empathy (Koole et al., 2019; Siegel, 2020). At the same time, silence enables the experience of separation from social pressures, comparisons and judgements, allowing young people to regain a sense of identity independent of external narratives.

In existential terms, silence is associated with the experience of presence, loneliness, transcendence and meaning. For a young person experiencing an identity crisis, questions about meaning, the value of life and interpersonal relationships take on particular meaning. Here, silence can act as a ‘container’ (emotionally stabilising) for boundary experiences – such as existential anxiety, emptiness or bereavement – allowing them to be symbolised and tamed (Frankl, 2009).

At the same time, silence allows for the experience of deep being, unproductive, non-imposed, devoid of social pressure. In such a context, silence becomes a space for authentic encounters with self and the world, which for young people at an age of intense comparison and group positioning can be a liberating and formative (formative) experience (Brown & Ryan, 2015).

In crisis situations – such as sudden social change, trauma, isolation or peer violence – silence can have a protective and stabilising function, can offer a refuge from over-stimulation and create the conditions for rebuilding mental resources. The communal aspect is also not insignificant: group silence practices (e.g. silence before class, meditation together) foster a sense of safety and co-presence, completely without the use of words (Brown & Ryan, 2015).

Silence, although undervalued in today's digital world, can be understood as a developmental, therapeutic and existential resource. Its presence in the lives of young people can significantly support the development of mental resilience, deepen contact with oneself and counteract emotional overload. Incorporating silence into prevention and therapy, however, requires not only individual work, but also a systemic approach in education, health and culture. Silence in the life of the 'restless generation' should not be regarded as a lack of activity, but as a condition for psychological and spiritual development. It is a space where it becomes possible to regain inner balance, integrate experiences and build resilience to external tensions. In times of permanent noise and over-saturation of stimuli, silence is no longer just a luxury – it is becoming a necessity.

### **3. Silence in educational practices to support adolescent mental health**

In the face of a growing mental health crisis for children and young people, school cannot be seen solely as a place of knowledge transmission. It is becoming increasingly responsible for supporting the mental, emotional and social development and well-being of students (UNICEF, 2021; Odgers, 2024). One of

the untapped resources in this respect is silence, which in pedagogical terms can have a regulatory, supportive and transformative function.

From a pedagogical perspective, silence is not just a lack of verbal communication, but a quality of presence – a space of experience, attentiveness and encounter. In the pedagogy of presence and reflective pedagogy, silence plays a role enabling internal formation, strengthening subjectivity and developing the ability to self-reflect. It gives student the opportunity not only to learn 'about the world', but above all to learn 'themselves in the world'. Silence as an affective and existential experience allows the learner to build distance from the stimuli that condition his or her responses and thus supports the development of self-regulation and mentalization (Fonagy et al., 2017).

In school reality, silence can be treated as a pedagogical space of respite, allowing students to temporarily get out of the pressure of learning, assessment and exposure, which makes it possible to suspend cognitive, performative and social pressure. Moments of silence create a space of 'pedagogical hesitation' – a moment in which teacher and student can enter into relationship not through transmission, but through co-presence (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). This kind of silence is relational and ethical – it is not a silence of coercion, but of openness, acceptance and recognition of the Other as an autonomous subject.

In social-emotional education (SEL) and mindfulness approaches, silence is a tool to enhance students' well-being, reducing stress and supporting emotional competence (Jennings, 2015; Roeser et al., 2012). Practices such as mindful silence and 'transformational silence' are increasingly being used successfully in schools, with proven potential to influence concentration and well-being (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, silence can also serve as an emancipatory tool. In a world where young people are constantly subjected to external narratives, judgements and exposure – silence becomes a space of resistance to the hegemony of productivity and visibility. It is an act of breaking conformity, in which the student can withdraw from the role of 'always present' and 'always active'

to reclaim the right to be outside the narrative of success, efficiency and adaptation (Giroux, 2011). In this context, silence is not a pedagogical “absence”, but a structure enabling the creation of meaning. It enables education in the spirit of deep listening – not only to others, but also to oneself. It contains ethical (relationship with the Other), cognitive (integration of knowledge with experience) and existential (confronting one’s own questions about meaning, purpose and identity) potential.

A school that adopts silence as a pedagogical value ceases to be merely a space for the transmission of knowledge and becomes a space for the formation of humanity. Learning ceases to be merely a process of knowledge accumulation and becomes a process of grounded being, rooted in the body, emotions, time and relationships (Van der Maren & Tupper, 2022; Edling, 2021). The practical application of silence in the educational prevention of mental health can take the form of daily rituals of silence (e.g. the beginning the day in silence) or mindfulness and self-reflection workshops (Jennings, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Silence can be part of an educational lesson or a reflective break (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012). It is possible to create spaces of silence in the architecture of the school (e.g. sensory zones), or to use shared silence as an element of group integration (Roeser et al., 2012).

Implementing these practices requires adequate teacher preparation, including the development of emotional competence, mindfulness and the ability to create safe learning relationships (Jennings, 2015). A school should not only teach silence, but be a place of its facilitation, a place that protects it and integrates it with other aspects of education – cognitive, emotional and social. From a pedagogical point of view, silence does not mean abandoning an action, but it conditions its quality. It is a space in which education becomes not only effective, but deeply

humanistic. In times of overstimulation, restlessness and disintegration of youth, silence becomes not an alternative but a necessity – an act of care, presence and deep listening that enables the development not only of knowledge but also of subjectivity.

## Conclusion

In the face of increasing sensory overload, cultural acceleration and a growing mental health crisis among young people, silence appears not as a luxury, but as a fundamental developmental and educational resource. Its pedagogical value lies not only in providing a counterbalance to noise and excess, but above all in enabling a deeper experience of self and the world. Silence is not neutral, it carries the potential for change, resistance and regeneration. Introducing it into educational practice can help to redress the balance between action and reflection, between exposure and privacy, between impulse and awareness.

From an educational perspective, silence promotes the formation of emotional maturity, supports self-regulatory processes and builds a space for dialogue, which does not always have to be filled with words. In a world dominated by a permanent online presence, silence becomes not only a form of rest, but also a form of resistance to the dominant narratives of productivity, efficiency and visibility. The text’s proposed framing of silence as a tool for mental health education and prevention, and as part of a paradigm shift in education, points to the need to redefine the role of school, from a place of knowledge transmission to a space of attentive presence and humanity formation. Integrating silence into the daily educational rhythm is an act of pedagogical care and courage that can have a profound impact on the psychological, relational and existential development of the young generation.

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