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Young Russians Are Taking Care of Their Mental and Physical Health

Post-Soviet generations take cues from the West instead of their parents.

By Loretta Marie Perera

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There's no shame in admitting you have problems nowadays. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

"What are your five reasons to live?" Moscow-based Instagrammer Natalya Krom asked her 116,000 followers last month in a post aimed at suicide prevention.

Krom was diagnosed with bipolar personality disorder at 15. Now 20, she has been sharing everything from her daily life, including time spent in a psychiatric facility and coping techniques, since May 2018.

"I needed to speak out about all my pain that accumulated through my whole life," she told The Moscow Times. "I first started this account to help myself; now my aim is to help others,

too."

In Russia today, social media has become a platform for insight into mental health struggles. On Instagram, dozens of accounts run mostly by young Russian women are dedicated to plights ranging from depression and anxiety to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

It's a far cry from how things used to be during Soviet times, where there was little or no talk of mental health and psychology was a foreign concept.

"Soviet times were about survival," said psychology lecturer Yekaterina Redkina. "It's a very Russian thing: Why do you need a psychologist when you can talk to a friend? It would mean that you weren't strong enough — can't you help yourself?"

Related article: Russia's Alcohol Consumption Plummets More Than 40% – WHO Study

Psychologist Alina Gornshtein, who started her career in 1987, believes that awareness of mental health has come a long way, too. "At that time, almost nobody knew anything about psychology," she said.

In the past five to 10 years the concept of counseling and psychological help has gained precedence in Russia, said Gornshtein, who most commonly encounters patients seeking help for depression, bipolar disorder and orthorexia — obsessive behavior that manifests in pursuit of a healthy diet.

"When my patients came to me 20 years ago, I had to explain my role as a psychologist," she said. "Now, people know what a psychologist is, and what kind of help to expect."

Far more than before, being different is now seen as a benefit rather than a disadvantage.

"It used to be so scary to be different, to be unusual," Redkina said. "Now, it's good to be different. 'You're bipolar? That's interesting, tell us more about it.'"

For IT professional Yulia Alexeyeva, 33, sharing her story online was a way to tell her friends and followers that she needed some time off, but was doing fine.

"I wanted to explain why I would sometimes disappear, go offline. That's the main reason I decided to start talking about mental health," she said.

The increase in mental health awareness, along with access to education and healthcare, has made the seeking of treatment easier in Russia, and the entire process far less daunting.

"I realised just last year that I've suffered from anxiety my whole life," said Alexeyeva, who also suffers from depression. She added that chronic symptoms of anxiety have led to the loss of three jobs and stopped her from completing her university education. "Because I had it from such a young age, I thought that's just how life was. I never understood that it was anxiety," she said.

Today, it isn't difficult to find a psychologist in Moscow — though Gornshtein stressed it's

important to find one with the right qualifications — and medication is available on prescription.

Medication for mental health is often prescribed over long periods of time, ranging from months to life, and this can lead to significant changes in lifestyle as many drugs don't mix well with alcohol.

"I stopped drinking because I was on meds," says Alexeyeva, who is currently on daily medication for her depression.

Medication isn't the only reason to give up drinking. Other young Russians are eschewing alcohol altogether or drinking craft beer instead of vodka because they came of age in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Contrast today's judo-practicing, abstemious Putin with former President Boris Yeltsin dancing on stage at a rally or failing to make it off his jet to meet the Irish prime minister in Shannon in the 1990s, and it's clear that younger Russians have begun to drink more like their counterparts in the West, and less like their parents.

Craft beer brewer Oleg Pivovar —whose surname means brewer in Russian — picked up on this trend, and used it to make a name for himself in a new industry.

"I noticed that in Russia, at the beginning of 2014, people began to show interest in unusual beer from small craft breweries," he said. "By 2016 to 2017 it had become a trend, there was a real craft revolution." Within and beyond that period, a recent report from the World Health Organization (WHO) showed that from 2003 to 2016, alcohol consumption in Russia fell by 43%.

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It has become the norm for young drinkers to shy away from stronger drinks in favor of craft beers with enough variety to suit individual tastes — a visit to any craft beer bar will introduce you to a large variety of lagers, IPAs, ales and stouts.

More than alcohol, it's variety, culture and atmosphere that counts, says craft bar owner Anton Popov, who has been surprised to see how well beer sells in Moscow's modern market.

"We always have several varieties of non-alcoholic beer as well as kvass, lemonade, tea and coffee," says Popov, who opened his bar, Wild Tony's, in Moscow late last year. "At our place, the main thing is the atmosphere. You can immerse yourself at the bar without alcohol."

Another vice that has declined in popularity over the past three decades in Russia is smoking. Like in the West, today's youth are more interested in staying away from tobacco than any generation before them, and many of those who do smoke do it electronically. Vaping shops selling flavored e-cigarettes are mushrooming in Moscow, and a 2016 report estimated that there are 1.5 million Russian vapers, with numbers expected to increase by as much as 25% per year.

The lighter versions of vices look set to continue to grow in popularity, with customization being key for today's younger generations.

"It is now very popular to brew beer with the addition of natural berries, fruits, spices and sweets," said Pivovar. "And each consumer can choose what they like."

Fun flavors aside, the international culture surrounding these common vices is continuing to grow and emphasize diversity and coolness.

"Craft beer is less harmful to health than vodka, and drinking vodka is just not cool anymore," Pivovar said.

"In today's society, drinking vodka can even be a sign of bad taste."

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