

Adolescent mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were among the leading causes of disability and poor life outcomes in young people. However, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents faced unprecedented challenges and continue to experience ongoing challenges resulting from the pandemic.

Their changing world

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes in the day-to-day lives and worlds of adolescents: how they attend school, interact with friends and develop a sense of identity. Many missed special occasions, such as graduation ceremonies, sports competitions and time with relatives. They may have had COVID-19 themselves, suffered from long COVID symptoms or lost a loved one to the disease.

Recent research involving 80,000 youth from around the world found that symptoms of anxiety and depression doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms.¹ Chronic stress, anxiety and depression, coupled with instability in their communities at large, contributed to feelings of hopelessness in some adolescents, which is one of the top predictors of suicidal thoughts. In early 2021, emergency department visits in the U.S. for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time period in early 2019.²

Social distancing and quarantining helped to keep adolescents and their families safe and healthy during the pandemic. However, these and other protective measures were difficult for many adolescents to process because they often lacked the positive coping skills and support needed to deal with difficult circumstances resulting from the pandemic. According to a review of studies conducted between 2019 and 2021 reported in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, globally, adolescents of varying backgrounds perceived “low” to “moderate” levels of social support during the pandemic, which contributed to increases in anxiety and depression and a higher frequency of using negative coping mechanisms, such as self-medication with alcohol and cannabis.³

For adolescents, interactions at school with peers and teachers are central to their lives and development. Prior to the pandemic, adults in schools were able to recognize distress or abrupt changes in adolescents’ behaviors. During the pandemic, the safety net provided by schools for mental health-related issues, homelessness and other concerns was disrupted or not available.⁴ Due to stay-at-home orders, school closures or new at home learning methods, some students sought ways to connect and to socialize in manners that were not productive for optimal health. During the pandemic, the average time teenagers spent in front of screens for activities not related to school more than doubled from 3.8 to 7.7 hours per day.⁵ Behaviors such as smartphone addiction and internet addiction likely contributed to poor mental health outcomes for some adolescents.

Factors putting youth at risk

Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory 2021 identifies the following risk factors as contributing to youth mental health symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this is not a comprehensive list of risk factors and some of these factors are unique to U.S. populations, many are applicable to youth worldwide.

Risk factors contributing to youth mental health symptoms during the pandemic:⁶

- Having mental health challenges before the pandemic
- Living in an urban area or an area with more severe COVID-19 outbreaks
- Having parents or caregivers who were frontline workers
- Having parents or caregivers at elevated risk of burnout (for example, due to parenting demands)
- Being worried about COVID-19
- Experiencing disruptions in routine, such as not seeing friends or not going to school in person
- Experiencing more adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, violence and discrimination
- Experiencing more financial instability, food shortages or housing instability
- Experiencing trauma, such as losing a family member or caregiver to COVID-19

Special populations of adolescents, such as youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, racial/ethnic minority youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, LGBTQ youth and others are at higher risk for mental health issues. These groups have always experienced more challenges, but the pandemic has significantly affected the quality of life of these adolescents.^{3,6}

Support for youth mental health during the pandemic and beyond

Despite the uncertainty of the current COVID-19 crisis, youth need to receive the physical and mental care necessary to develop, grow and thrive. It is important to seek out and use all available resources to help adolescents make the adjustments required by the pandemic. And, don't forget to utilize the other literature in this toolkit to check in on yourself to be sure you are the best possible caregiver and role model for your youth.

What families and caregivers can do:^{4,6}

- Address their own mental health and substance use conditions
- Be positive role models for children
- Promote positive relations between children and other supportive adults
- Encourage healthy social relationships with peers
- Provide a supportive, stable and predictable home and neighborhood environment
- Be attentive to how youth spend time online
- Learn to identify mental health challenges early and seek appropriate professional help (Remember that it is not easy to know what's normal and what's not normal when it comes to mental health. Behaviors could be typical for an individual or the result of another illness or issue. Each mental illness has its own characteristics and symptoms.)
- Ensure that youth have regular check-ups with a family doctor or other health care professional
- Help cope with grief – whether the loss of family members or the loss of experiences or opportunities
- Teach decision making and coping skills for managing challenges and improving resilience going forward

Although many of the challenges faced by young people are outside their control, there are steps they can take themselves to protect, improve and advocate for their own mental health and that of their family, friends and neighbors.

What youth can do for themselves and others:⁶

- Understand that mental health is a part of overall health and wellbeing
- Learn about different mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression
- Build strong, positive relationships with peers and supportive adults
- Learn decision making skills for difficult or stressful situations
- Practice techniques, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or “counter-thoughts,” to manage emotions
- Take care of body and mind
- Be attentive to use of social media and technology
- Know when and how to seek help from a trusted adult
- Know when and how to assist a peer who is in need
- Find ways to serve and be a source of support for others

On the positive side

Fortunately, many young people thrived during the pandemic. Social support, positive coping skills, home quarantining and parent-child discussions seemed to positively impact mental health for some adolescents during this period of crisis. They got more sleep, spent more quality time with family, experienced less academic stress and bullying, had more flexible schedules and improved their coping skills. Many young people demonstrated resilience and have been able to bounce back from difficult experiences resulting from the pandemic. Others increased their resiliency and strength as a result of the pandemic and will likely be better prepared to navigate uncertain and stressful circumstances in the future.

Goal for the future

While the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing and its long-term impact on adolescent health is not yet fully understood, the goal going forward should be to strengthen the health and resilience of all young people, support their families and communities and mitigate the pandemic's impact on their mental health and well-being.

Sources:

1. Racine, N, et al. Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 2021, 175(11): 1142-1150. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482>
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3. Jones, E, et al. Impact of COVID-19 on mental health in adolescents: A systematic review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 2021 March 3, 18(5):2470.doi:10.3390/ijerph18052470
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6. Office of the Surgeon General (OSG). *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2021. PMID: 34982518. Accessed at www.pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

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