

How COVID-19 Pandemic Has Affected the Mental Health of Teens



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Experts say teens were dealing with a variety of mental health issues even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Ibai Acevedo/Stocksy United

- High school students say they have dealt with a number of mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Among them are feelings of depression and sadness as well as verbal abuse from a parent.

- Experts say teens were already facing mental health issues before the pandemic and the restrictions imposed during that time exacerbated those issues.
- They say parents should listen to teens' concerns, let them know they are supported, and recommended digital tools to help them cope.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is shedding new light on how difficult the COVID-19 pandemic has been on high school students.

The agency has released its first nationally representative survey

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of teens' mental state during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the survey, more than half – 55 percent – of high school students said they experienced emotional abuse from an adult in their home. In addition, 11 percent saying they experienced physical abuse.

The study reported that 37 percent of high schoolers experienced poor mental health during the pandemic and 44 percent said they felt persistently sad or hopeless the past year.

Another 29 percent said a parent or another adult in their home lost a job during that time.

“These data echo a cry for help,” said Dr. Debra Houry

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, the acting principal deputy director at the CDC, in a statement. “The COVID-19 pandemic has created traumatic stressors that have the potential to further erode students’ mental wellbeing. Our research shows that surrounding youth with the proper support can reverse these trends and help our youth now and in the future.”

Lesbian, gay, bisexual youth, and female youth reported greater levels of poor mental health as well as emotional abuse by a parent or caregiver, the CDC reported. These groups also attempted suicide at a higher rate.

More than a third (36 percent) of students said they experienced racism before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest levels were reported among Asian students (64 percent) and Black students and students of multiple races (both 55 percent).

The report’s authors stated that “The survey cannot determine the extent to which events during the pandemic contributed to reported racism. However, experiences of racism among youth have been linked to poor mental health, academic performance, and lifelong health risk behaviors.

Reaction from experts

Mental health professionals told [name removed] the escalating numbers were concerning but hardly surprising.

“We should acknowledge that youth mental health was already high on the radar,” Ray Merenstein, the executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Colorado, told [name removed].

“In part, there are not enough beds, practitioners, school supports and others to meet a growing need exacerbated by a variety of factors even before the pandemic, (including) social media pressures, stigma/bullying, academic pressure,” Merenstein said. “It’s as though we were trying to build a bridge across a canyon but didn’t have all the materials to finish the project. Then, the pandemic hit, making the canyon wider and the materials even more in demand.”

Merenstein said that prior to the pandemic, one in six youth aged 6 to 17 in the United States experienced a mental health disorder each year. It’s now one in three.

How parental issues trickle down

Even without experiencing their own pandemic-related trauma, children were feeling the effects of what the adults around them were going through.

“When parents lose jobs or become ill or have financial struggles, it increases stress, which increases conflict, which increases instances of abuse, physical violence, arguments,” Dr. Megan Campbell, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Children’s Hospital New Orleans, told [name removed]. “Another example that compounds the problem: the opioid epidemic has worsened, which often exacerbates difficult family dynamics and stressors that kids are being exposed to.”

“When kids are isolated at home, they don’t have the advantage of the myriad of support opportunities outside of the home: teachers, friends, coaches, administrators, counselors – who serve as role models, model healthy social interactions, and importantly, notice and report when kids aren’t doing well or need social services, Campbell added. “Outlets where kids have fun and learn skills and express themselves (teams, sports, clubs, activities, social events) have decreased or been eliminated with a pandemic. People have been ill or have been terrified of becoming ill.”

“Our children are like sponges. If we are experiencing distress related to the collective traumas of COVID-19, they are likely to be impacted as well,” added Anjali Ferguson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at Children’s Hospital of Richmond at Virginia Commonwealth University. “We saw even greater disparities in health and outcomes for historically marginalized groups – ones that existed well before the pandemic widened even more. Thus, placing many historically marginalized children at risk for adverse childhood experiences- a known predictor of poor mental health outcomes.”

The impact on teens

Ferguson told [name removed] that by July 2021, an estimated 1.5 million children in the United States had lost a primary or secondary caregiver to COVID-19.

“This number has only risen since then,” Ferguson said. “Further, 2020 also brought a racial reckoning across the world that highlighted the impacts of racial traumas/stressors on individual mental health and outcomes. Recent studies have noted that Black teens report greater depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation after exposure to police brutality videos.”

It’s a vulnerable age group even in the best of times, noted Dr. Asha Patton-Smith, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Kaiser Permanente in Virginia.

“Teens were already dealing with feelings of helplessness, depression, and other mental health impacts before COVID-19,” Patton-Smith told [name removed]. “The pandemic exacerbated these struggles and made it harder for teens to get help. It’s difficult to say for certain, but it is likely that without a pandemic, these percentages would have been substantially lower, yet still on the rise”

“With disruptions in normal routines and moving to virtual learning, students faced isolation, loneliness, and loss of structure in their day,” Patton-Smith said. “Many teens lost important connections forged in the school environment, both with peers and with school staff, which caused many students to lose their support systems, which often provided an outlet to cope with issues they may be facing and helped to identify students in need of additional support.”

In many cases, what high schoolers sought to fill the void with was just as harmful, said Nick Allen, Ph.D., the director of the University of Oregon's Center for Digital Mental Health and the co-founder of Ksana Health.

"Many teenagers also increased their use of social media, and while that was probably protective in many ways because it allowed them to maintain some contact with their peers, using digital media may have also contributed to problems such as sleep disruption or exposure to bullying," Allen told [name removed].

What parents can do

Now that we're learning more about the pandemic's impact on children, mental health professionals say parents and caregivers can get to work solving some of the problems.

"I think the major thing parents need to do is check in with their children and see how they are doing emotionally," Patton-Smith said. "Parents should not only listen to what their children are telling them, they should also note any behaviors that may signal that there are issues (irritability, crying, aggression, isolation)."

"Even if your child is struggling, children are very resilient and with the proper support, they can get back to a more balanced space," she said. "It is important for parents and educators to reassure teens that they are supported and to make sure that their schools are inclusive and safe. Parents who notice significant changes in their child's behaviors should

start with an open, non-judgmental conversation and reassure your child that help is available.”

“Parents might encourage children to use one of the many digital tools available to help with reducing stress and practicing mindfulness, such as the Calm app,” Patton-Smith said. “Reach out to your child’s mental health provider or primary care doctor if you’re concerned about your child’s behavioral changes.

“The good news is that children and teens are extremely resilient and with the proper support, it is likely that they can move past this challenging time with more resilience and new coping skills,” she added.