



Teen Mental Health and COVID-19

By: Mariah Coulstring

The numbers are in for how US teens have fared the pandemic. And although we may have assumed that our mental health would take a toll from the stay-at-home orders, social isolation, remote learning, and widespread media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, teens are no exception, and may have even taken a harder hit. In May of this year, 4-H, a

positive youth development and mentoring organization, in partnership with the Harris Poll, conducted an online survey to assess the current state of teenage mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article will break down the data collected from the over 1,500, 13 to 19 year olds in the United States and address topics facing teens, including stressors, feelings of anxiety and depression, how resilience plays a role in coping, and the impacts of increased screen time. By discussing and reflecting on this information as we work to proactively address youth hardships, we may better understand the needs faced by adolescents during and as a result of the pandemic.

Generally speaking, teenagers experience high levels of stress and anxiety due to the nature of their developmental stage in life and the many responsibilities that make up a teen's world. If being a teen is not hard enough, based on the information gathered from the 4-H survey, this year teenagers had to withstand unprecedented levels of stress due to COVID-19. In fact, 64% of adolescents surveyed said they believe that "the experience of COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on my generation's mental health," while 81% agreed that mental health is a "significant issue for young people in the US."

Of teens that identified as having anxiety or depression, which is about 7 out of 10 respondents, more than a third of this group felt anxiety or depression every single day. The survey went on to break down those feelings of stress and identified their causes. Some of the most common stressors reported were: inability to hang out with friends/family in person, conducting school online, being stuck at home with my family, worrying about me/my family getting sick, cancellation of extracurricular activities/summer internships and jobs, and loss of normalcy and routine. However, the evidence suggests that teens were at much higher risk of peer pressure to keep these feelings suppressed. Although 13% of teens were actually using substances to cope, 37% of teens are *worried* about their friends starting to smoke or vape, while 20% worry about their friends becoming alcoholics or overdosing on drugs. This concern for friends' substance use only adds to teens' overall stress levels.

Another piece of the survey identified the role that resiliency plays in a teen's life. Defined as "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties or hardships; toughness," resiliency was assessed by asking if individuals agreed with the statement, "I consider myself to be resilient." Thankfully, even though the pandemic, 68% of teens surveyed considered themselves resilient, with 61% reporting confidence in their ability to solve their own mental health struggles. As compared to those identified as non-resilient, resilient teens are more likely to find healthy ways to cope with hardships, which has effectively set them up for success in coping with the pandemic. On the other hand, teens classified as "non-resilient" were twice as likely than resilient teens to say they use drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism, when asked what they use to help when feeling anxious or depressed during COVID-19. Regardless of identification as

resilient or non-resilient, 42% of adolescents still reportedly turned to their 'vices' to cope with stress, such as eating junk food or vaping; 60% said, "it's hard to have healthy coping mechanisms to deal with the stress of COVID-19 under the current stay-at-home orders."

The survey found that non-resilient teens were also more likely to experience severe anxiety or depression, and even contemplate suicide, compared to resilient teens. Other comparisons drawn between resilient and non-resilient teens in the data addressed perseverance and self-esteem/confidence between the two groups. When asked about these traits, 45% of resilient teens reported being self-confident compared to 27% of non-resilient teens. When asked about perseverance, 58% of resilient teens thought they could persevere in a tough situation, versus 35% of non-resilient teens who thought they could.

With remote learning encouraging extended periods of time on screens, social media, and other online outlets, this is another way that teens have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about stressors that made them feel anxious or depressed, 41% of teens selected "using social media." When teens were asked how they coped with feelings of anxiety and depression during normal times, 37% ironically, stated that they "spend more time on social media." But when asked the same questions about how they cope specifically during COVID-19, teens who reported "spending more time on social media" jumped to 49% as compared to 37% of teens during 'normal times.' An alarming statistic found that teens spent 75% of the time they were awake behind a screen; resilient teens said they spend upwards of 9 hours of the day behind a screen during COVID-19, while non-resilient teens logged in 10 hours of screen time in one day.

Ultimately, when things start to "return to normal," we will still be left with the aftermath and lingering impacts of the pandemic and must be prepared to combat a mental health crisis that is coming our way. If we do not stop to recognize the struggling that is already all around us, it may get to be too much to overcome. Take it from the 82% of teens who said, "It's time for Americans to talk more openly and honestly about mental health issues in this country." And let's try to show the 80% of teens who "wish more young people were more comfortable asking for help when it comes to their mental health" that we are here to listen and to help them through this tough time. While 71% of teens "feel misunderstood by other generations", saying, "most older people do not understand the struggles of young people today," as trusted adults in the lives of teens, I believe it is our duty to be kind, and support the youth and others in our communities who we may not fully understand what they are going through. Everyone reacts to and experiences stressful situations differently, so it is important to help young people figure out what they need to take care themselves during these times. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggests:

- Taking care of your mental health so that you can think clearly and be able to react swiftly in an emergency. Take breaks from news coverage of the pandemic as to not become overwhelmed and anxious by all of the information.
- Take care of your body by eating healthy, getting exercise and sleep, avoiding excess alcohol and drug use, and even by meditating.
- Try to connect with others while still taking precautions, and through the phone, social media, or the mail.
- Get involved in a new activity or volunteer, but most importantly, take time to unwind and do the things you enjoy and that make you feel good.

If you are interested in accessing the full 4-H survey, you can find it at: <https://4-h.org/about/research/#!healthy-living> and by scrolling down the page to find the “4-H Youth Mental Health Survey.” Be sure to take care to keep yourself safe during this pandemic, but also pay close attention to your mental health as well. If you are struggling with your mental health, do not hesitate to:

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255
- or SAMHSA’s National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357
- Visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness website at nami.org
- Looking to talk with someone local? Call AskPETRA at 603-259-1729 or Text “TALK” to 603-259-4820, Mon-Fri: 8am-4:30pm or visit askpetra.org

Youth on Track is a column dedicated to youth substance misuse prevention and education in our community and is brought to you by the Haverhill Area Substance Misuse Prevention Coalition (HASMPC). Mariah Coulstring is the Drug-Free Communities (DFC) Program Coordinator for HASMPC and employee of the North Country Health Consortium (NCHC) in Littleton, NH, the hub of the regional public health network that also serves as the fiscal agent for HASMPC.

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