

Coronavirus Turmoil Raises Depression Risks in Young Adults

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“A number of kids are expressing that these are supposed to be the best years—high school and college—the most free years,” says Anne Marie Albano, a professor of medical psychology in psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York. “The possibility that Covid is going to completely change this period of their life, and they won’t ever get it back, is overwhelming for a lot of them,” she says.

Nearly 41% of college students reported symptoms of depression in a survey of 18,764 students from the end of March through May by the American College Health Association and the Healthy Minds Network, a research project based at the University of Michigan, Boston University and the University of California, Los Angeles. That is up from 35.7% in a Healthy Minds survey from fall 2019. Also, suicide risk measured in the spring ticked up to 27.2%, from 25% measured last fall in a survey by the college health association, which is a research and advocacy group promoting student health. In a survey taken in April by Active Minds—which has chapters on more than 550 college campuses—about 80% of 2,086 college students reported that Covid-19 had “negatively impacted” their mental health.

Even before the pandemic, young people showed rising rates of mental-health problems. According to a spring 2019 survey of nearly 68,000 college students by the American College Health Association, about 24% had been diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems in the preceding 12 months, and 20% had been diagnosed with or treated for depression. Those rates were about double those found in the survey a decade earlier. The stress of Covid can make existing mental-health problems worse and cause new ones, psychologists say.

“Emerging adulthood is a very intense time of life,” says Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a senior research scholar at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. From the ages of roughly 18 to 29, young people “are making big decisions about their education, their career path, their romantic relationships,” Dr. Arnett says. “It’s the liftoff decade for your entry to an adult career path. To have that suddenly blown up with no sign of when it’s going to end, it’s tough.”

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Psychologists say that the social isolation and the curtailing of some autonomy imposed by the pandemic are particularly difficult for teenagers and young adults. At these ages, young people are driven to seek more independence from their families, connect with their peers and pursue romantic relationships, says Karen L. Bierman, director of the Child Study Center at Pennsylvania State University.

The uncertainty around if and when the pandemic will end, and what life will look like in that future, is also causing distress.

“One of the things that carries young people through all of the things they have to do is some vision of the future. Here’s a life I see for myself that looks interesting. Suddenly that gets hard to see,” says Joseph P. Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. Dr. Allen says this can zap motivation to do things like study for the SAT or even just get off the sofa, which can make mental-health issues even worse.

The grinding unemployment that has hit young people especially hard is likely to have other harmful effects, notes Charles B. Nemeroff, professor and chair of the department of psychiatry at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin. “Studies have shown a relationship between unemployment and suicide and unemployment and illicit drug use and unemployment and alcohol use. This teenage and young-adult population is particularly susceptible to those influences,” Dr. Nemeroff says.

Indeed, psychologists and psychiatrists worry that the pandemic may cause long-term harm because the developing brain is “vulnerable to insults,” he says. “One of the insults is isolation and loneliness.”

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