

COVID-19 AND THE EFFECTS ON OUR YOUTH



COVID-19 shook the world. It impacted upon many aspects of our lives, personally and professionally.

For a time, we collectively lost our daily routines, rituals and simple things we took for granted. We briefly lost the ability to hug our loved ones and have face to face meetings. For some people, the pandemic impacted on how we went about our work, many even lost work. It wasn't all doom and gloom though. We learnt new ways to connect, some found time for projects that we had been meaning to attend for months, if not years. Others started engaging in long lost passions and hobbies, while others learnt new skills. We had to learn to pivot, be flexible and embrace change, which is not always easy to do.

These sentiments ring true for not only us but for our youth, our children and teenagers. While the disease itself does not appear to be as severe with most cases in children and adolescents, the pandemic significantly disrupted their lives in other ways. Social distancing and the interruption of typical school routines presented novel challenges for our young people. According to researchers at John's Hopkins University, one of the greatest impacts felt by teenagers, in particular, would have stemmed from school closures and not getting to see friends and peers. Teenagers have different developmental needs than adults and social distancing requirements have a different emotional impact on them. Research into adolescents suggests that among others, there are two important developmental tasks at this age and stage. Firstly, adolescents are to develop social skills and empathy and secondly, they are to develop a sense of identity. Both these tasks happen through interactions with peers. The disconnection from social gatherings, educational settings, sporting commitments and extra-curricular activities may have some implications on social and emotional well-being and skill development.

Older adolescents and young adults struggled through the loss of “rites of passage” we took for granted just a few months ago. COVID-19 forced cancellations of many key rites of passage for year 12 students such as formals, sports days and concerts. Research done in South Australia found that some year 12 students felt lost and saddened by the cancellation of many important events. Some articulated that they felt worried that they would be missing out on the best parts of year 12. University students have echoed these concerns stating that they were struggling to connect with the online learning environment and that their “firsts” at university has been postponed.

COVID-19 has also impacted the job market for adolescents and young adults in significant ways. Research into employment found that jobs for individuals aged under 20 decreased by around 10% between March and April just after the hundredth case of COVID-19 was recorded in Australia, with a large number of job losses in the accommodation, food services and arts and recreation industries. One study found that the most likely demographic to have lost a job were individuals living in rural areas, aged between 18-29 years and students.

With all the uncertainty, isolation and change it isn't surprising that there has been a increase in anxiety amongst Australians as a whole. Research undertaken after the first month of COVID-19 restrictions found that there were very high prevalence rates of individuals experiencing clinically significant symptoms of depression and anxiety, and that even mild to moderate symptoms were being experienced by 25% of the population sampled. The report also outlined that more than 10% of individuals had experienced thoughts of self-harm and that increased irritability was widespread. More positively though, when the researchers looked at optimism rates amongst Australians in the first month, they found that on average people were more optimistic than pessimistic and nearly 1 in 3 were highly optimistic.

There are some ways we can continue to support each other and our young people through these challenging times:

- 1. Normalise anxiety:** anxiety in some instances can be healthy and it typically acts as a useful and protective emotion. Teenagers and children sometimes fear that their heightened emotions signal the onset of a full-blown anxiety disorder. They become worried about the fact that they are worried. Normalising their worries and acknowledging their concerns may help to reduce the impact of anxiety.
- 2. Offer perspective:** anxiety typically becomes unhealthy when it occurs in the absence of a threat or when it heavily outweighs the threat involved. We can support adolescents and children to keep their worries about COVID-19 at an appropriate level by encouraging them not to overestimate the dangers or underestimate their ability to protect themselves from those dangers.
- 3. Supporting others:** research has shown that turning our attention to help others can alleviate our anxieties. A study conducted after a 2006 flood destroyed a small town in southern Poland, found that the teenagers who provided the highest levels of social support to fellow flood victims were the ones who went on to express the most confidence about their ability to face challenges in their own lives.
- 4. Avoid excessive updates:** focusing and fixating too heavily on our dangers increases our anxiety levels. The constant availability of fresh updates on the effects and spread of the virus can create a compulsivity to check and in turn, create or reinforce our anxiety. Research shows that obtaining clear and succinct information about potential

threats help alleviate anxiety, however constant ambiguous information only further perpetuates the concerns.

5. Calm is contagious: managing our anxieties and concerns goes a long way in calming those around us, in particular children and adolescents. Research shows that young people look to adults for cues for how they should feel when encountering novel situations. Children and teenagers can also tell when adults are saying one thing but feeling another.

6. Seek help: finally seeking help when our anxieties become overwhelming can significantly reduce their impact on our emotional well-being. If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis there is help available:

- Speak to your GP
- Mental Health Hotline (24 hr) 1800 011 511
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- Beyond Blue 1300 22 46 36 Lifeline 13 11 14
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

There is always hope. As we continue to show kindness and care for ourselves and those around us, we will eventually progress through the other side of this. As a society we have faced difficult and challenging times before and made it through. As the old adage goes, "this too shall pass".

Be blessed.

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