

The Page and the Epistle



NEWS

NEWS: EFFECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH

DECEMBER 16, 2020 | LOUISA STAMAS | 18 COMMENTS

There's a significant amount of fear and uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus pandemic stemming from the virus's ability to rapidly spread and infect, the increasing number of lives lost globally as days tick by with no cure, the unknown long-term effects for those who survive the illness, and the unsteady foundation of the economy as many industries suffer due to restrictions. Education has become completely virtual since March 2020 for most students; only some are fortunate enough to be in a hybrid model, splitting their time virtually and in-person. The stress, the anxiety, and the lack of personal and physical connection due to online school have exacerbated another epidemic: teen depression, anxiety, and other mental health struggles.

While traditional stressors of college, grades, friends, sports, and futures still weigh heavily, high school teens are more comfortable facing these circumstances and teachers, parents, counselors, and mental health experts are more prepared to support these situations. The pandemic, not even a year old, has drastically upgraded the pressure for teens specifically as they worry about new dangers such as bringing the virus home to parents or grandparents, they or their parents losing employment, or not succeeding academically due to the different obstacles surrounding learning.

Many students lack the emotional resources to deal with these unprecedented challenges. The University of Chicago Medicine reports that the "high level of uncertainty is affecting adolescents differently than adults [as] physical distancing and the inability for children and teens to spend time with friends is

negatively impacting their social development and causing psychological trouble like worry, sadness, and fear” (Houston). In person connection is crucial for teen development, and the absence of this profoundly increases the trauma of the virus.

These effects are seen especially in learning and education. Online classes require more self-motivation and discipline, which many students are less likely to have due to the physical effects of screen time such as poor sleep and headaches. Additionally, typical incentives to school including feel-good hugs, high-fives, pep rallies, and student get-togethers that boost morale and gratitude are not available. Many students feel a disconnect from their teachers, and hence disconnected from their classes and academics as a result. It is hard for them to grapple with the reality of these new circumstances, especially since these years encompass special milestones such as prom and graduation. As a New York Times article reports, Lisa Damour, Ph.D. states, “‘Pandemic conditions are at cross currents with normal adolescent development’ (Grose). And much of the ‘normal adolescent development’ – difficult class discussions, euphoric athletic wins, heartwarming friendship bonds – occur on school campuses.

These changes, along with the loneliness and dullness of online school, have proved to be negative for teens’ mental health. Studies conclude that teens’ mental health is not only deteriorating, but so is funding for resources for students who are struggling:

As shown in an early October survey of 1,000 teenagers, almost 50 percent of teens said their mental health is much worse or somewhat worse than it was pre-pandemic (wellbeing.org). More than 50 percent said their social life is worse or somewhat worse, and over 72 percent said that the coronavirus has created a disadvantage for their generation, with climate change and racial strife cited as the biggest societal stressors for them outside of the virus.

These numbers are significant and prove that online school is not ideal. Many pediatric psychologists urge students to return to school full-time; however, this could accelerate the current COVID-19 surge. So, students must do the best they can with limited resources. However, the resources are noticeably more limited in lower-income neighborhoods. One’s socioeconomic status affects opportunities to meet for in-person school or tutoring, and connection to better online resources. This has resulted in a more significant education gap – a gap that was already rising exponentially prior to the virus.

There are a few daily habits that are proven to boost motivation and the feeling of accomplishment. Taking a walk or going outside every day, especially in the morning, activates the retina in your eyes for better sleep. Fresh air is a mood-booster, and crucial with online school since it is easy to spend seven hours on the screen and then four more for homework.

Another habit is to limit non-school screen usage, because of the high daily usage for school, or buy blue-light glasses to help with the side-effects of increased screen-time. Calling or social-distantly visiting friends offers opportunities to de-stress with favorite people. Exercise is a proven dopamine producer

and can be a vital substitute for sports seasons that have been canceled. And understanding that teachers, fellow students, friends, family, and other are there to support and listen is important.

In this environment, the numbers of depressed and anxious teens are rising globally, including in the St. Paul's community. Give yourself time to take care of your physical and mental health. Reach out to your friends and classmates. Just checking in can boost a friend's mood, as many teens are facing this unique trauma together. Though people are dealing with circumstances in different ways, this pandemic presents opportunities for empathy to be a center focus in how to treat each other.



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18 THOUGHTS ON "NEWS: EFFECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON STUDENT'S MENTAL HEALTH"



travelling sisters

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