

Why Is the Pandemic So Hard on Young People?

Research suggests that young people are more stressed, anxious, and depressed than other age groups during COVID-19.

About the Author

Hello, it's me, a college graduate representing the class of 2020! During the pandemic, I had my last semester of college partially online, then searched for jobs in a struggling economy, all from the comfort yet social isolation of my childhood home. Many of my peers have had similar challenges, and others have been cut off from loved ones, got laid off, or watched a family member suffer from COVID-19.



Of course, people of all age groups are struggling right now.

[Young parents](#) are contending with child care and work at the same time, while the elderly are more isolated

than ever. And yet [research](#) suggests that across the age spectrum, younger people like me are faring the worst, with greater stress, anxiety, and depression.

“[T]he COVID-19 outbreak represents an extraordinarily stressful experience for youths, including how necessary public health measures may also threaten personal and collective meaning-making, and disrupt family dynamics and youths’ usual social environment,” [write](#) Cécile Rousseau and Diana Miconi of McGill University.

Why are youth especially vulnerable during this time, and what we can do about it? Although scientists are only beginning to explore these questions in the context of COVID-19, research on well-being across the lifespan can give us some clues about what might be going on.

Young people in the pandemic

During the pandemic, studies in various countries have found that young people in particular are struggling. For example, in a [study](#) of over 7,000 Chinese people in February, people under 35 reported higher levels of anxiety and more depressive symptoms compared to other age groups.

Over in Spain, just as the pandemic began to impact the country, 48% of people ages 18 to 25 were experiencing

moderate depression, according to a survey [study](#). In contrast, this was true of only 21% of their 26- to 60-year-old counterparts, and 6% of those older than 61. According to the researchers, the elevated rates of stress, anxiety, and depression for young people could have been partially due to the additional stress they were experiencing as they tried to adapt to online education.

Finally, in a [survey study](#) in Slovenia, younger participants had worse stress and mental health compared to their older counterparts. Here, one big factor that seemed to contribute to mental health was people's resilience: their ability to handle painful feelings, deal with whatever life throws at them, and bounce back from hardship. Not only was resilience important for protecting against elevated stress and worse mental health, but it also weakened the negative impact of risk factors like pre-existing health conditions on mental health.

Few of these studies offered any clear explanations for this pattern, though. Why do young people seem to be struggling so much more than older adults right now?

How emotions change as we age

Research on how our emotions change across the lifespan offers a clue. According to Stanford psychologist Laura L. Carstensen's "[socioemotional selectivity theory](#)," young

people tend to have different goals and relationship behaviors because of the way they perceive time. When time remaining in life seems expansive, as it does for most younger adults, we tend to focus on knowledge-seeking goals, like investing in a long-term purpose or project. These types of commitments tend to be more emotionally taxing. On the flip side, when older adults perceive their time as limited, they tend to focus on emotion-related goals, such as savoring positive moments and engaging in activities that make them feel good, with a focus on more immediate payoffs.

In other words, even outside of a pandemic, older adults put more attention and effort into regulating their emotions, and actually tend to be [higher in well-being](#).

But add a pandemic to the equation, and young people are at an even bigger disadvantage. The goals we tend to focus on—like gaining new skills or succeeding at our jobs—are being thwarted, as school is disrupted and employment hard to find. Meanwhile, while their lives may certainly be restricted, older adults are more practiced at finding contentment in the little things.

According to Carstensen's theory, these differences extend to people's social lives, as well. Younger people want to maximize their social connections and connectivity overall; they prefer novel social interactions that could have potential

payoffs in the future, so they tend to build a larger network. This contrasts with older people, who become more selective and undergo a pruning process that leaves them with a more intimate circle of friends—a habit much more suited to the days of social distancing and pandemic [bubbles](#).

In other words, the conditions of life under this pandemic make it harder for young people to capitalize on social connections, and act according to our instinct of exploring a vast array of social opportunities. We miss out on letting loose with friends at a concert, experiencing the dating scene and seeking a lifelong mate, and attending networking events to help advance our careers.

The loss of rituals



UC Berkeley's 2020 graduation ceremony

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As part of the UC Berkeley Class of 2020, I attended

graduation on Minecraft, an online game that had been designed as a virtual ceremony on a virtual Berkeley campus. While this was a thoughtful way of adapting to the situation, it certainly did not evoke the sense of ritual and sentimentality that my peers and I would have felt in gathering together in person. Besides, what's a graduation ceremony without all of the sobbing parents? This day reminded me that a graduation is less about the ceremony itself and more about the feelings that are shared with your friends, family, and community by your side.

The loss of rituals like this may be another reason why young people are struggling right now, says [Betty Ray](#), the founder of the Center for Ritual Design, who works to help people navigate personally meaningful life transitions. Whether it's moving to college, graduating, or getting your first apartment, [rituals](#) are very important to young people, marking the journey into adulthood. Rituals, no matter how big or small, also provide a sense of belonging and meaning. They represent growth, signifying the end of a chapter and the start of another.

As Ray explains, coming of age has always been important for young people; graduation, for example, is a paramount experience where a young person is launched into the world. Critical family bonding as well as personal growth happens out of these milestones.

“Having an authentic rite of passage, focused on purpose, designed for the young person to grapple with the most important questions . . . is invaluable,” says Ray. Those crucial questions included, “What is my purpose?,” “What do I care about?,” “What am I good at?,” and “What does the world need?” Rituals give us time to reflect on where we came from and where we’re going. And crafting this solid sense of identity has huge mental health upsides.

To foster a sense of purpose for young people in this rocky time, Ray suggests finding ways to reclaim our rituals. It’s best if our rituals are action-oriented and embodied, in a way that goes beyond just thinking. For example, on a small scale, we could take a walk where we get out in nature to experience beauty, or commit to a daily journal writing activity where we go beyond a typical to-do list and reflect more deeply on life. Ray noted the importance of our mindset and a sense of receptivity, which can help us find meaning even in simple ritual practices. Read some other suggestions for recreating and reimagining rituals [here](#).

How young people can cope

Besides reclaiming ritual, researchers are already exploring other ways that young people (and others) can cope with the isolation and stress of the pandemic.

For example, [Japanese researchers](#) argue that one way

young people can combat mental health struggles is to try to deliberately savor ordinary, everyday experiences by using the five senses to amplify positive emotions and promote a sense of calm. In practice, this might look like bringing attention to your breathing and the sensation of each of your ten fingertips as a grounding practice in an overwhelming moment.

Similarly, a [study](#) with 282 Belgian college students showed that positive rumination, or focusing prolonged attention on pleasant aspects of the present moment (like the awe of watching a sunset or reveling in the joy of a good phone call with a friend) promoted positive emotion—and telling others about these feelings was even more beneficial. This is pretty much the opposite of what some of us are doing when we spend [hours a day consuming COVID-19 news](#), which can hurt our mental health.

When we are struggling, the [researchers from Slovenia](#) suggest a few approaches that can be helpful for young people. For one, they recommend practicing psychological coping strategies that can help us solve problems, deal with difficult emotions, and find meaning in our lives. For example, we can try looking at the situation from a different perspective to find the silver linings, such as the improved relationships with others or greater strength or competence that we are building through adversity. We could also adapt

to the situation by shifting our goals or re-prioritizing our [life values](#).

Based on research about natural disasters and trauma, the researchers also highlight the crucial role of human connection and social support. Finding ways to [stay connected](#) and [give](#) and receive support can help combat the traumatic experiences many are facing due to this global pandemic.

As young people try to grapple with online learning, search for jobs in a struggling economy, and cope while cut off from our support systems, it's clear that our age group in particular is struggling at this time. Although our minds might be drawn to pursuing big future goals and meeting new people, in this world today it is critical to put effort into our emotional wellness and our close connections.

I hope to practice savoring the positive emotions that arrive and nurturing them to the best of my ability, all while doing everything I can to stay socially connected. On the ritual side, I plan to keep up my surfing practice, which centers me in providing a space for quiet reflection. And I'll continue to ponder my answer to Ray's questions of "What does the world need right now?" and "How can I contribute?"