

“It flipped my world upside down.”

Supporting students through the COVID-19 crisis

Although there is little research focusing on college students and pandemics, limited studies were conducted during the 2009 swine flu pandemic. One [study](#) on mental health outcomes and behavioral factors related to taking care of one’s physical health (e.g., washing hands) found that undergraduate students reported increased stress and general anxiety as well as more vigilance in their physical care. However, during the swine flu pandemic college students were not a high-risk group, and thus their thoughts and behaviors might not be the same as those associated with COVID-19 today. One can assume that since COVID-19 poses a greater [risk for young adults](#), college students could face significant mental health consequences. In this brief we address students’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and what research shows about how young people process distress and what they need. Selected resources to inform responsive teaching are provided.

What students are saying

We asked students to share their concerns as they left campus and moved online for the semester.

I believe transitioning classes to solely online will be difficult and hectic. There are a lot of systemic influences (such as non-essential business closures, loss of income for both my parents and myself, late rent payments, etc.) that will end up getting in the way of school. And without access to on-campus guidance and resources, I personally feel left having to fend for myself.

— Gabriel

I think that overall moving to online is harder because it messes with our routine. It is a lot harder to be motivated to get work done when you do not have to get up, get dressed, walk to class, etc. It's almost as if it's harder to put your brain in school mode.

— Rosa

The United States now has more COVID-19 cases than any country in the world and we are supposed to carry on our coursework as usual?

— Taylor

It has, like for many others, flipped my world upside down and has been emotionally painful. As dramatic as that may sound, it's difficult to use more toned-down wording solely due to the reality of the fast pace at which things are changing and how drastic these changes we must adapt to are.

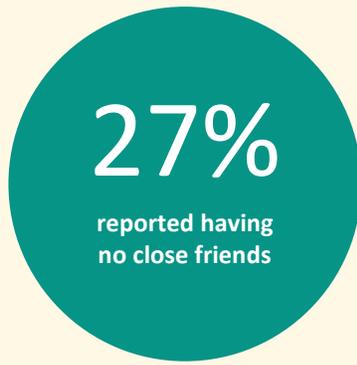
— Yong

Although some students indicate they are coping well, for many there is a sense of sadness, shock, and frustration. Students, not unlike faculty and staff members, are experiencing varying levels of self-reported grief, decreased social connectedness, and loss of familiar daily routines, any of which can often prompt various mental health conditions.

Disconnection in today's generation

We assume that adolescents today are more socially connected than were previous generations, yet recent [research](#) suggests that they are significantly less integrated.

In comparison to earlier studies showing that only 9% of Baby Boomers and 15% of Generation X reported they had no friends, among today's adolescents (ages 18–27),



Brain development and skills in adolescence

Added to this is another layer of complexity for adolescents in terms of their ability to process a pandemic. The frontal cortex region of the brain does not fully develop until roughly age 26. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH), this area is responsible for skills for avoiding risky behaviors:

Engaging in forward thinking

Controlling impulses



Rationalizing costs and benefits of behavior

Planning and prioritizing

Although we saw hundreds of students on beaches during spring break, it is important to understand that this might not show blatant disregard for others, but rather that young people have a difficult time fundamentally with understanding and managing the magnitude of the pandemic. Furthermore, [NIMH](#) cautions that because their brains are still developing, adolescents may respond to stress differently than adults, which could lead to stress-related mental disorders such as anxiety and depression.

What adolescents need

- 1 Support for managing stress
- 2 Ways to become socially connected
- 3 Creative and expressive outlets
- 4 Help with problem-solving
- 5 Validation of their feelings
- 6 Involvement: make it a team effort

Resources to support adolescent students in response to COVID-19

Support in the classroom

Coping With Coronavirus: How Faculty Members Can Support Students in Traumatic Times

Free downloadable resource from The Chronicle of Higher Education

Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide

Free downloadable resource intended to help educators understand how trauma affects learning and provide practical advice for how to work effectively with college students who have been exposed to trauma

Youth-led actions

Voices of Youth

A worldwide community of young people seeking to make a positive difference in their countries and communities; an initiative of UNICEF (special section on COVID-19 and youths' mental health)

Youth-led response to COVID-19

A story of youths in Bangladesh who are helping their communities respond to the crisis, reported in New Age; a challenge for us to be creative about how we can help even in quarantine

Meaning-making

Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: What do We Gain and What do We Lose When Classrooms go Virtual?

Blog post in Scientific American by a student in narrative medicine and fine arts

[COVID-19] One important recommendation you may not be hearing

Mission.org blog post on how to activate your "brain's superpowers" and body's immune system



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