

Teenagers Report Growing Anxiety. Maybe That's Rational.

April 2, 2022

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This week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published results from a survey of American teenagers that was conducted between January and June of 2021, and the findings aren't great.

According to the C.D.C.:

More than one in three high school students (37.1 percent) experienced poor mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, 44.2 percent of students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, almost 20 percent seriously considered suicide, and 9.0 percent attempted suicide during the 12 months before the survey.

When the survey began, the C.D.C. notes, "approximately 50 percent of all students in the United States were receiving online-only instruction," and "research has shown that online-only instruction has had a negative effect on the mental health of adolescents." The impact was not felt equally among all teens, though: "Female students and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, other or questioning (LGBQ) are experiencing disproportionate levels of poor mental health and suicide-related behaviors" and "students who reported racism were also more likely to experience poor mental health and less likely to feel connected to people at school," the results indicate.

In The Washington Post, Moriah Balingit writes that adolescent mental health was already on a downward slide:

Concerns about adolescent mental health were rising before the pandemic: Teens had been reporting poor mental health at higher rates. Between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of teens who reported having "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" rose from 26 percent to 37 percent. In 2021, the figure rose to 44 percent.

Kim Tingley has recently written for The New York Times Magazine about this phenomenon. And as the C.D.C.'s website outlines, anxiety and depression among children has increased over time, as the number of kids ages 6-17 "ever having been diagnosed with either anxiety or depression" has increased, "from 5.4 percent in 2003 to 8 percent in 2007 and to 8.4 percent in 2011-2012."

Because a lot of these worrying statistics overlap with the expansion of the internet's ubiquity, I'm already bracing for the tech-centric, if not tech-panic, explanations, including more headlines asking whether smartphones are destroying a generation or if social media is causing horrible mental health among teen girls specifically.

I'm not suggesting that social media may not be part of why teenagers say they're anxious, and have become more anxious over time. But as with any thorny issue or big change, there are likely multiple intersecting causes.

First, let's be clear that the pandemic cratered a lot of people's mental health, regardless of age, and there's so much else going on in society right now, including inflation, gun violence and the war in Ukraine, causing people profound upset. The American Psychological Association has been conducting its "Stress in America" survey since 2007, and this year found that "Money stress registered at the highest recorded level since 2015."

When will the pandemic end? We asked three experts — two immunologists and an epidemiologist — to weigh in on this and some of the hundreds of other questions we've gathered from readers recently, including how to make sense of booster and test timing, recommendations for children, whether getting covid is just inevitable and other pressing queries.

How concerning are things like long covid and reinfections? That's a difficult question to answer definitely, writes the Opinion columnist Zeynep Tufekci, because of the lack of adequate research and support for sufferers, as well as confusion about what the condition even is. She has suggestions for how to approach the problem. Regarding another ongoing Covid danger, that of reinfections, a virologist sets the record straight: "There has yet to be a variant that negates the benefits of vaccines."

How will the virus continue to change? As a group of scientists who study viruses explains, "There's no reason, at least biologically, that the virus won't continue to evolve." From a different angle, the science writer David Quammen surveys some of the highly effective tools and techniques that are now available for studying Covid and other viruses, but notes that such knowledge alone won't blunt the danger.

What could endemic Covid look like? David Wallace Wells writes that by one estimate, 100,000 Americans could die each year from the coronavirus. Stopping that will require a creative effort to increase and sustain high levels of vaccination. The immunobiologist Akiko Iwasaki writes that new vaccines, particular those delivered through the nose, may be part of the answer.

As The Atlantic's Olga Khazan explained in a good article about why people are acting so weird right now, everybody is extremely overwhelmed, and it's causing lots of adults to behave in uncivil ways on airplanes, in school board meetings and even at the Oscars. Watching adults fall apart probably isn't helping teenagers cope with life, nor are a lot of other recent stressors. As Erin Anhalt, the mother of a 15-year-old girl in Maryland, put it to me on Twitter, her daughter says "she watched half the adults throw a fit about wearing a mask during a pandemic, they're watching climate change play out rapidly, feels like no chance at an education without crippling debt, etc... of course they are anxious."

Life has always been hard, and being a teenager has always been hard. Being a teenager with abusive parents, or one who is food insecure, has always been particularly hard.

So I do wonder if another reason for the uptick in teens saying they're depressed and anxious is that they have the language for it now, and that there's so much less stigma to admitting these feelings than there was even when I was a kid — which is something psychologists and psychiatrists I have interviewed for previous newsletters have pointed out. This would be difficult to demonstrate with a study, since we don't have a time machine to go back and interview teens in 1992 to ask them about their knowledge of, attitudes about and exposure to mental health issues.

In any case, we should pay close attention to the fact that teens are reporting such high levels of stress. So many of them are still reeling from the worst moments in the pandemic and the feelings of isolation and disconnection that they experienced. And I do think we should all be mindful of the ways our kids are interacting with social media, and how it's making them feel. In *The Times*, Virginia Hughes reported on a new study about social media use:

Analyzing survey responses of more than 84,000 people of all ages in Britain, the researchers identified two distinct periods of adolescence when heavy use of social media spurred lower ratings of "life satisfaction": first around puberty — ages 11 to 13 for girls, and 14 to 15 for boys — and then again for both sexes around age 19.

It's this kind of nuanced, specific information that I find most helpful in figuring out boundaries around social media use for my own two girls. I was contemplating allowing my older daughter to get a smartphone at the beginning of middle school, but information like this makes me reconsider. Perhaps we will opt for a "dumb phone" without internet capabilities, or a smart watch with limited functionality instead, if we feel she must get some kind of tech to keep in contact.

The internet, and our reliance on it as a tool, isn't going away. We need to help our kids live with it in a way that protects their mental health, rather than freaking out about how it's destroying them.