

We asked Huron

How has your mental health been affected by the pandemic?

All responses are anonymous

"I feel like I'm always at **30 percent brain power**. No less, no more."

"Sometimes it feels hard to even get up and take care of myself."

"I used to be very on top of my work and did very good in school but **everything's harder**."

"I have almost zero motivation and online school is so stressful. It **makes me miserable**."

"It has plummeted to the **lowest it has ever been** and caused me to develop social anxiety."

"It's just kind of **perpetually bad** - I don't really notice anymore."

Q&A with Eli Atkinson about his mental health



JULIE PARK | DESIGN EDITOR

Q: What's the most challenging part of virtual school as a student with anxiety and depression?

A: "The most challenging part of virtual school and the COVID pandemic is feeling disconnected from everyone. I am a very extroverted person and I like to "recharge" by interacting with other people. Although there are opportunities to communicate with others through technology, I never get the same energy as I can when I'm connecting with people in the same physical space. This lack of in-the-flesh connection coupled with my anxiety and depression leaves me consistently drained of any ability to cope with or distract myself from their symptoms. It's easy to find a day spent up by anxious racing thoughts or lack of motivation to roll out of bed and turn on my computer. One strategy I have for reducing my stress is reminding myself that there is nothing wrong with me. The last nine months have been different from every other time in my life. It makes perfect sense to struggle and be less productive than normal right now."

The Second Pandemic

All ages - from teenagers to the elderly - are starting to feel the mental health impacts of the pandemic. While they are separated by several generations, the feeling of today remains the same - they are tired, scared and exhausted.

Hitting the limit

Students' mental health suffers as they aim for perfection amidst pandemic chaos

SHANIA AHMED
STAFF WRITER

Mental illnesses have been a prominent issue within today's society, especially within teens and young adults.

According to MIA (Mental Health In America), mental health is worsening among youth; 9.7 percent have severe or major depression, a value that additionally has skyrocketed as a result of the pandemic. A recent survey conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California presents that more than half of students indicated a need for mental health support throughout the pandemic. The rising prominence of mental health illnesses has left parents and teachers concerned. So, what impacts does virtual school have on mental illness amongst students and what are effective ways parents, teachers and staff can work towards preventing this occurrence?

The pandemic altered the normality of the world as people know it, changing routines as well as aspects of everyday life. For instance, an everyday school day consisted of students interacting and or socializing with each other and staff, going from one class to another and having the opportunity to ask questions and gain feedback from teachers. However, due to the virtual school, students are unable to have this opportunity.

"I don't necessarily think that virtual learning has a negative impact on students," school psychologist Jason Lewis said. "I do however feel that because of virtual learning that students may be missing out on a lot of the great aspects of school that they get from being there in person. People in general are social beings, and this pandemic has caused us to forego a lot of the social aspects of life that are a part of our humanity. Many students are missing their friends that they usually see on a day to day basis. They miss seeing their teachers and getting personal attention, missing meaningful conversations, sports, clubs, joking around, handshakes and high fives, etc. All of these things can have an impact

on people's emotional wellbeing."

When considering instances of the impacts online school has on students, the question of how staff and students work towards identifying, as well as preventing, this becomes crucial. A step you can take is to check up on not only the people around you, but also yourself and take time to participate in activities you enjoy.

It's most important to remind ourselves that it's okay not to be okay. And that feeling of loneliness, depression, and sadness are normal - but valid.

Lost in isolation

How the physical distancing negatively affects the elderly

ALLISON MI
COPY EDITOR

At the outset of the pandemic quarantine in March, the most reasonable solution for protecting the elderly, with their vulnerability to COVID-19, was to isolate them.

Completely. After all, the fatality rate from the disease is 14.8 percent for people 80 years and older, which is the highest figure for all age groups. When the elderly are physically secluded, all possible risks of infection are eliminated. However, in isolation, another crucial aspect of their well-being is unintentionally compromised: mental health. While most do not consider this factor as being critical, in fact, it is necessary for survival.

"There are so many things physiologically that happen when we're socially engaged," commented Linda Chatters, PhD, University of Michigan Professor of Health Behavior & Health Education. "We are definitely."

Studies of orphanages show that children who do not get daily interactions with caretakers show withdrawal, a smaller physique, less development and an overall "failure to thrive" compared to children who have stronger social connections.

"We gain a lot developmentally by the interactions that we have that involve visual cues of engagement," Prof. Chatters said. "This includes gaze, holding one another, talking and mimicking. These are all ways in which our brains develop."

Workers at Ann Arbor's Hillside Terrace Senior Living have noticed both obvious physical and mental declines in their residents, who have been quarantined for eight months.

"I mean, just the mood itself, it is very clear how much of a toll this has taken on them," Erin McIver, the Life Enrichment Director, said. "It's almost like we're not able to get people out of this kind of depression, even once we've been able to open back up. We're encouraging them, 'No, don't worry, you don't have to be stuck in this room anymore, we can get out and go do things now.'"

The quarantine impact on social health is unmistakable. The mandated quarantine has also been difficult on residents' families. During the first week of quarantine, as one staff member related, one of the resident's daughters came to surprise him at his window. They aligned their hands up and touched the window together, and blew each other a kiss. He then turned around with a tear in his eye. His final words: "That's my daughter." Her visit was one of his last interactions. He died the following Sunday from COVID-19. In Michigan, nursing homes and assisted living facilities account for 30.9 percent of COVID-19 deaths, a number that would probably be much higher without these enforced isolation measures. The dilemma lies in the fact that this policy, although it alleviates contamination, is also linked

"They're saying that they'll never see their loved ones, and if they have to live like this, they might as well give up."
Nanya Litz

to several mental health issues, the most prevalent being depression and anxiety. Additionally, the lack of social interaction can also worsen dementia. "Getting out and interacting with others is therapeutic for older adults with dementia," Prof. Chatters said. "That's going to be curtailed. Access to those [social] services has been a problem. Some of it you can do virtually, but certainly not all of it."

While residents have mixed feelings regarding conversations with boxed faces through Zoom, and some have even gotten used to it, face-to-face interactions have undoubtedly been missed.

"They're starting to think [these extreme precautions are] never-ending," Nanya Litz, Hillside's senior administrator, said. "They're saying that they'll never see their loved ones, and if they have to live like this, they might as well give up."

The frustration got to a point where some people began to refuse to drink water. To help lessen the effects of isolation, McIver tries to diversify what she shows to the residents each day from different movies and TV shows to word games and art projects. "I try to change up their daily routines because they are stuck in four walls for months at a time," McIver said.

Gradually, as the snow melted and April turned to May, flower petals opened and so did the activities at Hillside.

"It's almost like you see the light come back in some of these residents' eyes," McIver recalled. However, enforcing social distancing amongst the residents who were exhilarated to see their friends again was not as easy as she had anticipated. "I had to constantly remind them, 'I'm sorry, but you can't linger. I'm sorry, but you have to be six feet apart. I'm sorry, but you can't hug each other,'" McIver said.

The first activity to be opened was a walking program. In 14-day increments, a group of six people or fewer walked six feet apart in the beautiful courtyard, as temperatures warmed. Ice cream was served, too.

"I'll never forget about Walter, [who has a wife and daughter back at home], holding that ice cream," Litz said. "It took him forever to eat it. Everybody else was done with theirs. So, I said to him, 'Why are you waiting to eat that ice cream? Why are you eating it so slow?'" Walter's thoughtful response speaks to all of us. "I am savoring this moment," he said.

Mental Health Resources at Huron

If you would like to talk to someone about your mental health, reach out to your counselor, advisor, social worker, or Huron's psychologist, Dr. Lewis (lewisj@a2schools.org).

If you or someone you know needs urgent assistance, call the crisis lines below.

Washtenaw County Community Mental Health Crisis Line:
734-544-3050

Ozone House Crisis Line:
734-662-2222

GRAPHIC BY BRIDGIT JUNG

