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HEALTH & WELLNESS

# Coronavirus Turmoil Raises Depression Risks in Young Adults

Social isolation and vanished opportunities caused by Covid-19 bring a mental-health toll for those on the cusp of careers and adulthood



The social isolation brought by the Covid-19 pandemic has made everything harder, says Da'Trevion Moss, a senior at the University of Dubuque.

PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By [Andrea Petersen](#)

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For Da'Trevion Moss, a 23-year-old college student at the University of Dubuque in Iowa, the Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a series of personal blows. His summer internship at a local hospital was canceled. Many of his plans for starting an on-campus chapter of Active

Minds, a young adult mental-health-advocacy organization, had to be shelved. And now he's anxious about going back to in-person classes as the virus continues to spread.

“I felt like my career, all the things I was looking forward to and planning, were all ruined,” says Mr. Moss, who is starting his senior year and goes by Tre. “I was hurt and devastated by that.” The social isolation has made everything harder, he says. “I really thrive off face-to-face interactions. Not having that for the past four or five months has been really, really difficult.”

The pandemic and its economic fallout are taking a toll on the mental health of many Americans. But the burden is perhaps greatest for those on the brink of adulthood, young people who are often seeing their dreams of careers, romances and adventures dashed.



Mr. Moss says he's trying to keep a positive mindset, going to the gym and getting back his old job at Starbucks when his internship fell through. On his frequent walks, he often stops to pet his neighbor's dog.

PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

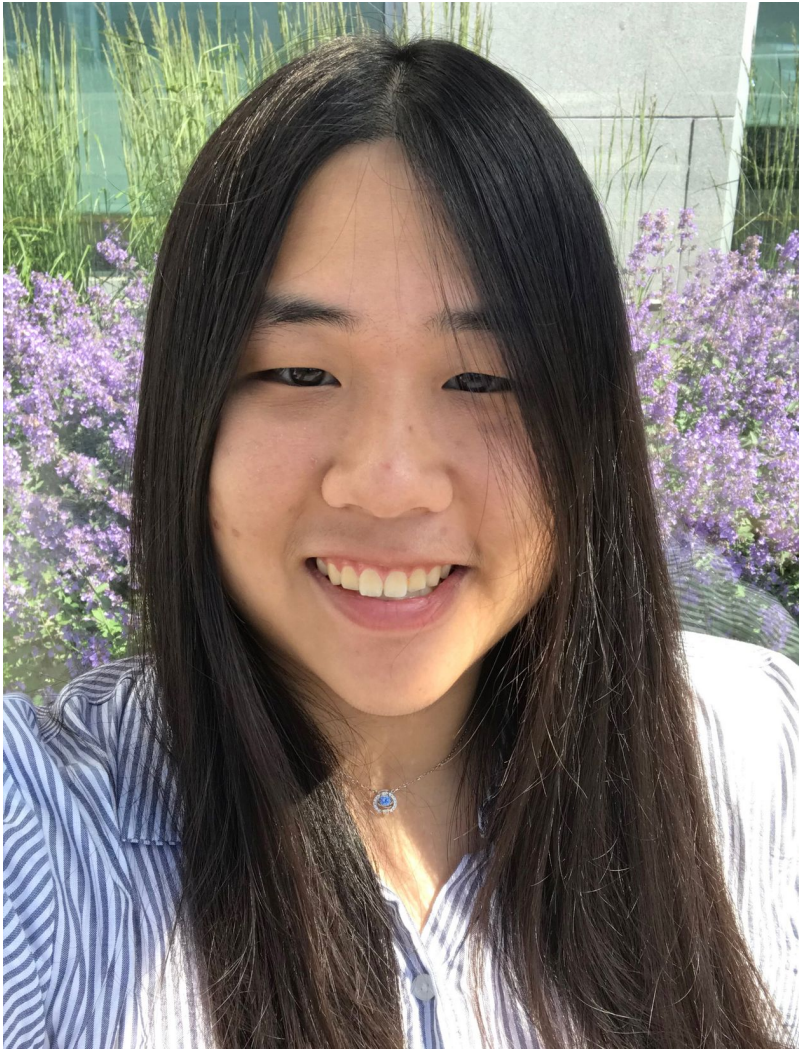
“A number of kids are expressing that these are supposed to be the best years—high school and college—the most free years,” says Anne Marie Albano, a professor of medical psychology in psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York. “The possibility that Covid is going to completely change this period of their life, and they won't ever get it back, is overwhelming for a lot of them,” she says.

Nearly 41% of college students reported symptoms of depression in a survey of 18,764 students from the end of March through May by the American College Health Association and the Healthy Minds Network, a research project based at the University of Michigan, Boston University and the University of California, Los Angeles. That is up from 35.7% in a

Healthy Minds survey from fall 2019. Also, suicide risk measured in the spring ticked up to 27.2%, from 25% measured last fall in a survey by the college health association, which is a research and advocacy group promoting student health. In a survey taken in April by Active Minds—which has chapters on more than 550 college campuses—about 80% of 2,086 college students reported that Covid-19 had “negatively impacted” their mental health.

Even before the pandemic, young people showed rising rates of mental-health problems. According to a spring 2019 survey of nearly 68,000 college students by the American College Health Association, about 24% had been diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems in the preceding 12 months, and 20% had been diagnosed with or treated for depression. Those rates were about double those found in the survey a decade earlier. The stress of Covid can make existing mental-health problems worse and cause new ones, psychologists say.

“Emerging adulthood is a very intense time of life,” says Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a senior research scholar at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. From the ages of roughly 18 to 29, young people “are making big decisions about their education, their career path, their romantic relationships,” Dr. Arnett says. “It’s the liftoff decade for your entry to an adult career path. To have that suddenly blown up with no sign of when it’s going to end, it’s tough.”



'I was really sad,' says Sophia Sheih, whose internships, work-study job and study-abroad program were canceled.

PHOTO: SOPHIA SHIEH

Sophia Shieh, who is 21 and entering her junior year at Boston College, applied for three summer internships. They were all canceled, as was her summer work-study job. Perhaps the biggest blow, however, was the cancellation of her study-abroad program in Oxford, England, where she had planned to spend the coming school year.

"I was really sad," says Ms. Sheih, who says she has found solace in online support groups run by her college's counseling center and in a virtual Bible study group she conducts with friends.

Psychologists say that the social isolation and the curtailing of some autonomy imposed by the pandemic are particularly difficult for teenagers and young adults. At these ages, young people are driven to seek more independence from their families, connect with their peers and pursue romantic relationships, says Karen L. Bierman, director of the Child Study Center at Pennsylvania State University.

The uncertainty around if and when the pandemic will end, and what life will look like in that future, is also causing distress.

“One of the things that carries young people through all of the things they have to do is some vision of the future. Here’s a life I see for myself that looks interesting. Suddenly that gets hard to see,” says Joseph P. Allen, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. Dr. Allen says this can zap motivation to do things like study for the SAT or even just get off the sofa, which can make mental-health issues even worse.

The grinding unemployment that has hit young people especially hard is likely to have other harmful effects, notes Charles B. Nemeroff, professor and chair of the department of psychiatry at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin. “Studies have shown a relationship between unemployment and suicide and unemployment and illicit drug use and unemployment and alcohol use. This teenage and young-adult population is particularly susceptible to those influences,” Dr. Nemeroff says.

Indeed, psychologists and psychiatrists worry that the pandemic may cause long-term harm because the developing brain is “vulnerable to insults,” he says. “One of the insults is isolation and loneliness.”

“One of the key jobs that a teenager has developmentally is to learn how to develop trusting friendships and resolve conflicts in ways that are constructive and productive,” says Maria A. Oquendo, chairman of psychiatry at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and past president of the American Psychiatric Association. Social isolation could “derail their maturation and development,” Dr. Oquendo says.

Several psychologists recommend that teens and young adults create “pods” with a few friends they can see without social distancing. The key is to allow young people to meet their needs for social interaction in a safe way, says Columbia’s Dr. Albano. “If you pen them in,” she says, “you’re going to make your kids more depressed and anxious.” (They’ll also be more likely to sneak out to those big, unsupervised parties, she adds.)

Focusing on what you can control helps, says Mary Alvord, a psychologist in Chevy Chase, Md. “Every session, I start with, ‘What’s under your control right now, what’s going well?’ And when things are not going well, ‘What are aspects you can do something about?’ ”

James Robinson, 15, says volunteering with an organization that delivers food to needy families and attending protests for the Black Lives Matter movement “adds structure and gives me a boost in myself.” A high-school sophomore this year in Bethesda, Md., James says, “Doing something I’m passionate about that’s doing some good in the world, that’s important to me.”

The pandemic might be teaching some young adults an important lesson, says Victor Schwartz, a psychiatrist and chief medical officer at the Jed Foundation, a mental-health-education and advocacy group focusing on young adults. Covid-19, says Dr. Schwartz, “has undermined the fantasy that I think teens and young adults and their families have had, that life is controllable and predictable given the right resources.” Young people, Dr. Schwartz says, can “learn how to adjust and roll with things.”

Mr. Moss in Iowa says what has been helping him is sticking to a schedule. He has started going to the gym every day, writing poetry and heading out for regular walks. He sees a therapist weekly and, after his internship fell through, got his old job back at Starbucks.

“I’m trying to keep a positive mind-set,” he says. “I’m ready to tackle so many things.”

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