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## Mental Health in High School Students at the Time of COVID-19: A Student's Perspective



### To the Editor:

**T**he global impact of 2019 novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is unprecedented and has left countries grappling with uncertainties. Various public health measures all over the world have been implemented to reduce associated illness severity and mortality. Countries are now coming out of lockdown with cautious optimism after successfully flattening the curve with measures such as social distancing, quarantine, and closure of public places including schools. However, the challenges related to the impact on students' mental health continue beyond this phase of the pandemic. This article highlights key issues and offers practical solutions to address the mental health of adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic from a high school student's perspective.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ROUTINE

As with many schools and universities, my school has been closed since March 13, 2020, and it is uncertain when classes will resume. Adolescence is a crucial period for social development. Social distancing and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic can worsen existing mental health problems in adolescents and increase the risk of future mental health issues.<sup>1</sup> A loss of routine for many students, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness increase the risk of mental illness.<sup>2</sup> An increase in domestic violence and abuse during this pandemic further exposes adolescents to risks of developing mental health problems. Historically, schools may provide a social support network and mental health services for vulnerable teens. However, closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic has taken away the protective layer of school-based mental health support. Closure of community agencies makes the situation even harder. Conversely, the COVID-19 quarantine has afforded time for family bonding over traditional board games and other activities. However, some students may need additional support for their well-being. Virtual meetings with guidance counselors from schools can facilitate early recognition and referral to primary care and mental health services.

Within a pandemic environment of furloughs and job cuts, families may struggle to purchase technology for high school students who could benefit from school-based counseling support for mental health problems. Efforts should be made for equitable access to technology for adolescents seeking telemental health services through school and community providers.<sup>3</sup>

### POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

The last few months have seen social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and TikTok flooded with COVID-19 materials.<sup>4</sup> Trending of information on these social media sites is due to the "likes" and "shares," and any misinformation leaves adolescents exposed to associated vulnerabilities. The social media infodemic has been linked to anxiety, feeling powerless, and catastrophizing situations.<sup>4</sup> Further, COVID-19-themed jokes and memes circulating on social media can lead to pandemic issues not being taken seriously, which increases the risk of infection and associated distress and trauma.<sup>4</sup> Partnerships with parents and social influencers can guide students toward healthy information-seeking behavior and positive mental health strategies. Both increased social media use and traditional forms of education moving to digital platforms have led to the majority of adolescents spending more time in front of screens.<sup>5</sup> Excessive screen time is often associated with poor sleep, sedentary habits, mental health problems, and physical health issues.<sup>5</sup>

Uncertainty, fear of getting the virus, sleep problems, and worries about the future are some of the common mental health issues impacting adolescents in the face of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Increased incidence of mental health problems, including stress-related disorders, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, have been described in adolescents during a pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Quarantine, trauma, and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic further increase the risk of mental health problems.<sup>3</sup> A lack of adequate support systems leaves adolescents to find resources by themselves in an underfunded area that continues to face stigma. Family and community supports to foster stronger relationships with children and adolescents and involvement of children safeguarding agencies when needed can help mitigate risks.

## FIVE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenging time, and a multilayered action plan to support students' mental health during the pandemic is necessary. Such a plan could include the following strategies:

- Improving resilience of high school students with self-help strategies: The psychological impact of COVID-19 on adolescents will be felt both in the short-term and in the long-term,<sup>3</sup> and efforts should be made to equip adolescents with strategies to build resilience. Students can be encouraged to create short-term goals and schedules and taught mindfulness techniques to build resilience.<sup>3</sup> Acts of gratitude and compassion, such as helping those in need through volunteer activities, can also help.
- Developing peer support networks (buddy system): Creating a buddy system allows high school students to form peer connections and check in on friends through network hubs or mentoring supports, either created by adolescents connected to each other (eg, sports clubs, hobby clubs) or facilitated by youth organizations.
- Leverage digital technology for mental health support: High school students can access digital options for support and resources by exploring online portals that offer resource hubs and self-assessment tools. Self-help apps, digital counseling, and telemedicine services will continue to allow increased access to mental health services from home.<sup>6</sup>
- Collaborative partnerships: Community mental health organizations should partner with high school students, their families, and schools to co-create mental health promotion programs. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to be digitally connected and work on collaborative projects, such as community mindfulness sessions.
- Ongoing government support through its networks: As a high school student, I would like to advocate for greater cohesiveness in governance across all levels—regional, provincial, and national—to mobilize and invest in community resources that promote engagement with local youth organizations.

Benjamin Franklin famously said: “Out of adversity comes opportunity.” The COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with myriad challenges, and the way we respond is going to shape the mental health of adolescents for the future.

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## Elements of the New Conversation



### To the Editor:

**I**n the editorial comment<sup>1</sup> on Greenhill *et al.*'s report of new MTA data on growth effects of stimulant medication for ADHD,<sup>2</sup> Dr. Charach calls for a new conversation on stimulant use and makes several important points that we would like to amplify.

She notes that “In view of these data, the search for evidence-based nonmedication interventions ought to intensify” and recommends “...integrating non-pharmacological interventions that provide proven benefits to limit total lifetime medication exposure.” In fact, we already have some evidence-based nonmedication interventions. The MTA itself found evidence for a significant reduction of stimulant dose with better outcome by adding currently available behavioral treatment (behavior modification, parent training, training in study skills, school programming, daily report card) to optimal medication. However, not only should nonpharmacological