

An interview with a university mental health professional

Anxiety, depression, loneliness grip millions of youth during pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives of millions in the US and internationally. In the US alone, the number of reported deaths due to the virus has reached 108,000, while the number of people infected is nearing 1.9 million. Directly and indirectly, Americans are witnessing unprecedented levels of mass sickness and death, social isolation, and economic downturn. At least 40 million people are unemployed, including at least 7.7 million young people under 30. There is not a single aspect of life the pandemic and economic recession have not affected, while the governmental response has revealed the ruling elite's indifference to human life.

It is under these conditions that millions are facing a mental health crisis in response to austere conditions wrought and exposed by the pandemic. The Household Pulse Survey, conducted by the US Census Bureau in collaboration with five other federal agencies, found that 34 percent of Americans ages 18 and older have reported symptoms of anxiety or depression that have been shown to be associated with diagnoses of generalized anxiety disorder or major depressive disorder. In June 2019, a similar survey found that 11.9 percent of the American adult population reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, meaning the numbers have nearly tripled within the past year.

The increase of mental health issues has primarily fallen on young people. In recent weeks, 47 percent of respondents ages 18-29 reported increased frequency in symptoms associated with anxiety and depression, such as feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge, feeling unable to stop or control worrying, feeling a loss of interest or motivation, and feeling depressed, down or hopeless.

While millions of youth are struggling to cope with the impacts of the pandemic, which is itself a product of the broader crisis of capitalism, hundreds of thousands of working class youth across the US have entered into a direct confrontation with the state in the mass, multiracial protests that erupted following the police murder of George Floyd in

Minneapolis. Ultimately, the mental health crisis affecting millions will only be resolved through such a social struggle, involving the entire working class, to rebuild society on socialist foundations that will guarantee all workers a high quality of life.

The WSWs recently spoke with Beth Dunn, L.C.S.W, a psychotherapist who works with undergraduate and graduate students, about the mental health of young people during the pandemic.

What major mental health impacts are college students experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Particularly with students and graduate students, there is an overall increase in anxiety and depression, which impacts their motivation and ability to do work. A large part of the college experience is being able to interact with one another in person, and now they don't have the opportunity to do that. Many of my particular clients express a sense of loneliness. The pandemic is really hitting them hard.

As a therapist I was working with students before the pandemic who were already struggling with various mental health issues, and the pandemic has exacerbated their mental health challenges, making them more difficult to manage.

What is it about the current crisis that is causing an increase in mental health challenges for college students in general and your clients?

There are a couple of ways the crisis is impacting people. It's not just the forced isolation that can impact depression, and it's not just the fear of catching the virus that increases anxiety, but they are also entering into a state of uncertainty in their lives out of school. So, a lot of people I am talking with who are graduating or are trying to find jobs or internships are feeling really discouraged and worried that they won't have employment. Many of my clients mention they will not find a job, and there just are no jobs to look for. The uncertainty of employment is causing just as much if not more stress than any immediate effects such as fear of catching the virus.

Quite a few of my patients are teaching assistants at the university level, and they have said that it has been really challenging to shift to teaching virtually. It has been an immense amount of effort, and they feel it's harder to connect with students. The quality of work is different. And I'm hearing similar things from students as well, that they are not learning in the same capacity as they were with in-person classes. They argue there is no real discussion or engagement, it's detached and at most you interact with a discussion board and listen to a pre-recorded lecture, so they are missing that interactive part of education which is near impossible to recreate online. So, for being a student and a teacher it's really challenging and there are stressors and conditions both are having to adapt to.

What do you see as possible implications for students facing mental health challenges in the current crisis, where students face mass unemployment, social isolation, etc.?

Maybe we are already starting to see it, but there is going to be a mental health crisis that emerges and that could last into the unforeseeable future. For the students I'm working with, I think mental health is so tied to other aspects of their well-being, so if they feel economically insecure, and if they are feeling immense loneliness and isolation, that is really serious. Talking to a therapist helps, but ultimately they need to be able to connect with people and find some sense of stability or purpose in their day-to-day lives and feel financially secure. That's not even considering the amount of people affected by this pandemic who aren't seeing a therapist, and really there are limits to what therapy can do. I do feel that my role as a therapist is important, but in general if people do not have access to social connection, even the ability to go outside and feel safe and comfortable, that is really damaging.

What do you think people need in the short term and long term to help mitigate mental health challenges?

In the short term, having more, easy, flexible access to a therapist if they want to talk to someone. Also, having access to coping skills, and other resources to help them cope with immediate symptoms, support groups, and more open and available access to crisis lines if and when there is an immediate need. Domestic violence rates have increased, and there needs to be more awareness and support for issues like that.

In the long term, hopefully this pandemic will be a wake-up call to rethink our system of mental health care, which is part of our overall healthcare system. I think there should be a complete overhaul of the health care system. It should be more accessible and more affordable. Mental health is just as important and is absolutely bound up with overall well-being.

COVID-19 is a great example of just how much mental health is shaped by social forces and what is going on politically. A lot of my clients will spend a lot of time talking about feeling angry, despondent or hopeless based on what is happening socially and politically in the world, and it has a huge impact.

You are seeing a manifestation of social ills affecting and impacting people on a psychological level.

What are your thoughts on the current push by the federal and state governments to reopen the economy and drive people back into the workplace?

I think that the push back to work exposes that what is really important is getting the economy back up and running and not people's well-being. For people who are faced with going back to work, it is difficult and dangerous. To send people back into the workplace without adequate testing and when case rates are still going up seems really cavalier and a disregard for people's well-being and life.

The immense social dislocation wrought by the pandemic has exacerbated all the preexisting crises of capitalism, including the vast mental health crisis afflicting millions worldwide and youth in particular. While capitalism has fueled the pandemic and created a bleak future for billions of youth around the globe, there is a political alternative—the fight for socialism, to reorganize society for the health and well-being of the world's masses.

The mass demonstrations that have swept across the US and internationally point the way forward, and what is now most urgently needed is the building of a political leadership to steer these struggles to a successful conclusion. We encourage all those who support this fight to join the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and for students and young people to join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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