

Toronto

Some Ontario teens starting to adapt to stress from COVID-19 pandemic, research finds

Hundreds of teens still calling every day about mental health issues, Kids Help Phone says

[Muriel Draaisma](#) · CBC News · Posted: Oct 21, 2020 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: October 21, 2020



Isaac Rosenberg, 17, a Toronto District School Board student in Grade 12, says life has become easier since March. Now, his schedule is clear, and he has a teacher who is motivating students to learn. (Submitted by Isaac Rosenberg)

When the Ontario government shut schools in March, Isaac Rosenberg, 17, said he felt completely overwhelmed — the first time in his life that he felt that way.

"It took a few hours for the news to sink in. But when it did, my hands began to shake and my heart was beating stronger than ever. I think the main reason was that I was no longer in control," Rosenberg told CBC Toronto.

Seven months later, the Grade 12 student feels better. His virtual school schedule is clear, he has a teacher who is motivating students to learn, and he knows what he has to do.

"Now, I've become much more accustomed to it," he said.

Rosenberg, who used to attend William Lyon Mackenzie Collegiate Institute in North York, sees his friends in his backyard about once a month, with everyone masked and physically distanced. Before the pandemic, they'd get together once every two weeks.

- [**Experts, parents call for more mental health support as kids head back to school**](#)

Over the summer, he said they even formed a rock band, The Weatherboys, to maintain a sense of normalcy.

"Now I text and call, although it's annoying not being able to hang out as much."

COVID-19-related stress dropping over time, researchers say

According to Kids Help Phone, hundreds of teens are still calling and texting the service every day to talk about mental health issues. But some experts say some teens are reporting less anxiety, depression and loneliness than in the spring.

Two associate professors of psychology at Western University, Wendy Ellis and Tara Dumas, examined the habits of 444 Ontario teens between the ages of 14 and 19 in April, and again in August.

"There was a decrease in COVID-19-related stress over time," they said a research abstract.



Doors open to a hallway in a Toronto District School Board secondary school. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

Their research in April found that many teens were reporting high levels of stress and worry, particularly about school and COVID-19 itself, which caused feelings of loneliness. It was especially hard for young people who did not consider themselves popular.

Ellis and Dumas say some teens turned to drinking to cope, with many drinking alone, virtually with friends or face-to-face with friends, despite public health warnings not to gather in groups.

But their follow-up research in August found that the same teens reported lower levels of loneliness, depression and anxiety.

They said 43 per cent of respondents reported being "very concerned" in April, while only 25 per cent said the same thing in August.



With the help of a colleague, Wendy Ellis, an associate psychology professor at Western University, researched the impact of the pandemic on teens in April and in August. 'We had found that, generally, things got better, not surprisingly,' she says. (King's University College)

Ellis said: "They were less lonely, less depressed, less anxious than they were in April. I think they've kind of gotten used to it."

Spending time with parents helped lower depression, along with seeing friends in person, whether in April or August, the researchers found. Teens with supportive parents fared better, both at the start and six months into the pandemic. Support from friends led to less loneliness.

Virtual interactions with friends, however, did not yield these benefits.

And Ellis pointed out that teens who don't have good relationships with their parents, who don't have supportive friends, and who have existing mental health conditions, may suffer longer lasting impacts.

"I think that there are definitely signs of resilience, but I think if you look a little bit deeper, you're going to see some difference between participants," Ellis said.

For example, she said, nearly two-thirds reported feeling pressure from peers to engage in less physical distancing.

Stress still high for teens in racialized communities

Aseefa Sarang, executive director of Across Boundaries, an organization that works exclusively with people from Toronto's racialized and Black communities who are experiencing mental health and addiction issues, said stress related to the pandemic hasn't decreased for them.

"For our youth, not so much," Sarang said.



Aseefa Sarang, executive director of Across Boundaries, says she encourages parents to work on time management and organizational skills with their teens, to keep an agenda of daily assignments, to be involved in their day-to-day activities, to keep a list of websites that teens need to access and to be open to having young people share their challenges. (Submitted by Aseefa Sarang)

Across Boundaries says youth it supports in Toronto's Jane and Finch area, aged 15 to 24, are having trouble navigating school, whether it's virtual or in person.

"They're not finding enough support with online learning and schedules because things are constantly changing without proper notice and it's also affecting their attendance," Sarang said.

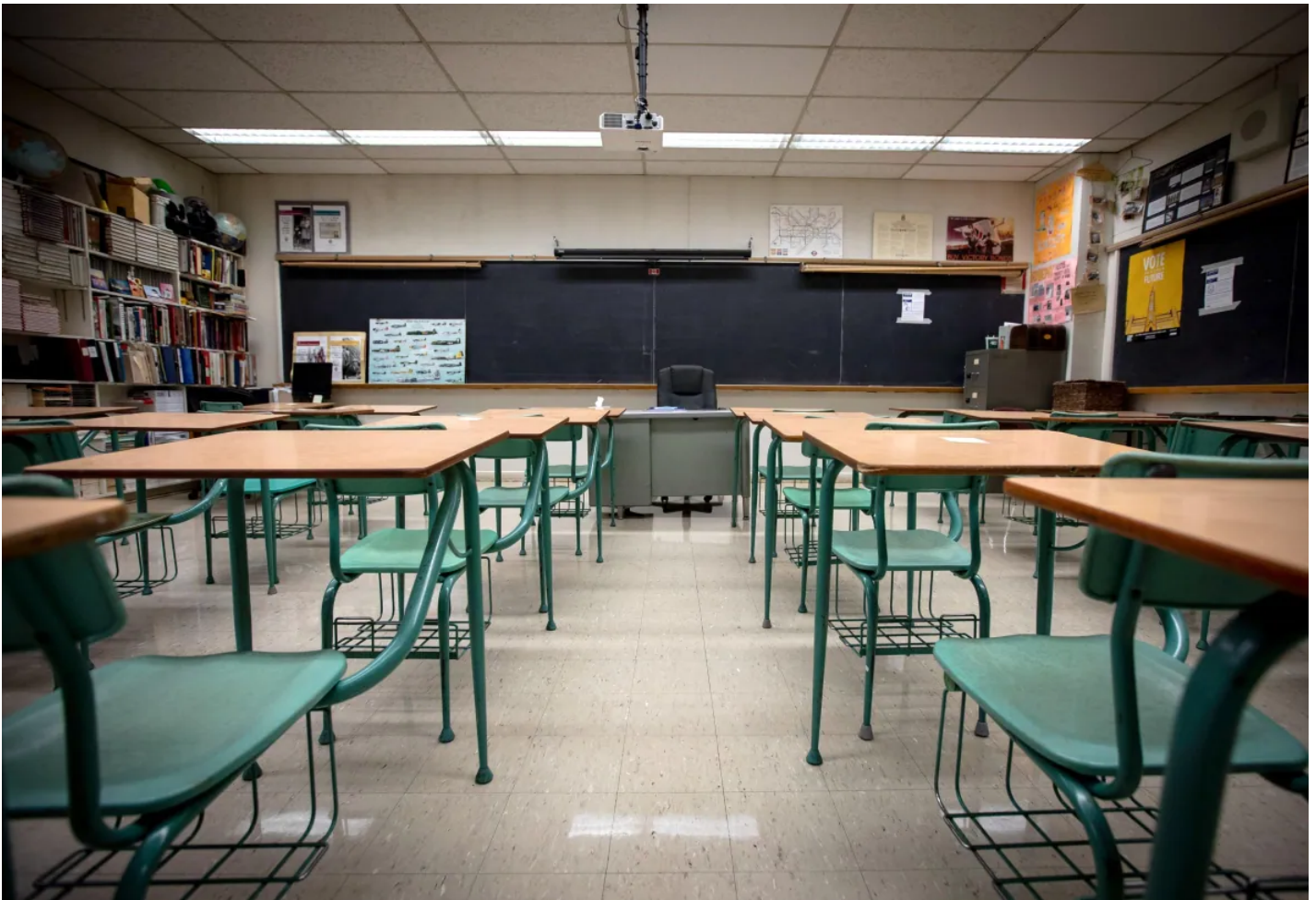
Sarang said there was already a lot of disparity in "what people were receiving, experiencing and accessing" in Toronto's racialized communities before the pandemic, adding that the education system needs to provide "safety nets" to ensure that disadvantaged youth don't fall further behind.

"Youth are very resilient and they're very knowledgeable ... But not everybody is the same. And so there will be some who may fall through the cracks," she said.

Teen concerned about outbreaks in schools

The high number of cases in particular neighbourhoods adds to the stress, she said, as well as stories about COVID-19 outbreaks in schools.

"The youth themselves are concerned and then they're connected to social media, which means they're bombarded with all sorts of information, correct and incorrect."



A classroom in a Toronto District School Board is empty of students. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

Teens still expressing anxiety, worry to Kids Help Phone

Alisa Simon, a senior vice-president at Kids Help Phone, said the service is seeing a change in conversations since the pandemic began.

During the first wave, the service saw significant increases in the volume of calls and texts it received and in conversations about grief, isolation, anxiety and stress, substance abuse, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Now, since students have returned to school in September, as the second wave is getting underway, the service is seeing an increase in conversations about relationships, anxiety and mental health, family, suicide and school. There continues to be a lot of uncertainty in the lives of young people, she said.

"Young people from coast to coast to coast still are concerned, still are having a lot of anxiety and worry about what's to come," Simon said.



Alisa Simon, senior vice-president of service innovation and chief youth officer at Kids Help Phone, says the service is seeing a change in the kinds of conversations it has had since the pandemic began. (TynanStudio)

Kids Help Phone says it received 900 to 1,000 calls and texts a day in September, mostly from people between the ages of five and 28. Roughly half were from Ontario. The vast majority of users say they are less distressed, more hopeful and have a plan after they have had a conversation.

"What we find is that when young people reach out for support, whether that's Kids Help Phone, whether that's a parent, a coach, a friend, that takes a huge amount of courage. And in doing that, it demonstrates resilience," Simon said.



Isaac Rosenberg, 17, says of life during the pandemic: 'Now, I've become much more accustomed to it.' He says he considers himself lucky because his home has a stable internet connection. (Dan Rosenberg)

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