

Modern Life and Mental Health Newsletter

Issue 1

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I would like to welcome you all to the **Modern Life and Mental Health Newsletter**. Thanks very much for signing up.

What I plan to do is every 2 to 4 weeks focus on a specific issue related to modern life and mental health. Rather than just mentioning an article with important information, I will take that information, expand its context, and offer something both relevant and interesting. The sources will be linked if you have deeper interest, but mostly I'll do the work for you.

I will cite things I have written and at times (like today) relate things to my upcoming book, "**Frontal Fatigue. The Impact of Modern Life and Technology on Mental Illness.**" Other times my work will be absent.

So, let's begin today with a look at the mental health fallout from life during a global pandemic.

Specifically, I'm looking at life during a pandemic, not from having COVID itself or related experiences like losing a loved one to COVID. I have written two articles about this: [one](#) at the very beginning looking at what may be coming, and [one](#) almost a year later, which took a look at how things were going.



The most important point in the second article was that young people, from school age through college, were by far taking the brunt of the psychological effects of the pandemic.

One [study](#), which looked at 29 other studies from all over the globe and included over 80,000 young people, found a **doubling** in rates of already accelerating anxiety and depression (roughly, during the pandemic, the rate of clinical levels of depression and/or anxiety increased from 1 in 10 to 1 in 5 young people). Explanations are offered such as: the children and adolescents were isolated, lonely, away from their normal routines and its supports (teachers, coaches), along with missed milestones like proms and graduations. As time went on there might have been problems at home with money and family conflicts. But most adults have their own version of this scenario. In addition, adults worry more about money, the health of the family, and the future; not things that usually occupy children.

Perhaps children are more susceptible to anxiety and depression. That is just not clear. So, it still must be worked out if the stresses of COVID are worse for a young person than an adult. All in all, I do not think a difference in stressors explains this larger growth in anxiety and depression seen in young people during the pandemic.

These concerning findings about young people led me to a different explanation.

Upon reflection, the pandemic lives of young people are like small, but intense versions of modern life. They are cut off from others and dependent upon technology. This did the job of getting them their schooling, but at a cost.

Experts have noted that spending a lot of time on video chats like Zoom can be very taxing. We are not designed to communicate this way. We need to be able to see someone clearly, see all their nonverbal facial movements, as well as their body language. Instead, we have distortions, delays, unnatural camera angles, lighting and sound, and the distraction of seeing yourself constantly in the corner. There is much more to this than we know, but nonetheless it is quite unnatural and mentally taxing to maintain.

I would venture that it is an example of what I discuss in the book. We are using parts of our brains (the prefrontal cortex or PFC) to build a world for us when a real one is not at hand. The book goes into much more detail into what I call **Frontal Fatigue**: a condition that affects most citizens of the modern world, in which the PFC is overwhelmed by demands made by a technological society. Young people are being forced into an intensified version of modern life with near-total isolation and most relationships existing only over video apps.

What we're seeing in these high rates of anxiety and depression in young people is actually a continuation of something that has been happening for decades. In fact, the study cited above mentions that the numbers have been climbing since the year 2000. Now they are climbing faster. Adults are indeed exposed to the same stressors, including the stress on the PFC. But in humans the PFC does not fully develop until the late twenties. This gives adults the advantage of a more mature PFC in managing the intensified modern stress of the pandemic.

What the COVID pandemic is doing, aside from its devastating death rate and long list of health and social problems, is to exacerbate what we have all been living through our entire lives: too much isolation and a technological culture. The result, plain and simple, is more mental illness and less psychological well-being for everyone, especially the young.

Solving this problem—the way modern life interacts negatively with our psyches—is a defining task of our era. For now, I recommend we set our sights locally, on ourselves and those close to us. Stay connected, slow down to whatever degree possible, and stay mindful of your own states of mind. There will be more on this in future newsletters as well as in the book itself.



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