

Social Isolation and the Lasting Impact of Mental Health in Students

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“No school tomorrow!” Those are the three words every student dreams of hearing. What about “no school for two weeks!” Well, what could be better than that? “No school for the rest of the year!” That must be the best news ever, right? Well, that became a reality for students across the world during March 2020, when Covid-19 cases began to surge. The euphoric feeling of not having to attend in-person classes and taking classes from the comfort of your bed slowly drifted each day the world was in lockdown. No social physical interaction, no after school activities, no quick conversations in the hallways when switching classes. All the small daily moments we took for granted, suddenly became memories we wished for back and it became apparent how important those interactions are to our personal growth and mental health.

Isolation derives from the word isolate, meaning to separate, being alone, solitude. The world experienced isolation at the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic in March 2020, some people experiencing it during key stages of development. The feeling of being alone, with no outlet to escape to, can be detrimental to a human’s mental and physical health. Students specifically felt the effects of the pandemic. School is meant to be an interactive experience, a way to connect with others, become active in the community, and explore different hobbies. But during lockdown it became an 8-hour day on a computer screen, most students sitting in their homes for hours with no freedom to interact or express themselves. Isolation has significant effects on mental health as shown through research of Palestinian prisoners in solitary confinement, as well as occupants of rural communities. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in students being forced into isolation. Due to these isolating circumstances, students' mental health has deteriorated and may potentially lead to long-term effects. This has also led to an increase in internet and social media usage, which correlates to poor mental health. In this essay, I will discuss the poor mental health

of students due to the pandemic and discuss my solutions as to how schools can aid in the student mental health crisis based on my research findings.

Social relationships are a fundamental and vital component of human life, they can result in positive or negative mental health. Social isolation is defined as a low quantity and quality of contact with others and includes a number of contacts, feeling of belonging fulfilling relationships, engagement with others, and quality of network members to determine social isolation.¹ Social isolation is correlated with poor mental health. There is research formulated prior to the pandemic that discusses the personal and self-image effects of peer isolation and loneliness. Social isolation and loneliness have profound impacts on adolescents' health, including increasing their risk of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. More specifically, peer isolation is associated concurrently and longitudinally with depression during middle adolescence and loneliness during adolescence is associated with lower self-worth. Feelings of isolation are also associated with self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.² Based on a study conducted in 2017, it was proven that the depression symptom score is higher among more socially isolated participants.³ Another study issued by Louis C. Hawkey showed evidence linking perceived social isolation with adverse health consequences including depression, poor sleep quality, impaired executive function, accelerated cognitive decline, poor cardiovascular function and impaired immunity at every stage of life.⁴ These are all major implications that have been proven to lead to risks for long-term effects.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not the first instance of isolation in human history. Isolation can be categorized in different ways and has occurred for ages. There are extreme cases of isolation, such as solitary confinement, and less extreme cases where someone may not be completely alone, but still subjected to staying in one place. Regardless, isolated circumstances

can lead to a loss of identity. The novel titled, *Threat: Palestinian Political Prisoners in Israel*, discusses Israeli imprisonment of Palestinians and does a deep dive into the psychological impact amongst Palestinian Prisoners in 1967. Prisoners were sent into solitary confinement, as it served as the most important strategy for breaking the spirit of the Palestinians and coercing them to collaborate. Many studies have been conducted that have recorded several of psychopathological effects, including rage, anger, negative attitude and affect, compulsiveness, attention difficulties, disturbances of body image, anxiety, and fear of relationships with other people.⁵ The effects of confinement did not diminish after leaving isolation, research has shown that these long-term symptoms do not disappear over time, but rather become worse if left untreated. These long-term effects include dependency, limited concentration, attention and memory and confusion.¹ Although solitary confinement is the most extreme case of isolation, this research proves that the mental strains of being alone and being forced into an uncomfortable setting can lead to long-term effects of mental health that follow people for years after leaving confinement.

Isolation also occurred in different sectors of the country prior to the pandemic. An example of a community that experienced social isolation before is rural areas. A primary concern for occupants of these communities is mental health effects due to social isolation. A study was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic that identified four main areas in which social isolation may affect health: mental health, general health and well-being, diminished access to basic resources, and quality of life. Of those four sectors that were discussed, mental health was the most frequently mentioned theme.⁶ Many of the informants interviewed cited a connection between social isolation and increased risk of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, as well as worsened cognitive health. One informant stated directly:

Social isolation is a huge risk factor. It can potentially compromise a person's health and well-being, and abilities to maintain their independence. I think it tends to be overlooked by a lot of people, you know they're always looking at like the medical, physical needs of a person, and perhaps don't recognize the importance of being engaged in the community as an important aspect to a person's life.²

Engaging in the community is pivotal to any person's well-being. It allows them to feel a part of a community and build up confidence. Being sheltered away with limited activities leads to a lack of independence and confidence. The study also noted that those who are socially isolated and/or feeling disconnected from their community experience a diminished sense of meaning, owing partly to the fact that they are not being asked to contribute their skills or expertise.² This study of rural communities and the connection to mental health proves that being socially isolated for a long period of time can lead to depression, anxiety, loss of independence and worth, as well as other personal health risks.

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the world into quarantine and isolation, changing the way learning and social interaction were traditionally practiced. Institutions around the world turned to remote, online learning at the start of the pandemic, due to the fast spread and uncertainty of the coronavirus. In a study conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, research was done to explore the various moods of students and their transition to living through a pandemic: 19.2% of the students saying they are tired of the phone, 42.9% of them are feeling frustrated, crushingly bored, anxious, overworked, and depressed and on the other hand 37.9% are feeling relaxed, peaceful optimistic, calm hopeful and loving.⁷ The abrupt change of social setting and sense of confusion experienced by students ultimately led to negative effects in mental health and personal wellbeing. In a research study done in May 2020 to explore the

impact of Covid-19 on students, about two months after the initial lockdown, approximately 25% of their sample reported experiencing anxiety symptoms, which were positively correlated with increased concerns about academic delays, economic effects of the pandemic, and impacts on daily life. Among the many student surveys administered worldwide, 83% of young respondents agreed that the pandemic worsened pre-existing mental health conditions, mainly due to school closures, loss of routine, and restricted social connections.⁸ This research proves that students began to struggle amidst the chaos and change experienced at the beginning of the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced the entire world into a digital transformation. Businesses, schools, organizations, clubs, etc. all had to adapt to an online environment. Countless hours began being spent on the internet; students, teachers and all types of workers spent their entire workdays staring at a computer screen. The lockdown made most activities go online, thus nearly 50% of the respondents are spending more than six hours a day in front of the screen of which 27.7% were plugged in for more than eight hours a day.⁹ Internet usage has been linked to an increase in depression and loneliness. Many people turn to the Internet in order to manage unpleasant feelings, this was only heightened during the pandemic. Yet research on internet addiction and depression demonstrated that the overuse of the internet was associated with an increased in the frequency of depression.¹⁰ Excessive time on the internet displaces time that could be spent with friends or family, leading to smaller social circles and higher levels of loneliness and stress. As well as the avoidance of homework or tasks, disruption of relationships, and social isolation.⁶ The study found that loneliness, depression, and social isolation predicted positive internet addictions which correlates to a decrease in social interactions, depression, loneliness, and lower self-esteem.⁷ Students were not given an option during the pandemic on the amount of time they would like to spend online, it was their only option. Digital, online

connections differ from personal, in-person connections. Online learning also potentially leads to schoolwork burnout since the distractions from the internet and social media can lead to poorer performance and procrastination. Students who burn out at school are at risk for excessive internet use and depressive symptoms, which in turn can affect various measures of their academic success later on.¹¹ Excessive internet usage is connected to mental health issues, specifically depression. People are becoming more and more online addicted and distracted from social life. Nowadays, people like online communication. As a result, people feel that there is no joy in their life. About 42% (95 males and 52 females out of 350) agree with this. 52.6% of people (113 male and 71 females out of 350) are losing interest in everything. About 68.9% of people (160 male and 81 females out of 350) face a lack of concentration. It causes a decision-making problem. About 60% of people (128 males and 82 females) feel this way. The results from studies conducted to excessive prior and during the pandemic all correlate to a negative impact on mental health.¹² Since the pandemic has only led to an increase in internet usage, it has therefore led to an increase in mental health problems.

With an increase in internet usage, comes an increase in social media, especially in teenagers and adolescents. With new social media applications, such as TikTok emerging, and apps continuously updating their social platforms, it is almost impossible for social media users to decrease their screen time. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, excessive social media use was correlated to poor mental health. Inadequacy about your life or appearance, fear of missing out, isolation, increased depression and anxiety, self-absorption, and cyberbullying are just a few of the negative mental effects of social media.¹³ The start of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a rapid spike of social media usage, between January 2020 (pre-pandemic) and March 2020 (start of the pandemic), U.S. traffic on Facebook's website increased by 27%.¹⁴ Another study

concluded that about 26.7% of students spent more than a day on social media for non-academic activities.¹¹ This is expected, though, since social media was one of the only safe forms of communication and interactions during the first few months of the pandemic. The study also researched the correlation of mental health and increased social media use; passive social media use, which made up about 75-80% of total use, was associated with worse overall mental health, these indicators included stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.⁹ The quality of social interaction is associated with better mental health than the amount of social interaction people are experiencing. Positive social interactions are good for humans and vital for overall mental health.⁹ Yet, social media has consistently shown a poor correlation between positive mental health and high usage.

College students are at an increased risk of mental health concerns, as they are in a developmental stage in which depressive symptoms become more prevalent. There are high levels of academic stress, changes in the environment, as well as low self-esteem.¹⁴ A study was conducted that reported mental health difference between non-student adults and student adults and it was reported that the students had a higher level of mental health disturbances than non-students. The most reported challenge by university students found in the current study is negative emotion and mental health.⁴ The feelings anxiety, depression, fear, sadness, anger and stress all correlated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the academic and social ramifications. Students around the world were forced to adjust to a new home and family environment, face new financial concerns and cope with the loss of loved ones due to Covid-19. The lack of academic social interaction and emotional support posed a challenge to students of all ages, but college students in particular showed a higher prevalence of mental health problems.

Not all students have experienced learning during the pandemic the same, it has been shown through research that there have been learning disparities between minority, low-income and other marginalized groups. Not only does research show that socioeconomic minority groups are at a disadvantage academically due the lockdown, but mental health is also deteriorating due to these discriminatory stressors. Low-income, underrepresented minority, and first-generation students may encounter increased stressors at home due to scarcity in basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), or access to healthcare or technology required for maintaining contact with others.¹⁵ This also correlates with statistics amongst students entering back into the classroom in March of 2021, a year after the initial lockdown. While nearly 1 in 4 white students are back to full-time in-person classes, it's closer to 1 in 10 Black, Latinx, and Asian American students who are attending in person full time. By contrast, 64 percent or more of students of color are still learning entirely in remote classes, compared to only 41 percent of white students.¹⁶ Lockdown and isolation due to Covid-19 are out of student's and family's control, as are the discrepancies between minoritized groups. Socioeconomic factors resulted in more stressors for some marginalized groups, leading to even more mental health concerns.

Returning back to "normal" has led to more anxiety in some groups of people. Anxiety or dread as a response to returning to work, school, or other outside activities can stem from a fear of infection. Fears can also be triggered by the change itself. Leaving the relatively secure and stable environment of one's home introduces uncertainties and disrupts routines that many people have integrated into their "new normal."¹⁷ As the pandemic set in last March, the percentage of people reporting they felt anxious or depressed spiked and has remained elevated since, according to survey data. Experts have also highlighted increases in sleeping problems and alcohol and other substance misuse and point to clear causes: Uncertainty and fear about the

coronavirus itself; job loss and housing and food insecurity; juggling working from home while dealing with cooped-up kids; grief and a loss of social cohesion as a result of restrictions.¹⁸

Separation anxiety among elementary school children is on the rise. This is due to the routine of being at home with their parents and that suddenly being disrupted. When kids go out now, they're often reminded not to get too close to other people, to keep their masks on, to use sanitizer, to wash their hands, notes Dr. Louie. "There's just anxiety in the air, and I think kids feel that. I think they are wondering: Are we sure it's safe to go back? And are other people safe? And is it safe to touch this?"¹⁹ There is a level of uncertainty among all groups of people, especially the fear of the unknown. This demonstrates how quickly life can drastically change without warning, therefore causing feelings of anxiety.

As the research on solitary confinement and the occupants of rural communities proved to show long-term effects, the effects of the isolation period at the beginning of March 2020 may also cause collateral consequences such as increased domestic violence rates, educational loss, and depression finally, this vicious cycle would cause irretrievable effects on society.²⁰ The significant changes of daily routine, lack of communication and isolation from friends and activities can lead to people feeling lonely and lost. Although there is not enough research conducted to formulate a proper conclusion of the long-term effects of Covid-19 and the impact of the isolating circumstances, prior evidence has shown that mental health problems caused by long-term isolation can lead to lasting mental health effects.

After analyzing isolation and its impact on mental wellbeing through past circumstances, as well as studying current research pertaining to student mental health during the pandemic through the lens of different students, it is vital schools implement the proper solutions. Carefully considering mental health, educational, and healthcare ecosystems through the lens of

sociocultural identities can facilitate a more thoughtful, systematic, and informed approach to target evolving student needs.¹⁵ There are also non-traditional methods and community partnerships for reaching out to the minority student populations in order for them to feel safe and heard. For example, The AKKOMA Project and The Steve Fund, nonprofit organizations dedicated to promoting mental health among people of color, have numerous programs and services that can readily be infused into virtual campuses and therapeutic environments.¹⁵ It is important to understand that different groups of people experienced isolation differently, therefore the lasting effects will not be interchangeable between groups. Schools must validate students' feelings because everyone copes differently and some students may transition back with ease, while some may be struggling in silence.

In addition to offering programs and aid that align towards groups that correlate to their specific circumstance, it is also important to provide services directed towards generalized populations. Educators' support, along with an open classroom environment is key to improving mental health in the classroom. An open classroom involves many open-ended activities, and invites new people, materials, ideas, and values to flow into the environment. A climate of openness is necessary for the development of student independence. It is characterized by exploration, risk-taking and tolerance. Students need to feel free to change their beliefs as they expand their understandings and perspectives.²¹ An open classroom environment strengthens the bond between student and teacher. Enhancing the overall classroom experience ensures personal growth and academic success.

Mental health aid can also be incorporated into the classroom and be taught to all students. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a methodology that helps students of all ages to better comprehend their emotions, to feel those emotions fully, and demonstrate empathy for

others. These learned behaviors are then used to help students make positive, responsible decisions; create frameworks to achieve their goals, and build positive relationships with others.²² The core of SEL is to encourage students to become self-aware of their emotions as well as increase social awareness to understand how other students may be feeling and teach empathy. The 5 core competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. From an academic standpoint, students who participated in SEL programs saw an 11 percentile increase in their overall grades and better attendance. On a more individual level, the skills learned within an SEL program have been shown to help students better cope with emotional stress, solve problems, and avoid peer pressure to engage in harmful activities.²² Incorporating SEL learning into the classroom setting can aid in preventing further mental health problems and create an open, safer environment for students in the long run where students can learn more effectively. It creates more trust in the teacher, therefore leading to confidence in the student to ask for help if they are struggling with a specific subject matter, not just their mental health.

The research examined prior in this essay proves that the mental health of students is declining due to Covid-19 and the isolating circumstances, therefore schools should be provided with a sufficient number of professionals to aid not only in the academic success of their students, but also their emotional support and mental development. One way to aid in this issue is having enough properly trained school counselors distributed throughout schools and districts that are readily available to students. It is important to utilize school counselors for social and emotional prevention and intervention. When it comes to social and emotional development, counselors can play a significant role in everything from reducing negative student behaviors to reducing the spread of gossip among students to increasing awareness of depression and suicide

risk. Counselor support can also make a tremendous difference for students from low-income families and students from underrepresented groups, as in the examples of counselors helping students of Mexican descent build stronger relationships at school and increasing the sense of empowerment and aspiration among Black males.²³ Evidently, school counselors have proven to make a positive impact on all students, specifically students from underrepresented groups who were hit hardest during the pandemic. School counselors should be collaborating with administrators since they have unique training to address all students' academic, career, and emotional developmental needs as well as the ability to make a positive impact on student achievement, attendance, and behavior.

Many school districts are not currently meeting the school counselor quotas or standards they should be to actively aid in this mental health crisis. According to a 2016 study, only 17.8% of school districts meet the American School Counselor Association's recommended student-to-school counselor ratio of 250:1 or lower. The median ratio is 411:1.²⁴ Luckily, federal legislation has led to an increase in funding to school counselors. In May 2021, President Biden released full details of the FY22 budget request, which includes a proposal for \$1 billion for a new grant program to increase the number of school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers. These funds would be used to address the shortages of school counselors and establish partnerships with higher education institutions to recruit, prepare and place in high-need environments.²⁷ Proper awareness and advocacy lead to change. Although mental health problems have heavily increased, so has advocacy and the urgency for change, therefore paving the way for federal legislation.

The year 2020 was unpredictable. Not only did Covid-19 greatly shake the entire world, but there were also a various number of events prior, during and after the start of the pandemic

that would lead students to unrest and concern. School shootings, a racial injustice movement, an election that divided the nation, etc. all have an impact on student mental health. The highly intense usage of social media and technology during the pandemic has developed concerns for internet addiction and the mental health impacts. But during a time when people felt alone, helpless, confused, or anxious, people were able to turn to social media to express their voices, drive awareness to social injustices they were passionate and start conversations and instigate change. Education starts at making people aware and providing the resources they need to make a change. To implement these changes, people must advocate for them. Initiating a dialogue is only the first step. The conversations about mental in the classroom, online, at home and even through personal research cannot stop.

Isolation can be viewed in a multitude of ways. The feeling of being alone or even abandoned, especially for a long period of time, can lead to adverse long-term effects to a person's mental health. This is proven through prior research studies of isolating situations, such as social isolation in rural communities or the psychological impact of solitary confinement in prisons. The isolating circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic deteriorated mental health, especially in students. This is due to the impact uncertainty and loneliness have on humans as well as the increased usage of social media and the internet. Symptoms of poor mental health, including anxiety, depression and cognitive decline spiked in students because of Covid. The decline in mental health sparked my curiosity as to what could be done to aid students in this mental crisis in the long term. Through research and evidence provided in this essay, it is clear that there are viable solutions schools and institutions can take to properly aid their student body. These include the implementation of SEL learning, utilizing school counselors for social and emotional prevention as well as ensuring educator support not only for academic success, but

personal growth. To tackle this mental health crisis, these solutions are integrated into schools and the conversation of mental health is encouraged everywhere, even outside the classroom.

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