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**Abstract:** Social media platforms are often recognized as an environment that can be damaging to a young individuals mental health. Said to cause insecurity, anxiety, and often times depression, it is typically recognized in a negative light. However, through the Coronavirus pandemic, social media platform TikTok provided an outlet for Generation Z to express themselves and seek guidance when needed. Through an unprecedented time, TikTok allowed Gen Z, a social generation, to connect with others through trends as well as eased anxieties by providing accurate and fact checked information through their partnership with the World Health Organization.

## How TikTok Provided an Outlet for Generation Z to Face Pandemic Related Mental Health Struggles

When the first case of the Coronavirus entered the United States in January of 2020, the country had no knowledge of what was in store for the coming months. As the virus grew to be a worldwide pandemic, the Northeastern United States began to shut down. Restaurants and other businesses closed for the foreseeable future, schools shut down, extracurriculars cancelled, and governors issued stay at home orders. It felt as if the world, and time, came to a halt. 6-foot rules and masks made us feel more apart than ever and many citizens felt lonely and anxious on account of struggling with issues such as: separation from friends and family, financial losses, health concerns, navigating online academics and many other pandemic related problems. But through it all, there is evidence that Generation Z<sup>1</sup>, some of those hit hardest with mental health problems during the pandemic, found a way to cope with an unlikely hero. A Chinese social media app called TikTok. Time and again, social media is acknowledged as a virtual domain that can potentially be damaging to user's mental health; however, there is corroboration which shows that TikTok may have become just the outlet that Gen Z'ers who faced new mental health struggles throughout the pandemic, were looking for.

### **Generation Z and How Social Media Affects Them**

In pre-Covid times as we would now call them (and as they may be known in history books for that matter), Generation Z has been avowed by many mental health experts and other professionals, to be a generation that is most affected by mental health issues. According to a research study conducted in 2017 by Western Governors University, only 45% of Gen Z individuals considered their mental health to be good or excellent.<sup>2</sup> Substantial amounts of research studies have been conducted to decipher just what caused this generations mental health to be so at risk. As studies show, many have concluded that the often-toxic environment of social media platforms that has developed as the generation grew up in the digital age has been a substantial contributing factor. According to A.G. Setko, E.V. Bulycheva, and N.P. Setko's book titled *Peculiarities of prenosological changes in mental and physical health of students from Generation*

<sup>1</sup> Generation Z is the newest generation. Born between 1997-2015, their ages range from 6 to 24 years of age. They account for nearly 68 million citizens of the United States.

Kasasa, *Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z Explained*, (Kasasa, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Generation Z and Mental Health*, (AECF, March 2021)

Z, “At present children pursue a lifestyle that differs significantly from those of previous generations and is characterized with low physical activity, short amount of time spent outdoors, and great educational loads [...] for example, information and communication technologies being actively and profoundly used by modern children, causes risks for mental and physical health.”<sup>3</sup> As they grew up, children traded their outdoor activities and creative time for time spent on their iPad or iPhones, a majority of which is spent on social media sites.

As reported by an NBC News report on data from Common Sense Media, even before the pandemic teens are spending an average of 7.5 hours a day on their screens<sup>4</sup>. These hours spent on screen time can have lasting effects on these teens and young adults. According to Dr. Christine Carter of Berkley’s Greater Good magazine, three risks that are associated with this screen time are materialism, insecurity, and loneliness.

To begin, screen time that is spent on social media platforms can affect the way teens think. These teens often value individualistic attitudes rather than community involvement. Dr. Carter writes, “Surprisingly, they are less likely to think about or be engaged in social issues, even though social media can be a great way to spread ideas and information related to the issues teens care about. And heavy users of social media are far more likely to want material things like new cars and vacation homes (and to believe these things are important in life).”<sup>5</sup> With easy access to information on social issues, you would think the individuals of Generation Z would be more involved in their community; but this is not the case. Access to social media creates this generation to be materialistic as they see unrealistic pictures of others on their feed with nice cars, nice clothes, and big houses. This creates the idea that these young individuals need these materialistic things to earn more likes, therefore, feeling more valued and liked by others.

Similarly, the same scrolling through social media that causes materialism also causes insecurities. Dr. Christine Carter writes, “A one-minute scroll through Instagram—filled with photoshopped selfies taken painstakingly from an angle that makes someone look her thinnest—can easily make even a secure and self-confident teen feel her normal body is disgusting and aberrant. Uber-wealthy teens and young celebrities, who on some level seem like peers, post “wealthies” (selfies that display their wealth) while flying around the world in their family’s

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<sup>3</sup> Setko, Bulycheva, and Setko, *Peculiarities of prenosological changes in mental and physical health of students from Generation Z*, (The Orenburg State Medical University, 2019) 158.

<sup>4</sup> Brett Arends, *Teens are spending nearly half their waking hours on screens – and that can have scary, lasting effects*, (MarketWatch, 2019)

<sup>5</sup> Christine Carter, *Three Risks of Too Much Screen Time for Teens*, (Greater Good Magazine, 2018).

private jets.”<sup>6</sup> Often times, celebrities and other people use social media to only show what they want people to see, posting only images and videos of themselves at their best, making their life seem appealing, entertaining, and lavish. When young adults see these posts, it’s showing unrealistic standards, especially for people their age. They base their standards of beauty off of photos that are photoshopped; people blurring their blemishes, whitening their teeth, and making their waist-size skinnier. Photoshopping like this along with being exposed to teens of “uber-wealthy” families causes these Generation Z individuals to compare their lives, their wealth, and their bodies to what they are seeing on their feed. This causes them to become insecure, which can turn into an unhealthy obsession of becoming an unrealistic version of themselves. If these individuals were only seeing images and videos of people much like themselves, or others who have it worse, they may not develop these insecurities.

Lastly, constant screen time can lead to loneliness. This comes off as surprising on account that they have access to constant social interaction at the touch of their fingers. Dr. Christine Carter writes once more, “my teens are constantly communicating with literally hundreds of kids through text and social media and video chat—more teenagers now feel left out and lonely than ever before (or at least since we started measuring these things).”<sup>7</sup> Though these teens can reach out and talk to others when they feel, they can also see what everyone is doing at almost any given moment, leading them to be able to see when they are being left out. Along with this, it is blatantly obvious that the more time these individuals spend on their screens, the less time they are having face-to-face encounters with friends and family. Since they do not need to see each other in person to be able to communicate, they are not getting together with friends and family as often as they used to. Research psychologist Jean Twenge reported, “The number of teens who get together with their friends every day has been cut in half in just 15 years, with especially steep declines recently.”<sup>8</sup> This generation seems lonely because quite frankly, social media screen time causes them to be alone.

Loneliness can have devastating impacts on one’s mental health. Andrew Stickley and Ai Koyanagi wrote an exceptional journal article regarding loneliness and how it affects mental health and could potentially cause the development of mental disorders. Within the article, they defined loneliness as “a distressing feeling arising from perceived deficiencies of one’s social

<sup>6</sup> Christine Carter, *Three Risks of Too Much Screen Time for Teens*, (Greater Good Magazine, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Christine Carter, *Three Risks of Too Much Screen Time for Teens*, (Greater Good Magazine, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Jean Twenge, *Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?*, (The Atlantic Magazine, 2017)

relationships.”<sup>9</sup> This distressing feeling can take hold of a young person’s mental (as well as physical) health. Koyanagi and Stickley write, “loneliness can be a prolonged condition that is associated with a variety of negative health outcomes. In particular, research has linked loneliness to chronic physical conditions such as heart disease and hypertension, and to common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression.”<sup>10</sup> Along with this, according to The American Academy of Neurology, “[Loneliness is] a major risk factor for depression and various forms of anxiety as well as cognitive deficits. Loneliness can change the neurochemistry of the brain, turning off the dopamine neurons, which trigger the reward response, and causing some degeneration in the brain when the reward response is not activated.”<sup>11</sup> Since loneliness directly affects the neurochemistry in the brain, it can be a major risk factor in developing mental health issues.

The majority of people in the United States feel lonely from time to time, however, many of those people are pretty resilient as the loneliness may only affect them for short periods of time. Feelings of loneliness are personal and affect people differently, however, when those distressing feelings of loneliness last for a prolonged period of time, these feelings can be diagnosed as chronic loneliness. Chronic loneliness is characterized by unrelenting and persistent feelings of being alone and unable to connect with others on a deeper level.<sup>12</sup> These feelings can lead to serious mental and physical health disorders, such as depression, sleep disorders, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, anxiety, as well as substance use. In serious cases, chronic loneliness can lead to suicide.

In a study performed by the global health service company Cinga in 2019, more than 20,000 individuals aged 18 and older were surveyed using the UCLA Loneliness Scale.<sup>13</sup> 43% of the participants sometimes or always felt isolated. This is an astonishing amount as almost half of the randomly selected 20,000+ participants felt lonely, even before the pandemic. Though Generation Z has been studied and found to be the loneliest generation in America<sup>14</sup>, many of these

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<sup>9</sup> A. Stickley and A. Koyanagi, *Loneliness, common mental disorders and suicidal behavior: Findings from a general population survey*, (Elsevier Journal of Affective Disorders, 2016) 81.

<sup>10</sup> A. Stickley and A. Koyanagi, *Loneliness, common mental disorders and suicidal behavior: Findings from a general population survey*, (Elsevier Journal of Affective Disorders, 2016) 81.

<sup>11</sup> Colino, *How Loneliness Affects Health*, (Brain and Life, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Cinga, *Signs and Symptoms of Chronic Loneliness*, (Cinga International, 2019)

<sup>13</sup> The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a 20-item scale designed to measure one’s subjective feelings of loneliness as well as social isolation. The participants using the scale rate items as either O (“I often feel this way”), S (“I sometimes feel like way”), R (“I rarely feel this way”), and N (“I never feel this way”).

Russell, D., Peplau, L. A., & Ferguson, M. L., *Developing a measure of loneliness*, (Journal of Personality Assessment, 1978) 42, 290-294.

<sup>14</sup> Jena Hilliard, *Study Reveals Gen Z as the Loneliest Generation in America*, (Addiction Center, 2019)

young people have not faced the challenges of prolonged feelings of loneliness. Until however, the world as they knew it began to change drastically as the Coronavirus pandemic touched down in the United States.

### **Mental Health During the Pandemic**

In 2019, to much of Gen Z, pandemic was a word only used in history books or apocalyptic movies. Most of the generation didn't have a grasp on just how serious a pandemic was. After all, in the very beginning, United States citizens *were* told that the symptoms of Covid-19 were like those of the flu, so how serious could it be? As Northeastern U.S. citizens began stocking up on canned food, waiting in long lines at the break of dawn in hopes to grab some rolls of toilet paper, and buying as many disinfectant products as the store allotted per customer, anxieties began to kick in. The seriousness of the situation began to settle, and many did not know how to cope with the drastic changes in everyday lifestyles.

The beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Northeast United States became one of the loneliest times for many of the country's citizens. Those with previous mental health issues, and even those who have never dealt with such issues before, faced increased struggles with their mental health. These mental health conflicts arose from anxiety over their physical health and worries about catching the virus as well as depressive disorders caused by social distancing mandates. Nirmita Panchal, Rabah Kamal, Cynthia Cox, and Rachel Garfield wrote in their 2021 issue brief, "A KFF health tracking poll from July 2020 found that many are reporting specific negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping, eating, increase in alcohol or substance use, and worsening chronic conditions due to worry and stress over the coronavirus".<sup>15</sup> All these factors were contributors to poor mental health. According to KFF.org, "During the pandemic, a larger than average share of young adults (ages 18-24) report symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorder. Compared to all adults, young adults are more likely to report substance use and suicidal thoughts."<sup>16</sup>

Along with these challenges, the older portion of Generation Z faced additional struggles that contributed to their decline in mental health. According to Tess Brigham, a licensed psychotherapist who was quoted in a fact checked article from healthline.com, "Most young people

<sup>15</sup> Panchal, Kamal, Cox, Garfield, *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*, (KFF, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Panchal, Kamal, Cox, Garfield, *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*, (KFF, 2021).

aren't married and don't have children," Brigham said. "And while they don't have to wrestle with their kids to pay attention in Zoom school, many of them live alone and live far away from family".<sup>17</sup> She continued explaining while a lot of young adults do live at home with family, not all of them have a good relationship with them. Even those that do have good relationships with their family heavily rely on their friendships at work as well as school and other extra-curricular activities. At the time, there were also many young adults just beginning to establish their post-college life, creating new friendships and beginning new jobs, all of which were halted in March 2020. According to a journal article written by Wai Kai Hou, Francisco TT Lai, Menachem Ben-Ezra, and Robin Goodwin, "Everyday life can actually be seen as the fundamental context for resilience during trauma and chronic stress."<sup>18</sup> When the world comes to a halt and everyday routines are eradicated, people often lose their sense of stability, leading to anxieties and often times depression.

All these factors contributing, the beginning of the pandemic quickly became one of the loneliest times for this generation. Though as previously stated, they have been recognized as the loneliest generation in the U.S., chronic loneliness is something that many Gen Z'ers have never experienced until 2020. Typical everyday socialization achieved through in-person school, work, and other extracurricular activities, had been cancelled due to the exponentially ravishing pandemic. So, where do many members of Gen Z turn to when they're lonely? Social media of course.

### **Generation Z and How TikTok Became Their Mental Wellness Outlet**

All of Gen Z has grown up in the digital age and has spent a great portion of their lifetime scrolling on social media, almost as if it's second nature. So, when the social isolation and loneliness starts to take its toll, they turn to social media sites to view what their peers and millions of others around the world are up to. It provides an escape from reality. While we now acknowledge and understand (per the research stated in the previous section) that often times social media can take a toll on users mental well-being, according to a journal written by Leia Y. Saltzman, Tonya Cross Hansel, and Patrick S. Bordnick of Tulane University, "Unique to COVID-

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<sup>17</sup> Campbell, *Adults Under 24: The Loneliest Group During COVID-19 Restrictions*, (Healthline, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Hou, Lai, Ben-Ezra, Goodwin, *Regularizing daily routines for mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, (Journal of Global Health, 2020) 1.

19 is the wide access to technology that may help buffer loneliness and isolation that lead to exacerbated mental health problems.”<sup>19</sup>

Back in February of 2020, it felt as if all members on Generation Z interacted some way or another with the Chinese social media app TikTok. In February, the app was still up and coming and if you didn’t have the app downloaded to your device, you’ve at least seen TikTok’s that were reposted onto other social media apps such as Instagram and Twitter. But as the loneliness grew during the pandemic and people’s boredom increased, the app went from up and coming, to the number one downloaded social media app on the app store. Between January and the end of March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok’s United States user count grew upwards of 48.3%.<sup>20</sup>

Like its 2012 predecessor Vine<sup>21</sup>, TikTok is a social media app where users post, share, like, and comment on short videos, anywhere from 15 seconds to 1 minute long. The app provides users with thousands of dialogue and music options for users to lip-sync to or use in the back of their videos. Though TikTok like all social media platforms has community guidelines, users have the freedom to use the platform for their own creative ways. TikTok is also a relatively easy app to use. Heather Schwedel from Slate news explains navigating the app best, “Like videos from Vine and Instagram Stories and as befitting a mobile-native app, TikTok videos are vertical. That’s not the only element of the app that might ring familiar—there are filters à la Snapchat, and you can show appreciation through “hearts,” which are essentially the same as ‘likes.’ The app should seem pretty intuitive if you’ve logged time elsewhere in the social media–verse.”<sup>22</sup> Fundamentally, if you have any of these other social media apps, TikTok may be easy for you to manage. If not, Schwedel explains further, “To explore further, try the magnifying glass icon next to the home icon, where you can search key words and hashtags—yes, TikTok uses hashtags—as well as explore some of what’s trending—yes, there’s also trending in TikTok. Within videos, tap on the screen to pause (as with Instagram Stories), and look to the right side for the user icon of the

<sup>19</sup> Hansel; Saltzman; Bordnick, *Loneliness, Isolation, and Social Support Factors in Post-COVID-19 Mental Health*, (American Psychological Association, 2020) S56.

<sup>20</sup> Williamson, *US Consumers are Flocking to TikTok*, (Insider Intelligence, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Vine was a free mobile application that similarly to TikTok, allowed it users to share unlimited amounts of short videos with a 6 second maximum length that loop. Acquired by social media app Twitter in 2012, the app debuted on the Apple App Store in the beginning of 2013. Similar to TikTok, you can scroll on your feed to view users videos, however, these videos were only of the people you follow, unlike TikTok where you can watch millions of different users on your main “For You Page”, or scroll to the left and view only the people you follow’s content. Vine was deleted from the App Store and shut down in December of 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Heather Schwedel, *A Guide for TikTok for Anyone Who Isn’t a Teen*, (Slate, 2018)



video's creator (which will take you to that user's profile), the number of "hearts" it got (you can click to heart it too), and the number of comments it got (click to read them). Along the bottom of the video, find the user's name, caption, and the name of the song that's playing. Captions tend to contain more hashtags that you can explore by clicking on them."<sup>23</sup>

Compared to other social media apps, TikTok has been recognized to be one of the most addicting, as users can scroll on their "For You Page" more commonly known as "FYP" for hours on end. There are multiple factors that contribute to the app's addictiveness. To begin, as soon as you open the app, you are welcomed with catchy music, either from an app or a video on your FYP. Along with this, the feed that's accessed as soon as you open the app is a never-ending stream of videos, which are personalized to your liking using the app's algorithm. TikTok scratches your itch for boredom immediately and with video after video, it ensures that you will be entertained the whole time the app is used.

A writer for Medium's *Data Series* touches on TikTok's addictiveness stating, "TikTok may be addictive if the content provides enough stimulus for the users to exhibit addiction symptoms and a neurological reaction that is consistent with addiction."<sup>24</sup> Some of TikTok's content is more addictive than others, that of which being content containing information and content that is short and captivating. There's a lot of information on TikTok, especially that which is related to the pandemic, and having access to such info improves decision making. As for the content which is short and captivating, "Rewards are treated in the mid brain with a dopamine response just as an intake of foods high in sugar, fat and salt is. This is both true for the consumption, but also for the anticipation of such a reward. Interestingly, TikTok's information is presented in a 15 second form. [...] This makes the platform more susceptible to the kinds of stimulus seen in addiction."<sup>25</sup> This addictiveness is what kept Generation Z returning and seeking an outlet for their boredom. The addiction provided a stimulus that they were no longer getting in their daily lives due to the pandemic, so they replaced it with this social media that could.

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<sup>23</sup> Heather Schwedel, *A Guide for TikTok for Anyone Who Isn't a Teen*, (Slate, 2018)

<sup>24</sup> Data Series, *How TikTok is Addictive: Psychological Impacts of TikTok's Content Recommendation System*, (Medium, 2020)

<sup>25</sup> Data Series, *How TikTok is Addictive: Psychological Impacts of TikTok's Content Recommendation System*, (Medium, 2020)

Not only was TikTok used to fix Generation Z's boredom throughout the pandemic, it gave a temporary fix to loneliness. With billions of users around the globe, the app gives us insight into other people's lives. TikTok provides a platform for people to connect intimately with each other, using features such as *duets* and *stitches*, people can interact and respond directly to videos. Like most other social media apps, you can like, comment and share the videos as well.

Along with how the social media app connected Generation Z through their response features, the US and the rest of the world helped to fix loneliness through TikTok trends. Short dance videos, the most notable being the *Savage* dance, had the world dancing together. The Savage Dance was a 15 second TikTok dance performed to the song *Savage* by Megan Thee Stallion. Created by TikTok user Keara Wilson, the dance begins with the lyrics, "I'm a savage, yeah. Classy, boujee, ratchet". The dance consists of an arm swing followed by a clap on "yeah". Users then swing their arms, sway their hips in the same direction of their arms, followed by a hip pop. As a relatively easy dance, the trend caught on with teens and celebrities alike, even as Megan Thee Stallion the creator of the song also performed the dance along with stars like Hailey and Justin Bieber. Along with dance trends, there were cooking trends. At one time it seemed like the whole nation was trying new recipes such as whipped coffee or even baking banana bread for the first time. These trends were a source of comfort to Gen Z, as they felt more unity to other users. It also provided a temporary fix to boredom as many people were learning new skills.

TikTok also provided an outlet for Generation Z by reminding them that almost everyone was in the same boat. One of the causes for decline in Generation Z's well-being during the pandemic was the disruption in everyday life and daily routines. According to a journal article written for the Journal of Global Health, "Regularized routines, [...] can buffer the adverse impact of stress exposure on mental health, but it is unclear how this message can best be conveyed..."<sup>26</sup> One quarantine trend in particular helped to ease Gen Z's anxieties or depression caused by the change in daily regularized routines. The trend was as simple as TikTok users recording short one minute "day in my life" videos. These videos showed users suffering with mental health issues stemming from change in routines that they are not alone. It also gave great examples of how to create healthy daily routines while in quarantine to keep yourself on track of responsibilities and to keep healthy and active.

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<sup>26</sup> Hou, Lai, Ben-Ezra, Goodwin, *Regularizing daily routines for mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, (Journal of Global Health, 2020) 1.

Along with these TikTok trends, the app helped inform users on the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated previously per the writer of the Medium article *How TikTok is Addictive* writes, “TikTok has a lot of information. Having access to relevant information can improve decision making. This is why new and relevant information are rewards for our brain.”<sup>27</sup> Navigating a pandemic as large as that of COVID-19 was new to Gen Z’ers. This monumental moment in our history can be scary and anxiety inducing. The beginning of the pandemic and the little-known information about it at the time caused many people to worry for their health and the health of their loved ones, especially those with underlying conditions. As you could imagine, many TikTok users were posting videos about the pandemic, some humorous, some filled with fear, and only some filled with factual and useful information. TikTok took a major step to partner with the World Health Organization (WHO) to keep TikTok users informed with accurate and timely information about the ongoing pandemic. TikTok released a statement saying, “At TikTok we’re focused on supporting our users by providing accurate information and resources from public health officials, as well as continued support, encouragement, and uplifting videos that our community share with each other during this challenging time. To that end, we’ve partnered with the World Health Organization (WHO) to create an informational page on TikTok that provides trustworthy information, offers tips on staying safe and preventing the spread of the virus, and dispels myths around COVID-19.”<sup>28</sup> At the bottom of each TikTok posted mentioning the pandemic either in the video or in the caption and hashtags of the video, the app places a banner that writes, “Learn the facts about Covid-19” when clicked on, you will be taken to a WHO fact page about the virus. Here they give you information on how to protect yourself, but possibly more important for user’s mental wellness, the WHO debunks myths about the virus, easing anxieties from nerve wracking rumors. In addition, the WHO did livestreams where they could talk to TikTok’s young user base and answer their questions and concerns live.

TikTok partnering with the WHO, fact checking videos, and providing this accurate information about the Covid-19 pandemic was beneficial to mental health because false or limited information about this serious topic left many Gen Z’ers anxious. University of California San Francisco Professor, Nina Bai writes, “When threats are uncertain, such as the current coronavirus situation, our anxious minds can easily overestimate the actual threat and underestimate our ability

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<sup>27</sup> Data Series, *How TikTok is Addictive: Psychological Impacts of TikTok’s Content Recommendation System*, (Medium, 2020)

<sup>28</sup> TikTok, *Statement About Partnering With the WHO*, (TikTok, 2020).

to cope with it.”<sup>29</sup> She continues informing readers how increased anxiety can cause us to make irrational decisions, panic, and even create new problems. Anxiety can foster poor prevention and safeguarding procedures which are necessary to staying healthy during the pandemic. TikTok partnering with the WHO provided accurate information to ease Generation Z’s anxieties about the pandemic. This allows users to be more in control of their anxiety, allowing them to prevent themselves from catching the disease and safeguarding themselves from it. Along with this, this partnership provided users with relevant information. In doing so, provided rewards to the viewers brain, therefore increasing dopamine (associated with the pleasure response), and providing users with a temporary fix to anxiety.

Typically, when people struggle with their mental health, they visit a psychologist or a therapist. The psychologist or therapist is able to give them tips on how to cope and is someone who people feel comfortable venting their feelings and problems to. However, amidst the pandemic, people were unable to make appointments due to factors such as the large volume of clients seeking therapy, feeling uncomfortable going in public with the worry of getting sick, or just simply not having the financial resources needed in order to get this help. According to American Counseling Association’s counselor and chief learning officer, Lynne Linde, “We’ve always had a shortage of mental health providers, and the pandemic has made it that much worse.”<sup>30</sup> Psychologists and therapists were seeing more patience while experiencing less cancellations than the previous year. Along with this, according to the American Psychology Association (ACA), 74% of psychologists were treating more patients with anxiety disorder than before the pandemic, 30% of which, were unable to meet the demand. This led to what the ACA states to be “a severe shortage of mental health providers in rural communities.”<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, many therapists and psychologists turned to social media to offer help to those who were unable to get the support they needed. They turned to TikTok to provide advice for free.

Kaya Yurieff a writer for CNN published an article about how clinical psychologist Dr. Julie Smith turned her profession to TikTok to help users get through the pandemic. Smith knew that many people were battling with their mental health during the pandemic and knew that TikTok provided a perfect platform for her to use her skills to help these people. Yurieff wrote, “Smith, who also uses Instagram and YouTube, joined TikTok last fall because she didn’t see mental health

<sup>29</sup> Nina Bai, *Feeling Anxiety About Coronavirus? A Psychologist Offers Tips to Stay Clearheaded*, (University of California San Francisco, 2020)

<sup>30</sup> Ken Budd, *Having Trouble Finding a Therapist? You’re not alone*, (AARP, 2021)

<sup>31</sup> Ken Budd, *Having Trouble Finding a Therapist? You’re not alone*, (AARP, 2021)

professionals on the short-form video app, which is popular with teens and known for lighthearted content, comedy and dance routines. She hoped to call attention to simple skills people can use to improve their mental health. That goal has arguably only taken on greater urgency in recent months due to the pandemic.”<sup>32</sup> What Smith’s videos aimed to do was to help TikTok users that were struggling with their mental health manage their anxiety and worries about the state of the environment around them. In many videos, Dr. Julie Smith tackles the issues of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. She also offers tips on how to combat them during the pandemic. One video in particular stood out to me as I visited her page. The video is titled, “This year loneliness has hit the world like never before.” She informs viewers that loneliness is associated with serious physical and mental health problems. Her advice, take your loneliness seriously, treat it like any other health issue, and make human connection a priority. Since connecting with others in person was not necessarily a responsible way to deal with loneliness, she encourages viewers to make a phone call to someone they’re missing or someone they can talk to. In a socially distanced way, take a gift to a neighbor, video call a friend or family member so you can see their face, or even start a conversation with the cashier at your grocery store while you are out.

Not only was this TikTok therapy free, it proved to work as well. Lauren Carbran from The Huffington Post wrote of her first-hand experience with TikTok psychologists. She wrote of how she even followed Dr. Julie Smith as well as psychologist Dr. Janine Kreft. She stated, “There was so much undiscovered content for people like me here, whether you were looking for a daily mantra or needed support during this tough time. Suddenly, instead of suffering from intense claustrophobia at home and feeling out of sorts on my daily walk, I relied on TikTok to release my nervous energy.”<sup>33</sup> Not only did psychologists help TikTok users, many other users who were suffering with the same mental health issues were supporting users with videos under hashtags like “#anxiety” and “#feelgood” with personal tips and help from their own personal experiences. Throughout the pandemic, much of generation Z worked together to end the stigma of reaching out and communicating with others about mental health. By talking about mental health struggles that an increasing number of citizens face, it debunks myths surrounding these issues as well as removes false notions surrounding mental health disorders. Once the stigma is removed, people will no longer feel scared to ask for help because they will no longer feel judged.

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<sup>32</sup> Kaya Yurieff, *These therapists are using TikTok to help you get through the pandemic*, (CNN Business, 2020)

<sup>33</sup> Lauren Carbran, *TikTok Has Become My Sanctuary from Coronavirus Anxiety*, (Huffington Post, 2020)

Unprecedented times can be nerve wracking, emotional, and trying for anyone of any age but especially for young people such as Generation Z. A generation recognized pre-pandemic for high rates of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression faced new barriers for their mental wellness when the United States and rest of the world was rocked with the Covid-19 pandemic. But Gen Z did what they do best, and they turned to social media to cure their loneliness, mental health struggles, and boredom. As we do not typically recognize social media as being good for mental health, TikTok's features allowed Generation Z users to remain connected with people, find tips to create a healthy lockdown lifestyle, find relevant and fact checked information on Covid-19 from the World Health Organization, as well as speak to and take tips from licensed psychologists, all of which proved to be beneficial for improving users mental wellness.

Though it feels like years since the beginning of the pandemic and though it feels never ending, we have come a long way. As my generation faced new challenges we have never experienced before, we contributed to putting an end to the stigma surrounding mental health. Mental health may never seem like a 'trendy' subject. However, when you are provided an outlet such as TikTok and are able to speak about your mental health struggles and seek help and guidance for them, it provides comfort for a Gen Z individual who often feels judged on such platforms.

As a member of Generation Z and someone who considers themselves well informed and up to date on social media sites, I can attest to the fact that TikTok is like no other app. Though I joined the social media site before the pandemic, I found myself relying on the app to 'keep me sane' in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In a time where it was normal to feel more distant and lonelier than ever, I felt connected with the world. We were all learning the same dances, learning from each other and about each other, and helping each other through a time which the world hopes to never face again, all through an app on my phone.

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