

# WORRIED, ANXIOUS...

## no school for the rest of the year..

Graphic by Rita Hitching.

By Los Altos Hills resident Rita Hitching, M.Sc., BSc. Psychology



Are you still trying to get your head around the idea of no more "real" school for the rest of the school year? Wondering what it will be like not seeing your friends for months, no graduation, no birthday parties, no last day of school? Trying to make sense of how you're going to manage virtual school, 24/7 with your family and staying quarantined at least until June? Are you feeling worried, anxious, uncertain, wondering if it's normal and what to do about it? Then read on.

Your teenage brain is glorious - if you didn't know that already. Neuroscience has shown that the brain goes through critical periods of growth and development - while in the womb, the first year of life, and the early years; right into adulthood. What scientists have more recently discovered is that the brain undergoes a 'secret mission' of change during the period between the ages of 12 to 19 years that is truly unique.

### Uncertain Times

We are living in uncertain times and having to manage unprecedented circumstances. Dealing with a new situation is hard at the best of times. We have not experienced a period where a virus was so dangerous to the entire community that the world has been told to stay home. Not having a how-to guide can make us feel like we don't know what we should be doing or if what we are doing is the right thing. I'm sure you've seen the news about coronavirus (COVID-19), talked on the phone with friends about it, discussed it with family and even received emails about it from your teachers. In order to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus, social isolation measures have been put in place. We have all been asked to stay home and limit contact with others. It is the first time that schools have been closed for weeks at a time, and chances are you are feeling worried and anxious.

### Anxious Brain

Understanding how your brain processes information that leads to feelings of worry and anxiety can be a useful first step to helping you manage anxiety. It is worth remembering that in the current COVID-19 epidemic feeling worried, anxious or angry is normal and adaptive. It would be strange to not feel worried in a situation where so many others are getting sick from a virus that we currently don't have a vaccine for. You feel the emotion, but your brain starts the process by giving attention to a situation, then thinking about it and then giving it an emotion. The connection between your senses receiving information from the outside world, and the prefrontal cortex processing that information and the limbic system giving it emotional value.

### Brain Changes

Keeping stress and worry at a manageable level is important, stress literally restructures your brain. When the brain is exposed to stress different brain regions within the limbic system, prefrontal cortex, amygdala, hippocampus and nucleus accumbens, and different types of neurotransmitters are affected. The impact is felt at the neuronal level and physically too, stress leads to the release of glucocorticoids, released from peripheral organs and glands. The main neurotransmitters in the brain impacted by stress are dopamine, acetylcholine, glutamate, and norepinephrine. One way that the brain is affected by stress is in the way one neuron speaks or trades information with another, the currency they use isn't dollars but neurotransmitters. When neurons finish 'trading' they leave behind a big mess and astrocytes clean up that mess! When you are exposed to a stressful situation your brain releases the neurotransmitter norepinephrine, which suppresses the activity of astrocytes, the housekeepers of the brain. A brain like a house soon starts to feel or smell bad if the trash is not taken out. In addition, stress reduces the amount of grey matter by increasing the production of myelin leading to more white matter.

## Virtual School

One of your main worries is likely to be homeschooling or virtual school and how to manage the workload without face to face contact with teachers or your study group. The first step is to have a designated study area with a computer and your school books/resources. Think about when you prefer to study and when there are likely to be fewer distractions in the house (e.g. when your baby brother is asleep) and make a schedule that works for you. Be sure to note when virtual classroom check-in or teaching sessions are happening, when assignments are due, and factor in breaks and snacks. The brain likes routine and predictability, and studying at the same time and in the same place helps you focus and keeps stress to a minimum.

## Shelter in Place

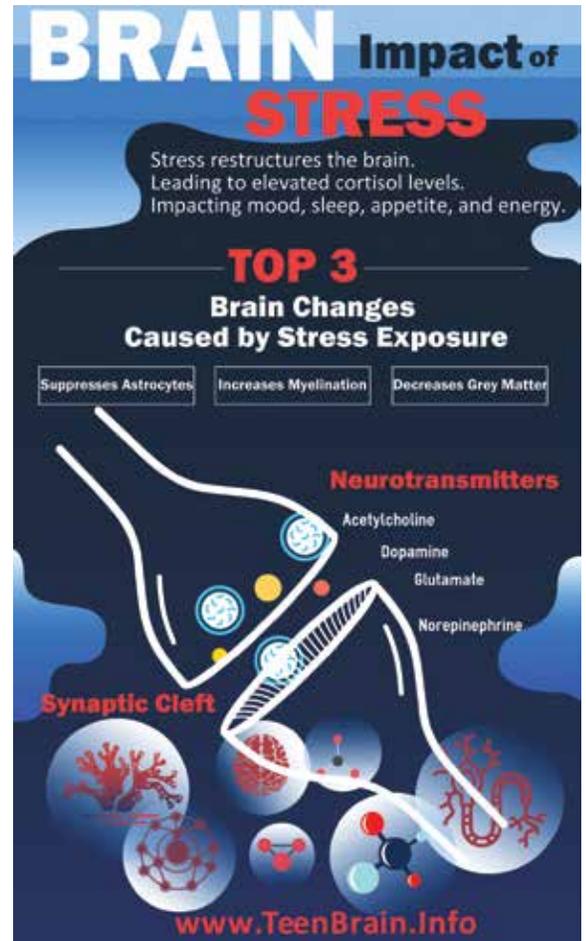
It might have sounded like a fun experiment to shelter in place for a few days, but it's probably not now and we are all feeling it. We are social creatures and our brains are wired to connect with others. You are likely worried about not being able to see friends play sports, meet extended family or attend social gatherings.

You may have noticed parents and caregivers may seem more irritable or short-tempered than usual. Really, I hear you say! Let me give you a little peek into what many parents and caregivers are dealing with. Grown-ups want to make sure that you continue to learn during virtual school and want to support you in any way they can, but many are not sure how! Parents and caregivers are not teachers after all. Their way of dealing with the uncertainty is to tell you to "do your schoolwork". Perhaps they are asking you to "keep the noise down" or "entertain your sister" while they are on a work call. Many adults are worried about their jobs, trying to remain productive while teleworking, and wanting to look after you at the same time. Fears about losing their job, older relatives getting sick, and just not really knowing how long the current situation will continue. Try to give the boomers some slack.

## Coping Tips

An important aspect of coping with the stress of the current situation is to be creative about connecting with those that matter most to us. Thankfully we have the technology to stay connected, Google Hangouts, Skype, Zoom, Facetime, text, email, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc. Use them and make a point of reaching out to others. Have virtual playdates or start a group chat. Friends and family are a great source of stress relief. Try and incorporate some exercise every day as another way to help you take care of yourself - do an online exercise class or run around the yard if you have one. Maybe keep a diary and record your experiences. Remember this too will pass and you will have a great story to tell about what you did during the shelter-in-place order.

Los Altos Hills resident Rita Hitching is the founder of [www.teenbrain.info](http://www.teenbrain.info).



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