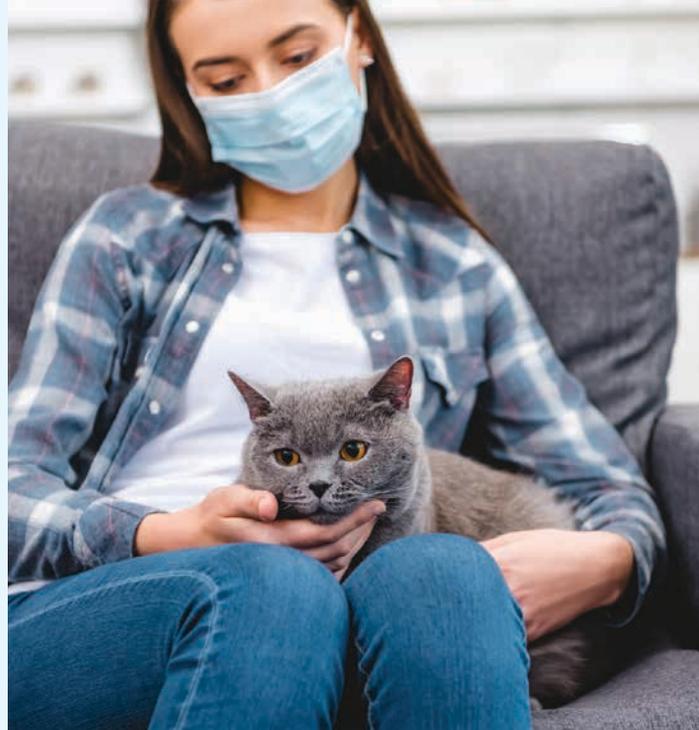


I overheard my teenage son today talking to one of his friends while they played a computer game saying "...that was BC..." He was not referring to the English language expression *Before Christ*, but *Before Coronavirus*. Out-of-the-mouth of babes. Indeed, life BC now seems like a period of innocence. When running to the grocery store to pick up a couple of items on the way home from work or meeting a friend for a coffee required no mental effort or cause for concern. The end to the new 'normal' seems nowhere in sight and we are all experiencing a collective mourning for the 'good old days.'

With Centers for Disease Control reporting the number of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) deaths in excess of 73,000 confirmed cases, and 1.3 million confirmed infections (as of this writing), fear on a societal level is real. Testing for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has been slow, and there is limited accurate data on the true number of infected community cases in the U.S., with estimates in the tens to hundreds of thousands. Desperate times, call for desperate measures, and social distancing and frequent handwashing remain the most effective strategy to curtail the rampant spread of coronavirus.

New Normal

A survey published by Pew Research reported that 90% of U.S. adults feel like the COVID outbreak has had a profound impact on their personal lives. Close to 200 million people who are living their lives in ways that were unimaginable just a few weeks ago. Our local community is taking the shelter in place order seriously, if the empty streets and occasional outings to the pick up of essentials or a walk around the block are anything to go by. The absence of hugs and handshakes between friends is especially felt by all. Many of us have had to cancel or postpone once-in-a-lifetime trips, weddings, birthday parties, but that all pales into insignificance when you factor in the worry we all have for loved ones or for ourselves. Many that



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work in grocery stores or health care are living with enormous anxiety about becoming infected or infecting others. Stories of enforced changes to living arrangements as the risk of infecting family and loved ones becomes a real possibility. Grandparents unable to hold their newborn grandchild or the adult daughter unable to attend her mother's funeral, strike me as especially sad.

Mourning Routine

Humans thrive on structure and predictability, and currently everything seems to have no precedent. Our brains prefer to focus on problem solving and not on adjusting to changes to our long established routines. It's too cognitively demanding, and consequently very stressful. Grocery shopping is now something 42 percent of Americans fear doing due to the possibility of infection. The mundane activity of the grocery run is now fraught with fear, especially if you are older, have limited mobility or are immune compromised. Our community has banded together, with local

highschoolers offering to pick up and deliver groceries to older residents and local stores have responded by offering special shopping hours and free curbside pick up.

Relationships & Loneliness

Contagion fears have resulted in 48 percent of older Americans are uncomfortable visiting a friend in their home or having a friend visit them, over 90 percent are uncomfortable attending a crowded event, and 77 percent are not willing to eat out at a restaurant. Shelter in place orders have led to extreme loneliness, particularly amongst those living alone, younger, with pre existing mental conditions and in lower income groups.

For many, the loss of social or religious organizations has added to the sense of isolation and loneliness. The local Chambers of Commerce are encouraging residents to continue to support local restaurants by ordering take-out, but the majority of businesses remain closed. Many organizations have started offering virtual gatherings, and mental health professionals are encouraging residents to make plans to speak with friends and family members regularly to diminish any sense of isolation.

Financial Concerns

With one in three Americans reporting that they either lost their job or someone in their household has, financial hardship as a consequence of the pandemic is a reality. I know of parents worried about their adult children being able to manage since they have lost their job, or asking to return to live at home as they can no longer afford to live independently. For many, loss of employment is more devastating than becoming infected with COVID-19. Loss of income may lead to eviction and even removal of legal permanence, if it was previously supported by a person's job. For others, businesses that they have spent years building up are in danger of closing or have already closed. Many small business owners have had to furlough or terminate staff that feel like family and have been working for them for years, and feel like family.

Remote Working & Virtual School

Like many of you, I am working remotely, and my children have been attending 'virtual school' since early March. Working remotely



has now become the norm as a consequence of the virus outbreak for 75 percent of working-age Americans with a postgraduate degree, closely followed by 62 percent of those with a bachelor's degree. For the majority of local residents that are working parents, it means navigating an unprecedented reality — adjusting to working remotely for many for the first time and homeschooling their children. All parents are concerned about supporting their child's learning, yet are very anxious about remaining productive and retaining their jobs. The Family First Covid Response Act (FFCRA) is offering working parents some reassurances, asking employers to be realistic about the amount of work possible while having to provide childcare. Parents are encouraged to not stress about needing to provide enrichment

Teens and Loss

Many teens are managing an unprecedented time in history, sheltered in place at a time when they are most primed to want to separate and become independent. It is a type of 'arrested development' not of their choosing — cancelled proms, college campus visits, first loves, school trips, even the end of the school year missed good-byes. Teens will likely want to be on their phones or playing virtual computer games with their friends more than ever. Any 'social' exchange and opportunity to be with peers, albeit virtually should be encouraged. Teens need other teens in a way that younger children don't. Local schools are responding with virtual and drive through graduations to help with the 'rights of passage' these events offer.

Mental Health

A Harris Poll by the University of Phoenix reported 84 percent of Americans are concerned that the ongoing impact of social distancing will have on their mental wellbeing. More than 68 percent of Americans feel like everything is out of their control, and more than 56 percent say they are balancing more now than before the pandemic. The Disaster Distress Helpline at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has seen a 9 fold increase (891 percent) in call volume compared to March 2019. Research is showing the psychological cost of quarantine measures includes confusion, anger, insomnia, anxiety, depression, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSD). Fear of infection, inadequate information, lack of supplies, stigma, xenophobia and financial loss are strong contributing factors. The reduced social and physical contact, absence of typical routine during shelter in place lead to boredom and a sense of isolation. With evidence emerging that shelter in place measures having long-lasting

effects, including alcohol abuse or dependence and PTSD, even up to three years post quarantine. Length of quarantine and degree of negative psychological impact are strongly correlated. With health experts indicating the situation may continue into Labor Day, the psychological impact will likely worsen. With reports emerging that men and women of Asian descent, especially Chinese experiencing online threats, racist slurs and politicization, the impact of what has been called the "Chinese virus" on our community remains to be seen. For many, anxiety can present in a multitude of ways — disrupted sleep, fatigue, irritability, trouble concentrating, rapid breathing, and in some cases even panic attacks or obsessive thoughts about becoming sick. Having clear and unified messaging from respected officials reduces anxiety, but the understanding of coronavirus is rapidly evolving and we are being flooded with intimidating, contradictory and confusing recommendations on what to do to protect ourselves and our loved ones. Examples of this include statements like "Don't hoard there's no need to panic," quickly followed by "Limit your chances of exposure, shop infrequently" or information that cloth or paper masks don't prevent infections quickly followed by requests to wear masks in public places.

Summer & Fall Implications

This summer will likely involve many cancelled trips and vacations. For many, visits to extended family and the absence of the routine of school is a welcome change. This summer will likely be different. Many families are already cancelling their vacations or plans to host visiting family and friends. Pew Research reports that 66 percent of Americans are not comfortable going to a polling station to vote. A concern that will need to be considered by lawmakers if the pandemic continues through our forthcoming November presidential election.

Coping Strategies

In light of the medical and existential crisis, we are all facing, what can we do to cope with stress and trauma? Many of us are concerned about staying healthy and doing what we can to boost our immune system. There is limited research evidence on the benefits of supplements and vitamins to enhance the immune system. What is known is the negative impact of stress on the immune system, and finding ways to relieve stress are a great way to boost immunity. Exercise lowers the level of cortisol (the stress hormone) in your system, but too much exercise can stress it. Try to focus on a diet filled with vegetables, fruits and foods that support your microbiome (yogurt, sauerkraut and fermented foods).

For many, stockpiling on toilet paper or non-perishable food items can give a sense of control when coping with high levels of anxiety or even panic, but in reality the behaviors have limited use as a coping mechanism.

Self-care should be a priority. Be sure to get enough sleep and virtually connect with friends, family and organizations. Keep stress levels low by exercising, gardening, mindfulness and meditation, and finding things that bring you joy. There are a multitude of free online exercise classes, including yoga. We are fortunate to have at our doorstep beautiful hiking and walking trails for all skills and abilities. Online apps like AllTrails and Strava are great at showing places to hike and walk. Follow the six feet recommended distance and enjoy the beauty outside your door.



Rita Hitching is a local science writer, researcher, and teacher who writes on teen brain development. She aims to help teens understand themselves by using the latest neuroscience data to explain how the teen body and brain develop and publishes the explanations on her website, teenbrain.info.

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opportunities for kids, and to not be concerned about the increased screen time. There is limited research evidence on the negative impact of screen time on children's development. Our school districts have made a valiant effort to rapidly pivot classroom instruction to full-time remote learning. Children will continue to learn, and for many virtual learning can be very effective. Local highschoolers are offering free online after school classes for K-8 children like stone painting or calligraphy. My 12-year-old daughter attended a class and it was a lot of fun. Consider signing up your child or asking your older child to volunteer to teach an online class.