

Teens in isolation finding ways to 'be social with each other'



Allison Pustelnik, a senior at Downers Grove North High School and a member of the school's Erika's Lighthouse Teen Empowerment Club, advises teens to remember resources and people are there to help with their stresses and sadness, even during the period of stay-at-home isolation because of the coronavirus pandemic.

(Courtesy of Allison Pustelnik)



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Passing periods. The lunchroom. Softball practice. Musical rehearsals.

It's not just history and science classes that are suddenly gone or switched from in-person to online formats for teens in high school as the world responds to the coronavirus. It's the social support system that gives order to teenage life. Without it, mental health experts say, teens may need new resources to cope.

"If you thought about the time in high school you loved doing something, it's not available anymore," said Brandon Combs, executive director of Erika's Lighthouse, (<https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/>) a Winnetka-based nonprofit organization that provides teen mental health tools for students, educators and parents. "Whatever that might be, so much of it is gone."

As schools closed and routines evaporated, teens were thrust into a new normal with little chance to adjust, Combs said. Teens worried about the virus' spread and isolated at home without their friends and school life can experience physical symptoms such as headaches and rashes, disturbances to their sleep or eating habits, and emotional issues including agitation, apathy or decrease in energy, according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<https://www.naperville203.org/cms/lib/IL01904881/Centricity/Domain/72/Parent%20and%20Caregiver%20Guide%20to%20Helping%20Families%20Cope%20with%20COVID%2019.pdf>).

"It's not just school is out," Combs said. "Their parents are stressed. Their grandparents are concerned."

Erika's Lighthouse responded to the mental health need created by the COVID-19 pandemic with a webpage (<https://secure.qgiv.com/event/inthistogether/>) called "We're in this Together." The page gathers resources including apps, videos, quizzes and games about positive mental health, a depression toolbox, ways to stay connected, e-learning resources, a parent handbook, tips to start

conversations and healthy family activities, all in an effort to support emotional stability.

A sampling of tips for teens:

- Feeling overwhelmed? Take time to look ahead. Create a vision board (<https://www.erikaslighthouse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/New-Year-Mini-Vision-Board-.pdf>) of the things you are looking forward to in the coming months.
- Need ideas for how to cope? Read what other teens are doing (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rachelysanders/teens-teenagers-at-home-isolation-coronavirus-school>) to stay connected and happy.
- Mood swinging up and down? Learn from teen therapist Mallory Grimste to play Self-Care Bingo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmOOJH5-N24&list=PLiLAumV7icFHRDsZcA5063GMTTLMiHMSy&index=2&t=os>) for a fun way to take care of yourself.
- Need to relax? Try a bubble bath, deep breathing, meditation, a gratitude journal, a do-it-yourself glitter calming jar (<https://www.marthastewart.com/1514477/how-to-make-calming-glitter-jars-for-kids>) or yoga on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene/>).

These resources and others on the "We're in this Together" page are meant to bolster the online lessons students are completing in the core academic subjects, Combs said.

"Those are absolutely important," he said, "but none will be successful if our mental and emotional health are not in a good place."

Staying social

Teenagers are social beings, Combs said. Even the introverts among them benefit from interacting with peers.

"I think for teens, it hits us hardest with the isolation, with the quarantine," said Allison Pustelnik, a senior at Downers Grove North High School and a member of the Erika's Lighthouse Teen Empowerment Club. "It's hard to not be able to go out and hang out with your friends and be stuck at home all day. I'm personally someone who likes to keep busy. It's a challenge to readjust your schedule and find things to do."

Put simply, Combs said, teens are feeling "a deep sense of loss," especially seniors like Allison who are unsure if they'll get to experience rites of passage such as prom or senior awards assemblies. That feeling, added to the requirements to avoid unnecessary outings and gatherings of more than 10 people, builds a strange loneliness that can cause or contribute to depression or anxiety.

Allison, who plans to study psychology in college, said even the term "social distancing" is a drag on mental well-being.

"I don't really like that phrase," she said. "I still think that people can be social with each other. I like to FaceTime with my friends and hang out with my family. I think that the social aspect is very important, even if you're in quarantine."

Allison's other tips for teens at home revolve around making the best of the situation.

"Take advantage of the time off to maybe try something new or change their schedule around and challenge themselves to learn a new skill or catch up on sleep," she said. "There are good things I think that can come out of this."

The Erika's Lighthouse Teen Empowerment Club has helped Allison and other members learn they're not alone in the stresses they feel. That applies, she said, even while teens are stuck away from their friends.

"There are people out there to help," Allison said.

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