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## Generation COVID-19: Navigating life's transitions

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# Generation COVID-19: Navigating life's transitions

Every generation has faced significant events and hardships that shape the way they view the world.

The silent generation (born before 1945) faced the Great Depression and World War II. Baby boomers (1946-1964), born in the post war years of prosperity, were challenged with civil unrest and the assassinations of great American leaders such as President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Generation X (1965-1976) faced the Watergate scandal, the energy crisis and a soaring divorce rate that disrupted the fabric of family life. Millennials (1977-1995) saw the World Trade Center's Twin Towers fall to terrorism on 9/11.

Today's teenagers and young adults, Generation Z (1996 to cur-

rent), are coming of age in a time of staggering cultural and political change against a backdrop of instant communication. Along with the rest of the world, this generation now faces COVID-19 as a defining moment in history, and their mental health is taking a hit.

COVID-19 has eroded the mental health of people ages 18-24 at an alarming rate. In a pre-pandemic survey, the CDC found that 11% of 18- to 24-year-olds struggled with symptoms of anxiety or depression. In June, that same number had climbed to 63%, with 75% reporting dealing with at least one adverse mental health issue, and 25% reporting they had seriously considered suicide. These numbers are far below those in all other age groups, even the groups that are most vulnerable



to the serious physical health effects of COVID-19.

It's ironic that adolescents and young adults, who are in the lowest risk category for serious COVID-19 illness, are experiencing the biggest drop in mental wellness. Why would this be? Researchers point to normal adolescent psychosocial development

as a possible answer.

Erik Erikson, an American psychologist who developed the most widely used theory of psychosocial development in the 1950s, identifies adolescent and young adulthood as the critical time to develop a sense of self and intimate relationships. Essentially, the job description of adolescents and young adults is to be social.

COVID-19 has seriously disrupted this process for most young people. Not only are they not getting the "normal" social experiences they need; they are grieving this as a major loss. High school athletics, proms, graduation, dorm life in college, hanging out with friends and going to movies now are experienced as losses rather than fun events.

Over time, these losses can add up to depression and anxiety. It is easy to see why the young

are struggling and why some have named their generation the COVID-19 generation.

Like the generations before, however, this generation can survive their defining moment and come back stronger. We all need to do our part by encouraging social connection while physically distancing. Rather than minimizing their concerns and complaints, we can help young people set up safe in-person activities and events, encourage connection through social media and technology, and talk with them about the importance of staying connected.

Listen carefully and reach out for help if needed. We can all get through this together!

Written by Dr. Tina Christine L. Chasek, HealthyMINDS247 member at Buffalo County Community Partners and associate professor in the Department of Counseling and School Psychology at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.