

Changes in Interpersonal Relationships of Emerging Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Adaptations and Implications for Psychosocial Distress

University of Minnesota researchers surveyed emerging adults (18-26 years) about changes in their relationships with family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 720 young people participated between April and October 2020.

FINDINGS

The majority of emerging adults reported events related to COVID-19 had somewhat (39%) or very much (30%) influenced their relationships with family members or friends. Depressive symptoms and stress during the pandemic were higher among emerging adults who indicated that COVID-19 had a strong influence on their relationships with family members and friends.

Key themes from respondents' comments about events related to COVID-19 that had influenced changes in their interpersonal relationships.

1 Changes in time spent with family and friends. Most emerging adults spent less time with family outside of their household. Emerging adults reported spending more time and having more communication with family members in the same household. Overall, respondents spent less time with friends and felt disconnected.

2 Changes in the form of communication with family and friends. Less in-person communication and desire to have more of it. Increase in contactless forms of communication (e.g. phone calls, texting, video conferencing, and social media).



"We have distanced and are being careful, but I miss them a lot. Phone calls aren't the same as a hot meal and hugs."

3

Changes in the quality of communication and relationships with family and friends. Some emerging adults shared problems developed in relationships with family members, significant others, and friends ranging from bickering to the ending of relationships. Being "cooped up" together, disagreements on compliance with guidance for reducing the spread of COVID-19, and stress in response to actions of government officials were influential factors. Having time to communicate more during the initial "stay-at-home" order and socially "getting back to the basics" played a role in relationship improvements for other emerging adults.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest experiencing change in interpersonal relationships is related to experiencing more psychosocial distress during the pandemic.

Health care providers, educators, and other caring adults can do the following:

- **Ask** emerging adults about recent changes in interpersonal relationships when assessing their needs.
- **Share strategies** for effectively managing stress during and in the aftermath of the pandemic.
- **Provide information** to assist them in recognizing and seeking help with symptoms of depression.
- **Have discussions** around patterns of engaging with social media. Determine whether there is a need for modifying patterns to ensure that all engagement contributes to the maintenance of healthful relationships and psychosocial well-being.



"I already knew spending a lot of time with family members would cause conflicts, but having no other option except to be cooped up with them has caused a lot of unnecessary arguments. I honestly can't wait until we can all go out again."

AUTHOR & CONTACT INFORMATION

This summary was prepared by MPH Nutrition student Tricia Alexander, Dr. Nicole Larson, Dr. Jerica Berge, and Dr. Dianne Neumark-Sztainer with the School of Public Health, University of Minnesota. The research was supported by Grant Number R35HL139853 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (PI: Dianne Neumark-Sztainer). The content is solely the responsibility of the researchers and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute or the National Institutes of Health. Send questions to larsonn@umn.edu.