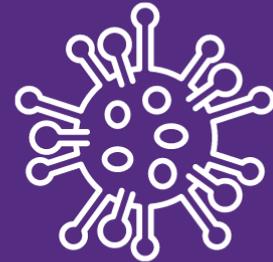


SEPTEMBER 2020



Helping Young People
Become Mentally Fit

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19



The Voice of Young People

As told by No5 Young Ambassadors

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Acknowledgements and Foreword

Firstly, my thanks go to our Young Ambassadors for sharing their insights so openly and honestly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are driven to help other young people learn from their life experiences.

I'd like to recognise their contribution, through ideas and content delivery (written and video) which has helped No5 provide additional resources by young people for young people during the lockdown. At No5 the voices of young people are at the centre of our service development.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Berkshire Community Foundation and The Blagrave Trust for their essential funding to core services that have enabled us to support the No5 Young Ambassadors to complete this work.

It has been and continues to be, a very difficult time for everyone and while our usual services moved to virtual delivery formats, the contribution of the Young Ambassadors, facilitated by The Berkshire Community Foundation and The Blagrave Trust has meant that we have been able to offer at least some essential support to the young people of Reading during the lockdown.

Although No5 is returning to deliver face to face counselling we will learn from how we have flexed our services and aim to quickly adapt should another lockdown be implemented. We are taking forward our own learnings to continue to offer young people a choice of video, face-to-face or phone counselling. No5 will continue to work with others to provide the best support we can whatever the future holds. Ultimately, we continue to focus on helping children and young people in Reading become mentally fit but also fully appreciate the additional demands on their mental health as a result of coronavirus. We wish to see them come through this challenging period with new emotional skills and learnings and experience to be stronger and more resilient than before.

We hope this report will offer us all some insight into the world of young people through the pandemic. I thank our Young Ambassadors again for giving up their time to share their own experiences and provide practical tips to help other young people. They are a credit to themselves and I hope we can all take their words as inspiration in the way we offer and deliver mental health services in the future. We must, as the adults, find a way to offer hope to this generation, as without hope our wellbeing is at serious risk.

Alyson

Alyson Brickley
Director, No5 Young People

About the Report

In the last few weeks and months, many reports have been published by large, national organisations about the impact that COVID-19 and the lockdown have had on our young people.

No5 wanted to be able to show the 'view from the ground' – the experiences of our central group of Young Ambassadors over the last few months. To highlight just how challenging this pandemic has been on our young people, and how the impact of COVID-19 will be felt by these young people in the months and years to come.

Our Young Ambassadors have shared their reflections on their experiences of lockdown and given a voice to those unheard stories of the difficulties of living in lockdown through a pandemic.

The views and thoughts of our Young Ambassadors were collected through regular group video calls during the pandemic, written content and their reactions to published reports and media articles. These were collated over a few months from July to the end of August 2020. This report has been compiled by Carly Newman (23), our former Lead Young Ambassador currently No5's Operations and Relationships Manager in conversation with No5's Young Ambassadors who had full editorial control. These are their own words.

Their stories show us the deep impact that COVID-19 has had on their relationships with their families and friends, their opportunities to socialise and feel connected to their peers (which is essential for all people, but especially adolescence), their education and careers, and ultimately, on their mental health.

Their insight illustrates the difficulties that young people have faced in the last 5 months, and also sheds light on what challenges we are yet to face in terms of restoration and recovery, as we begin to come out of this period of lockdown.

Significant damage to young people's mental health has been caused by this pandemic, through long periods of isolation and being disconnected from peers, by time missed in the classroom, by the very real concern over careers and job prospects, and by the sense of grief felt by us all. This damage will be experienced by our young people, and the services set up to support them, in the many months and years to come.

We hope that this report, and the testimony of our Young Ambassadors, will give a voice to those unheard stories of lockdown, show us the people who 'fell through the gaps', and help us all to better support our young people and provide the services that they want and need as they will need us now, more than ever before.

Key Themes and Findings

Detailed experiences of our young ambassadors can be found later in this report, broken down by topic area. Below we summarise common threads that arise in their experiences of lockdown.

Family & Peers

- **Restriction of independence.** As a result of lockdown young people, like everyone, were confined to spend more time than usual at home. To support adolescent development into adulthood it is important for young people to do things independently of their parents and lockdown prevented them from doing this. Will this have a long-lasting impact on young people's confidence?
- **Reduction of peer support.** The usual support network from outside the home such as school, other family members and peers was not to hand. Young people often find it useful to talk about how their feeling to adults who are not their parents. This can heighten tension and anxiety for young people with mental health needs.
- **Split between choosing one parent.** Over 18s with divorced parents fell through the crack during lockdown. The rules allowed under 18 to continue to see and live with both parents but over 18 were not covered. Imagine having to choose which parent you live with and the associated worry about the other parent you cannot see.

Friends

- **Digital didn't do it.** Young Ambassadors shared that communicating with friends via text and digital media did not make up for the lack of seeing their friends face to face. This broke the common misconception young people are always on their phone so 'always connected'.
- **Falsely connected.** Social media is not a place where young people admit they are struggling and need help as they fear stigma and being accused of 'seeking attention'. Our Young Ambassadors reported social media gave them a false sense of staying connected.
- **Appearances.** Social media use increased and so did the focus on weight and looks. Be aware this may lead to an increase in eating disorders not immediately detected.

Education & Careers

- **Exams.** For our Young Ambassadors about to sit their GCSEs and A-levels the cancellation of exams meant the creation of the pent-up adrenaline and anxiety had no outlet.
- **Isolation** was felt whilst studying alone or even if taking part in online lessons. Many reported it was a struggle to focus and motivate themselves.
- **Lack of hope & prospects** – the Young Ambassadors see their ideal role move further away from being a reality. Or they're already working and feel trapped in a job or industry that won't allow them to flourish, unable to see an opportunity to branch out.

Wellbeing

- **No team sports.** Wellbeing suffered for those who spend a lot of downtime playing team sports.
- **New or existing mental health issues.** New feelings of anxiety e.g. panic attacks experienced for the first time or impact of recurrence of mental health needs and how would they cope in lockdown.
- **Blame and guilt** Young people felt overlooked and unconsidered as though they were responsible for spreading COVID-19. Majority of our Young Ambassadors experienced guilt – for 'not doing enough to help' and for 'feeling grateful' for not being at high risk of catching COVID-19.

During lockdown all our Young Ambassadors experienced considerable periods of feeling anxious, lonely, sad, low, isolated, bored, exhausted, frustrated, stressed and scared. Having no sense of purpose or damage to their sense of self-worth has left them feeling lost and useless. There will not be a 'quick fix' upon return to some normality.

Family

The experiences of our Young Ambassadors when it came to their families ranged broadly with some being away from their families for an extended period; having stayed in their university towns throughout lockdown, some spending considerably more time than normal with their families and this leading to conflict and heightened tension, and some having to decide to not see one parent in order to try and keep everyone safe.

For many young people, lockdown meant an increase in the amount of time spent at home with their families, and with the added pressures and anxieties caused by the pandemic, in many cases, this has led to a sharp increase in tension and stress within the family home which all too often has resulted in an increase in conflicts between parents and their young people.

Having a support network that spans outside of the family unit is especially important during the crucial time of adolescence where young people need to feel able to leave their family home, branch out in the world and become an adult. Lockdown, in a very literal sense, prevented young people from doing that which not only causes a huge

increase in tension, and conflict, but also may have temporarily inhibited this stage of development for them. This inhibition may have long-lasting impacts on young people's own perceptions of their capacity to be in the world as an adult without 'needing' their family in the same way as they did in their formative years.

“Lockdown meant that I was fighting more with my parents due to different ideas and generational differences.”

Our Young Ambassadors have reflected that their family members, especially grandparents and other older relatives, have been a heavy source of anxiety, stress and worry and that this worry has carried a heavy burden. Young people have experienced heightened worries about these family members as they faced the very real risk of catching COVID-19 and being gravely ill or losing their lives, but also because they now had to isolate for at least 12 weeks. For most older people, especially those who live alone, visits from family and the opportunity to socialise is their lifeline and this was very quickly taken away. Also, it is not as easy for these family members to stay connected with loved ones via the telephone or video calls and so this made young people even more concerned as there was not an easy way to 'check in' on vulnerable family members.

There was also the worry about these family members getting the food and medicines that they needed, along with the deep anxiety of COVID-19 being 'brought in' to the house via these supplies and the perpetual worry that young people were unknowingly contaminating these supplies by dropping them off to loved ones.

“I was really worried about my grandparents, friends and family who lived alone, and the impact of lockdown on their lives.”

Although not experienced directly by any of our Young Ambassadors, we think it should be acknowledged that many young people will have lost loved ones during this pandemic. For many, they will not have been able to ‘say goodbye’ in the ‘normal’ or expected way as they could not visit care homes or hospital or attend

funerals. This is likely to have a long-lasting impact on the mental health of family members.

During lockdown, it was confirmed that children under 18 with divorced parents could continue to spend time and live between their two parents’ houses if that is what their custody arrangements had been previously. However, this did not cover young people aged over 18 who continued to see their parents in this way.

As spending time at, and moving between, two households was not in accordance with lockdown regulations throughout most of the lockdown period, this meant that young people who usually would spend time at both parents’ households had to make a rapid decision about which parent to ‘lockdown with’ and which one they would not be able to see. In instances where one parent worked in a ‘high risk’ area, this decision was taken away from young people to try and keep everyone safe. Many young people went from seeing both parents consistently to only living with one, and not knowing when they would be able to see their other parent.

“Before lockdown we made the decision to stay at my Mum’s house until further notice as my Dad was working in a high-risk area and wanted to keep us safe. Due to being over 18, it meant I was not allowed to see him unlike those under the age of 18. This was a big challenge for me as I went from seeing him every other day, to not knowing when I was going to see him again.”

This, is not only, hugely disruptive to the routine that families were used to but also detrimental to the wellbeing of both young people and their parents. Parents serve a ‘protective function’ to their children and young people and so where contact with a parent is removed, for whatever reason, a young person is more at risk of struggling with their mental health as a central part of their support network is missing. Equally, the wellbeing of these parents who have not seen their children during lockdown will have been jeopardised which is detrimental to both themselves, and their children.

Children naturally worry about their parents, especially when they don't see them and so young people not seeing one of their parents during lockdown would increase the burden on them as they would be more concerned about the wellbeing of that parent. Young people would also potentially feel guilty about it seeming like they have 'chosen' one parent over another, and the potential damage to the other parents' mental health and wellbeing over the time that they are apart.

This worry will also be felt by children and young people whose families may have lost their jobs and therefore livelihoods as a result of COVID-19, and this worry will weigh heavily on children and young people who may feel a responsibility to protect or help their parents when things are challenging.

Friends and socialising

As previously noted, the support network of a young person branches out away from their family into friendships and social circles. These groups are essential for a young person's socialisation, development, and wellbeing. The testimony of our Young Ambassadors shows that these friendships have been heavily tested, and stretched, during lockdown and the connectedness that young people usually feel with their peers has been severed by the loss of being able to see each other physically, but also by the feeling of there being less to say to each other as the pace of their lives changed so dramatically.

“My friends and I stopped reaching out as much as there was nothing to talk about since our lives were the same every single day.”

It is a common misconception that young people are always connected to their peers, and therefore should not or could not feel lonely, as they are 'always on their phones'. The experiences of our Young Ambassadors clearly show that communicating with friends via text and other digital means does not give

them the same feeling of connectedness as when they can be in the physical presence of each other and this loss has weighed heavily on them during lockdown.

“I felt anxious and loneliness was starting to sink in – friends started becoming more distant due to them starting to feel this way too as well as us lacking topics to talk about and activities to do remotely. What made these feelings even harder was not having my support network of my friends around me.”

It is clear that young people have experienced deep anxiety and loneliness during this period, which has driven them apart from their peers, who were likely feeling the same way. This coupled with the boredom and perceived lack of things to talk about has meant that young people have become further isolated from each other, heightening their sense of loneliness, and perpetuating the cycle of feeling lonely and isolating themselves.

This isolation and lack of connection, along with the physical distance between people has meant that young people have significantly lacked their support network during this time and so their everyday experiences have been harder to process and deal with as they haven't had the support of their peers to process these experiences with. This will have been particularly

“I had panic attacks during lockdown and had to deal with them without my usual support system of my friends with me.”

testing where a young person has experienced challenges with their mental health during this time. This is true for young people who struggled with their mental health prior to lockdown, but especially where a young person has experienced new challenges with their mental health, such as panic attacks, during lockdown.

This 'false feeling' would have been the most prominent in instances where a young person was struggling with their mental health, and despite maybe talking to their peers online still felt lonely and isolated and as though they were alone with their mental health struggles.

The 'curated identities' that we project/offer on social media can, on the one hand, prevent a young person from feeling exposed, vulnerable and 'imperfect', but on the other hand prevents them from truly connecting with each other and being able to reach out for help when they need it – it is far more comfortable, and much easier, to create the perfect image of a happy, healthy version of yourself than to admit that you are struggling and need help without the fear of stigma and being accused of 'attention seeking'.

This, along with the perceived 'practical necessity' of being online and connected 24/7 has led to a toxic environment where young people are spending countless hours online, seeking connection with their peers, without ever getting the support that they need.

For many young people, their worry about friends who may live on their own and be struggling in isolation caused significant distress. Just as with their family, young people feel a responsibility to protect their friends, especially in terms of their mental health where they know they have struggled in the past.

Difficult decisions have had to be made, and young people have felt as though they have had to put themselves at potential risk to protect the wellbeing of others. For our Young Ambassador, the risk of COVID-19 was far less important than doing everything they could to prevent a mental health crisis. This came at the risk of being judged and potentially 'reported on' by other people and they were so concerned about the potential kick-back, stigma and lack of understanding of others, that having their friend 'bubble' with them at the beginning of lockdown was something they couldn't share with others. This also means that this young person has had to 'deal' with this all on their own, as the fear of stigma prevented them from being able to share this with others and be supported in this decision.

“Social media gives us a false feeling of remaining connected.”

“What we fail to consider as young people is that we only show what we want other to see.”

“Bingeing and posting incessantly on social media have become a practical necessity, unexpectedly our sole source for information around the pandemic.”

Young people are still significantly worried about their friends. They have high anxiety about asymptotically carrying the virus and passing it on the vulnerable loved ones, both friends and family.

The damage that long-term disconnectedness will be experienced for many months to come. For some young people, especially those in education, employment, or training, they will more easily be able to spring back into socialising and being together, where social distancing regulation allows. However, for those out of education, employment or training (NEET) and young people who have struggled significantly with being disconnected and isolated or have underlying health conditions who have to continue to shield; their experiences and struggles with isolation and loneliness will likely continue for many months to come. Finding it harder to re-integrate back into friendship groups and social circles and not re-establishing the support network that they previously had around them.

“A friend of mine has social and general anxiety (and so struggled to talk to their house mates) and struggles really badly with isolation.

In order to avoid a serious mental health crisis, he moved in with me once lockdown began. I have felt bad and awkward about telling people as although we technically 'broke the rules', and I know that some people won't understand or think that mental health is a good enough reason, it was essential for his wellbeing. It was a decision we had to make, not so we could 'hang out' with a friend but to avoid serious and genuine

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Education and careers

For some of our Young Ambassadors, lockdown came at a crucial time in their education; some were about to sit their GCSEs and A-Levels, some were finishing different years at university, expecting to sit exams, finish coursework and hold exhibitions, and some were planning and preparing for their year abroad. For all our Young Ambassadors, lockdown has caused significant disruption to their education and/or careers.

It can be expected that we will see the impact of this disruption for many years to come. For some, their GCSE and A-Level results will mean they cannot go on to study the subjects that they were hoping to, and this will have a significant impact on both their wellbeing, their sense of worth, and future prospects.

“Lockdown began in quite a key point of my final year of university... my placement was cancelled... then our exhibition that we had been working towards and looking forward to all throughout all of our course had to be cancelled.”

“I assumed that life would go back to 'normal' and I could finish my finals and say goodbye to my first year of Law school.”

Mental health services will also see the impact of this in the issues that young people present with. For many young people, exams cause significant worry and anxiety and those feelings would have been building within them for

many months prior to lockdown. For many, the sitting of those exams expels the pent-up adrenaline and anxiety and acts as a physical release of those emotions. For young people who have not been able to sit their exams this year, these emotions have not had an outlet and young people will likely carry them for many years to come, having had no way to release or express them.

For many, the experience of online learning will have also been detrimental to their mental health, both because it has caused significant stress, and also because many young people have felt very isolated when taking part in online classes as the sessions where students' cameras and microphones were turned off have been in stark contrast to their usual noisy, busy classes.

“The transition to online learning has not been smooth.”

The struggles that young people have experienced in regard to online lessons, completing coursework and lacking suitable spaces to study has been a real gap

during lockdown. Of course, the ultimate aim had to be keeping everyone safe, but this has come at the heavy cost of young people struggling to work in isolation and facing a huge amount of pressure to continue to meet deadlines and work to their expected standard.

“I was working on my coursework before lockdown and was really looking forward to finishing it all off... Online school was its own struggle – many couldn't focus on online lessons...and classes felt isolating.”

“I had a particularly rough time trying to finish my dissertation in lockdown – it felt like I had this massive and impossible task and I was on my own. Due to my mental health, I already really struggle with concentrating and motivating myself. Going to the library and having a sperate study environment helped me when I had deadlines, but that was taken away.”

A significant gap for children and young people who were in a transition year (Year 6, Year 11, Year 13 and end of college or university courses) prior to lockdown was the opportunity to have a proper ending. Many will not have been able to say goodbye to friends and teachers who they will no longer be spending everyday with come September. This is a significant loss and will potentially make starting somewhere new in September considerably harder as their previous year feels unfinished and relationships lost.

Lockdown, and the damage to the UK's economy, has had a significant impact on job and career prospects, particularly for young people. For young graduates, they already faced what they knew would be a really uncertain task of entering the world of work following their studies. However, financial uncertainty and a potential change in the grades they were expecting, due to having to work in isolation, for many young people has left them feeling that entering the world of work, in a role that they are passionate about, is close to impossible. This causes a serious lack of hope and prospects for young people which is seriously damaging to their mental health. If young people have nothing to hope for, look forward to, or work towards, they can lose their sense of purpose and find themselves feeling as though there is 'no point' to continuing. A lack of hope is one of the most damaging feelings we can experience.

“The uncertainty of getting a job as a graduate was already enough, not it is feeling close to impossible.”

“I was looking at changing industries to do something I am passionate about; however, it seems safer to stay where I am.”

The lack of career prospects and feelings of instability and uncertainty is also being felt by young people who may have started their working life not in the industry where they hoped to build a career. These young

people are now feeling as though they cannot branch out of where they are, move in into doing something they are really passionate about and where they imagine themselves working for the years to come. This, again, is massively damaging to a young person’s hopefulness for the future and their prospects, as they are feeling ‘trapped’ in jobs and industries that don’t allow them to grow and thrive as individuals. Many young people will feel moving into the industry that they want to remain in is time-limited, and due to the current financial instability and uncertainty facing us all, that this is not the time that they can make this move. The optimal time for them to do this may pass without an opportunity for them to peruse it.

We will see the impact of this for many years to come as young people will not be in jobs that they are passionate about or allow them to grow as individuals. This will have a negative impact on their mental health as they are likely to feel unfulfilled, a lack of hope, prospects, and purpose.

Mental health

For many young people, the shine of what felt like an extended Easter holiday quickly wore off and was replaced with feelings of anxiety, loneliness, sadness, uselessness, and boredom amongst many other emotions.

For some young people, lockdown gave them time and an opportunity to focus on hobbies and interests that they usually didn't have time for, and for many, this has been hugely beneficial. However, for those who spent a large part of their 'downtime' playing sport, especially team sports, this was a significant gap for them and was detrimental to both their physical and mental health.

“More and more of my friends were staying up until 2 or 3am playing video games or watching videos which negatively affected their mental health.”

For many, exercise and sport are ways in which they stay mentally well and look after their wellbeing. For those who were able to go outside for their allowed daily exercise, this made a significant difference to their wellbeing, feeling less irritable and better all round. However, for those who could not do their usual exercise, or engage in their usual sports activities, these young people were less motivated, and their wellbeing suffered significantly.

For some young people, the boredom felt by a lack of things to do and the lack of routine to their days meant that many of them were staying up later into the night and filling their time by playing video games and watching videos online. This, along with an increase in their use of social media has led to a negative impact on their mental health.

“With social media being a vital form of communication during this time, many of us are focusing on the online presence of others which takes a toll on your mentality and belittles personal battles and self-improvements.”

Lockdown, and the increase use of social media, has led to a rise in trends across social media platforms that can cause serious harm to young people's mental health. A rise in trends that focus on physical appearance, and using lockdown to lose weight, is likely to have led to an increase in rates of eating disorders. Worryingly, these may go unnoticed for longer than normal as young people are not being seen by teachers, colleagues, or friends and this can be harder for family to notice if they see their young person every day.

Unfortunately, there has been a gap and lack of focus and attention on helping people to stay mentally well during lockdown as well as staying physically safe and well. For many, they have had to take it upon themselves to make sure they are engaging in activities that look after their wellbeing, or their mental health and wellbeing has suffered significantly.

Across the board, all of our Young Ambassadors have said they had considerable periods of feeling anxious, lonely, sad, low, lost, useless, isolated, bored, exhausted, frustrated, stressed, scared, and as though they had no sense of purpose during lockdown, and it can be expected that this is true for the majority of young people.

For some, they experienced mental health issues, such as panic attacks, for the first time, and for others, lockdown resulted in them struggling with their mental health in ways they had done previously and the recurrence of these feelings made young people fearful about what the impact of struggling with these feelings again might be.

As mentioned previously, an important factor in our Young Ambassadors' experience of lockdown was feeling no sense of purpose. For some, they were able to take control of this feeling by finding ways that they could help, with one working in a care home during this time. However, for others, those opportunities were not available, and a lack of purpose has left them feeling lost and useless. This can damage a young person's sense of self-worth and there will not be a 'quick fix' upon the return to some normality.

These experiences, alongside the extreme boredom due to a lack of opportunity of things for them to do has led to them feeling exhausted, which has then made it harder for young people to engage in activities and therefore perpetuates their boredom. This boredom and associated exhaustion have contributed to young people experiencing a lack of motivation during this period and this is further perpetuated by the lack of hope that they feel about their education and/or employment.

“Over lockdown there has been many trends across social media that involve bettering your physical appearance. But working on your mental health is just as important especially when previously simple tasks like going to the shops come with such overwhelming anxieties.”

“I had been in the dark and anxious mindset before and didn't want to stay there again.”

Young people also felt quite angry and frustrated during lockdown because they felt overlooked and unconsidered and as though they were 'being blamed' for spreading COVID-19. While there have been some cases of young people meeting up and not abiding to lockdown restrictions, the media attention surrounding this made young people feel as though there was a blanket judgement being made about all young people, rather than the few who were not following the regulations. This has made young people feel disenfranchised and not understood or respected.

"I have always seen the world slightly differently as a result of my OCD... For me, the word 'pandemic' is scary enough, but the idea that this virus was global and growing really heightened my anxiety. Undoubtedly, I was angry at myself because of this. I had made so much progress over the years to overcome certain aspects of my OCD, but the lockdown really threatened this.... A large part of my OCD stereotypically surrounds illness.... and I felt overwhelming anxiety and guilt."

Anxiety, especially about being in public spaces and doing once normal things, will be a lasting impact of COVID-19, particularly for those young people living with disorders such as social anxiety disorder and instances of OCD which surrounds illness and cleanliness. Our Young Ambassadors have consistently shown that this was a gap in the thinking surrounding, and provisions available, during lockdown. This particularly impacts young people who live alongside ongoing mental health issues but were not receiving support prior to lockdown. To young people, it seems as though they were left 'high and dry' to make it out on their own in terms of their mental health unless they were experiencing a crisis.

Guilt was also largely experienced by our Young Ambassadors who on the one hand felt guilty about 'not doing enough to help' but also guilty about feeling low and as though they 'should be grateful' for what they have and for not having caught COVID-19. This guilt about the way that they were feeling will mean that they have not given themselves the permission to experience those negative emotions or given themselves the time or space to process them but suppressed them and 'carried on'. This potentially will result in longer-term mental health issues across our young people who eventually will need an outlet.

As mentioned previously, although none of our Young Ambassadors has experienced the grief that will be felt by so many families who have lost loved ones due to COVID-19, it should be acknowledged that there will be collective grief felt by all society. We collectively will grieve for the tens of thousands of people who have lost their lives in the UK alone, and also grieve for a way of life that, at the moment, seems that we will never return to.

In their own words

Our Young Ambassadors personal experiences of lockdown (unedited).



Abbie's Story

My personal experience has been a bit of a rollercoaster. I started feeling quite calm about COVID-19 and the process of going into lockdown due to my dad's role at work as well as maybe the lack of information and research that had been done at that current time. On the day we went into lockdown I felt kind of prepared, I expected it to happen that week, so I said goodbye to my work friends and emptied my locker just in case. I feel that having this closure helped me at the start. A few weeks in was when this positive and calm outlook started to fade, and I felt the anxiety and loneliness sink in. Friends started becoming more distant too, due to them starting to feel this way as well as us lacking topics to talk about and activities to do remotely.

What made these feelings harder was not having my support network around me of my friends but also my dad. Even though I am now 20, I still stick to the custody schedule my parents have with my sister and I as I still live at home and quite enjoy it. Before lockdown, we made the decision to stay at my mum's house until further notice as my dad was working in a high-risk area and wanted to keep us safe. Due to being over 18, it meant I was not allowed to see him unlike those under the age of 18. This was also a big challenge for me as I went from seeing him every other day to not knowing when I was going to see him again. Amidst all this I also had a feeling of being lost, I work in hospitality so working from home was not possible and unlike some of my friends who go to uni, I had no studying to take part in. I genuinely felt like I had no purpose.

I then took a step back and looked at where I was, how I was feeling and why. I then wanted to make some improvements, I had been in the dark and anxious mindset before and didn't want to stay there again.

I created some new purposes to keep my mind active and to give me a reason to wake up in the morning. This gave me things to aim for and also to evaluate where I want to be in the future. Not long after, things started to ease, I was able to see my dad again after 2 months, I returned to work halfway through May, and was allowed to see friends and other family at a distance.

However, with the return to work and as more things started to re-open, I felt more anxious about doing simple things like getting petrol, popping into the shop, etc. Even now I am still struggling to work through these social anxieties and sometimes feel disappointed in myself due to having worked hard to get through these barriers in the past.

From reading multiple reports of the impact COVID-19, etc, has had on young people, I feel that they mostly match up to my experiences. However, I do feel they are lacking the view from those who are over 18 who didn't decide to go to uni and those with divorced parents who haven't been able to see the other. I feel that for those like me, there is a gap as we may not receive the support our peers may receive, and I am uncertain about any advances within my career in the next few years. I was looking at changing industries to do something I am passionate about; however, it seems safer to stay where I am.



Angie's Story

Lockdown has been a bit all over the place for me. While it did have some good moments, it also had many lows. Lockdown at first was just a bit of an inconvenience for me - it was the week I was working on my coursework for different subjects. I was really looking forward to finishing them off, and then lockdown was announced and two days later the schools were closed. Online school was its own struggle. Many couldn't focus on online lessons, and since cameras and mics were mostly turned off the lessons with full, busy classes felt even more isolating, since it was just so quiet! As the key dates passed-last day of exams, prom, summer concerts, last day of school - we all felt sadder but also more accepting of lockdown.

Some focused on hobbies or creative outputs that they never have enough time to indulge in during normal school time, especially in exam season. More of my artsy friends completed their old projects and started new ones, and felt more content as artists, whether specialising in music or textiles.

However, others struggled much more, those whose hobbies were mostly sport based, especially those playing team sports since many of clubs were closed to obey the social distancing guidelines. I noticed that more guys and girls were gaming. For some, this was quite new and can be seen as a positive effect of lockdown-exploring different interests and gaining new skills. The negative part of that was that more and more of my friends were staying up till 2-3am gaming or watching videos, which ended up affecting their mental health negatively, whether due to getting little sleep or fighting with parents. Yet another reminder that every coin has two faces.

My negatives in lockdown included having and dealing with a panic attack without my usual support system of my friends with me; fighting more with my parents due to different ideas and differences between generations; more and more feeling useless due to lack of activities I could do safely. Loneliness was an issue in the middle of lockdown. After the first few months, my friends and I stopped reaching out as much-there was nothing to talk about since our lives were the same every single day. For a couple of months, it was just awkward starting conversations. And then we all kind of adapted to not talking as much as we did. We got involved in projects or interests, and actually started talking again, about new things we did in lockdown.

There were positives that kept me going, and I actually ended up learning new things about myself. My drama group kept rehearsals going via Zoom and it was a relief to see everyone every Friday for a couple of hours. I became really interested in youth action and took part in a number of campaigns, discovering that I actually enjoy things like that, and now I'm looking forward to things I can partake in post-lockdown. I've never enjoyed PE lessons, but in lockdown, I noticed that on the days I didn't follow the exercise routine I created, I felt much worse: less motivated, more moody, more irritable and just all-round worse. "Exercise helps mental health" became more than just a phrase the PE teacher tells you before making you run cross country. It really did end up making a difference to my day-to-day attitude.

So yeah, while every day is different in lockdown, I think it ended up being as normal as it can be when the world has a new plague every month. Just got to take it one day at a time.



Hannah's Story

Living in a Global Pandemic: OCD edition

A year ago, if someone had said there would be a virus that would start a global pandemic, forcing countless countries to go into lockdown; I for one know I would not have believed it. I have always seen the world slightly differently as a result of my OCD. So, to one day wake up and have everyone suddenly taking all these additional precautions that I didn't think twice about doing was surreal. Not to brag or anything, but I like to think I was ahead of the game.

For me, the word 'pandemic' is scary enough, but the idea that this virus was global and growing really heightened my anxiety. Undoubtedly, I was angry at myself because of this. I had made so much progress over the years to overcome certain aspects of my OCD, but the lockdown really threatened this.

I quickly realised that I had the wrong attitude towards it. I engaged myself in news updates and researched thoroughly around how I could play my part to help during the pandemic. A large part of my OCD stereotypically surrounds illness so my vigilance with PPE and cleanliness was helpful in this case.

I began working in care because the vast research I had completed drew attention to the ever-increasing death rates in care homes as a result of the virus. This took me away from my overwhelming anxiety and guilt as I felt as though I was doing everything I could to help. It also took away from the loneliness and gave me a sense of purpose again.

Sadly, I know many young people, like myself at the start of it all, who were very negatively impacted by lockdown. What we fail to consider as young people is that we only show what we want others to see. With social media as a vital form of communication during this time, many of us are focusing on others' online presence. Which takes a toll on your mentality and belittles personal battles and self-improvements. Over lockdown there has been many trends across social media that involve bettering your physical appearance. But working on your mental health is just as important as working on your physical health. When simple tasks like going to the shop come with such overwhelming anxieties, just being willing to do these activities is an amazing thing; something that should be celebrated.

We need to draw attention to the fact that, as a collective, we are surviving a global pandemic. This shouldn't be overlooked. As although it is hard, we are getting through it. We are all living through it; however, this may be.



Sanjana's Story

Much like the vast majority of young people in the UK, I went into lockdown wearing rose-tinted glasses. After a hasty goodbye to my flatmates at University, I arrived home with a suitcase full of dirty laundry prepared to take a 2-week holiday. I assumed that life would go back to 'normal' after Easter at best, where after I would return to Uni to finish my finals, spend summer with my friends and say goodbye to my first year of law school.

Unfortunately, this 'normal' life never came for me. Battling both extremes of anxiety and utter boredom has been nothing but frustrating and exhausting. In addition, the transition to online learning has not been smooth.

Bingeing and posting incessantly through social media have become a practical necessity, unexpectedly our sole source for information around the pandemic. False feeling of remaining connected with our wider community.

Feeling of gratefulness mixed with survivor guilt.



Elii's Story

Lockdown began in quite a key point of my third year. I wasn't necessarily stressed about me catching the virus itself, (because I am fairly young and able-bodied) but I was worried about my grandparents, my friends who lived alone, and also the impact of the lockdown on life. When the lockdown started to begin my placement was cancelled, all of our group meetings were moved online. Then our art exhibition, that we had been working towards and looking forward to – not only all year but all 3 years of our course, had been cancelled.

I was worried about the mental health of my loved ones, especially those who lived alone - I know from my own experience how long periods of isolation can massively impact someone's mental health.

I had a particularly rough time trying to finish my dissertation in lockdown – it felt like I had this massive and impossible task and I was on my own. Due to my mental health I already really struggle with concentrating and motivating myself. Going to the library and having that separate study environment helped me when I had deadlines – but that was taken away. I coped by turning the spare bedroom into a little office, I would still very often get distracted, however, it was better than working in my bedroom. I also very luckily had a course mate who was a massive help, who would spell check my work and let me ramble about my ideas to make them clearer in my mind.

Our art exhibition became online, as I was on the website design team, my small responsibility had become the main event.

I also had a friend who lived in halls and has social and general anxiety (therefore struggles to talk to housemates), who also struggles very badly with isolation. He essentially moved in with me once lockdown began. This helped us both avoid any big mental health crisis/episodes - that would have otherwise inevitably happened. I sometimes feel bad, or awkward telling people, since we technically 'broke the rules', and I know that maybe some people won't understand - or won't think that mental health is a good enough reason. However, it was a decision that was essential for our wellbeing, not just so we could hang out with a mate but to avoid serious and genuine consequences.

Now that lockdown is gradually lifting, and I have finished my dissertation and my degree (yay) my concerns have shifted. I get a little nervous in public spaces, especially when people don't stay the recommended distance. The uncertainty of getting a job as a graduate was already enough, now it's feeling close to impossible. I worry about my partner and my friend's anxiety around catching the virus and passing it on to a vulnerable loved one.

However, with finding new coping mechanisms for new challenges, things are improving.

Conclusion

We cannot predict the whole picture of what the mental health of young people will look like going forward, or what long-term impacts we will see from this pandemic. However, it is clear that the mental health of our young people has suffered significantly and the effects of this will be seen by us all in the years to come.

If our young people are going to rise up and thrive from their experience of this pandemic and go on to be honest forward-thinking leaders that we will need as we recover from this pandemic, now more than ever we must to be there to support them.



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If this report has raised feelings or worries, you'd find helpful to discuss please contact our Young People's Helpline. Text TALK followed by your first name and postcode to 07786 202430 to request a phone call from one of our trained counsellors.