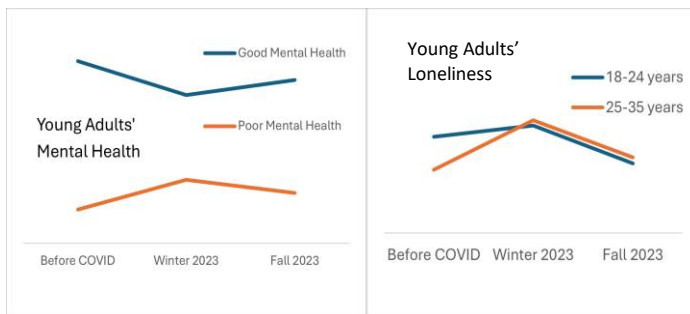


RESEARCH CONNECTION

Young adult mental health recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

By *Marysia Lazinski, Ph.D., Megan Secord, & Nancy Newall, Ph.D.*



Why this research is important

The mental health of young adults was poor and declining, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial phases of the pandemic exacerbated what was already being referred to as a "mental health epidemic" among young people. However, research has focused on the transition to social isolation and online functioning at the beginning of the pandemic, largely ignoring the transition back to in-person functioning in early 2023. This return was not conducted confidently. Rather, conflicting messages around the safety of in-person functioning were abundant. Therefore, during the pandemic recovery, young adults had to cope with significant uncertainty, a heightened sense of threat, and multiple online-to-in-person transitions. We need to understand the psychological functioning of young adults as the world recovers from the pandemic to understand their mental health trajectories and prepare relevant support.

What you need to know

Young adults were experiencing poor mental health and heightened levels of loneliness in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, but what about during the transition back to in-person functioning, during "pandemic recovery?"

How the research was conducted

The current study examined young adults' levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress and loneliness during the transition back to in-person functioning during pandemic recovery—an uncontrollable stressor. The study also investigated young adults' use of coping and emotion regulation skills during this time. Three hundred young adults (18–35 years) from Brandon University (BU), Assiniboine Community College (ACC) and the surrounding communities completed a survey between February 6, 2023, and April 18, 2023 (winter 2023), when they were returning to in-person functioning for the first time, but in a back-and-forth fashion, with confusion and uncertainty. Another two hundred fifty-eight young adults completed the questionnaire between September 6, 2023, and December 30, 2023 (fall 2023), when they were fully back to in-person functioning and even mask mandates had been lifted.

What the researchers found

Self-reported symptoms of depression and stress were significantly lower in fall 2023 than in winter 2023, indicating

that young adults' mental health may have begun to improve by the end of the transition back to in-person functioning, when there was no longer significant uncertainty. Young adults' symptoms of stress and depression were in the "moderate" range in winter 2023 and in the "mild" range in fall 2023. However, symptoms of anxiety were not statistically different and remained in the moderate range across both time points. Importantly, mental health had not yet returned to the "normal" range or to pre-COVID levels for this general population of Canadian young adults. Crucially, those young adults who reported being clearer about and accepting what they were feeling, those who held a stronger belief that they could regulate their emotions when upset, and those who reported being better able to concentrate and accomplish tasks while distressed were also more likely to report better mental health. Lastly, those who reported using less distraction and denial to cope were also more likely to report better mental health.

How this research can be used

Young people still require significant support for their mental health. Although mental health and loneliness had improved by the end of 2023, a hopeful finding, young adults were not back to pre-COVID levels. Emotion regulation strategies emerged as the most important way of supporting young people's mental health. Therefore, mental health resources for young people should be directed toward teaching young adults to:

- become aware, attentive and clear about their emotional experiences (e.g., label their emotions);
- decrease their negative reactions to their emotional experiences (e.g., validate their emotions);
- function effectively despite emotional distress (e.g., take small steps towards their goals while upset);
- use less distraction strategies to cope (e.g., be mindful of their emotions rather than trying to ignore them); and
- ultimately develop a belief that emotions can be regulated effectively.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Mental health, loneliness, young adults, emotion regulation, COVID-19 pandemic recovery

Publications based on this research

Lazinski, M. J., Secord, M. S., & Newall, N. (2024, April 26).

Where are they now? Exploring the mental health and coping of young adults during the transition to in-person functioning. [Symposium]. Mental Health on the Prairies (MHoP) 2024 Conference and Conversation, Brandon, Manitoba, Canada.

<https://www.brandonu.ca/mhp/files/Presentation-Abstracts.pdf>

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