

Why Taking Off Against the Wind After the Pandemic Has Created So Much Turbulence for Our Youth

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It's been a long, challenging 22 months since, literally overnight, the country shut down in March 2020 due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. During a time of division, something bigger than all of us became the single and powerful common denominator to unite us. We all became vulnerable, some of us more than others. While we were all in the same lake, we were in different boats, with no definite captain leading us. Most of us became scared and anxious.

The relationship between control and anxiety has been studied for decades, with the general finding that the less one feels they have control over a particular outcome, the more anxiety they will experience. An “internal locus of control” means that someone feels that their own behavior controls the outcome. Our “external locus of control” refers to the idea that outside forces (e.g. luck, other people, God, chance, fate) are in charge. During this pandemic, we saw this dynamic in its extreme. People lost their internal locus of control. We looked towards the most knowledgeable people to give us answers and, most importantly, assurances. Information not only changed by the minute, but also contradictory information being given simultaneously. We did not know whom to believe nor what to expect. We increased our internal locus of control by washing our hands, wearing masks, and not shaking hands. In spite of following all the measures, many fell ill. Our locus of control quickly became externalized again.

As adults, we tried to access our adaptive coping resources, apply logic, filter the excess of information that was bombarding us daily, and patiently wait. Despite this, there was significant anxiety and impairment. People could not control the permanent losses of work and, subsequently, income. Many were unable to see loved ones who were critically ill. Homes turned into classrooms and parents into teachers. Parents had to make difficult choices, that really weren’t “choices” to determine the benefits of staying home to supervise virtual learning vs. continuing to work to provide.

Fun posts on social media showed how people were “winning” during the lockdown by cleaning their closet, doing science experiments, sewing masks, and crafting. Sometimes, those already struggling often felt worse. However, the small victories were short-lived as we came to terms with reality. Kids weren’t going back to school in two weeks. Death tolls were rising. As parents became more anxious, so did children. The novelty and fun of wearing pajamas to “school” was fading. Kids missed their friends. They were also exposed to their parents’ worries over finances, food insecurity, and illness. Many parents worried about who would watch their children if they had COVID-19, and, sadly, if they didn’t survive. For single parents and parents of children with complex medical or developmental needs, the fear was even greater.

Anxious parents are more likely to make their children more anxious, by catastrophizing, withdrawing, exerting greater control over their children, and modeling external locus of control behaviors. There is no surprise that the rate of anxiety in children went up significantly over the course of the pandemic. A recent report of over 80,000 youth surveyed globally found the prevalence of anxiety symptoms in children doubled as compared to pre-pandemic estimates to an alarming rate of 20.5%.¹

The rise in volume of children, adolescents, and parents presenting in my practice with moderate to severe anxiety and other mental health symptoms has been staggering. It seemed to reach a peak sometime near the middle of the pandemic, when many had started to lose their sense of time seeing no end in sight. The winter holidays came and went,

¹ Racine N, McArthur BA, Cooke JE, Eirich R, Zhu J, Madigan S. Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During COVID-19: A Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2021;175(11):1142–1150. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2482

which were lonely and disappointing. School graduations were mostly done via zoom with families either crammed on a couch or logging on from elsewhere.

But, some hope was peaking over the horizon. Vaccines appeared and many viable businesses reopened. A robust conversation was evolving for kids to return to school in person. Children would finally return to some normalcy, albeit a “new normal.” Worries could include purchasing school supplies and actual clothing with coordinated face masks. I was encouraged that the anxiety and depression would be in the past. As youth came to me at the start of the school year, I reminded myself that kids are often anxious in the beginning.

But it hasn’t gotten better, and is actually worse. Recently, the *Washington Post* reported the number of gun-related incidents in schools during the first three months in 2021 compared to 2019 pre-pandemic has more than tripled.² There have been multiple threats of violence in both the local middle and high schools in my neighborhood in the last month. It seems as if many are feeling the aftershocks even more than the original jolts from the pandemic. What is getting worse is not just anxiety, but secondary symptoms that manifest in children, such as aggression and bullying. I asked kids ages 5 to 13 at my son’s baseball practice if they were seeing more hostility from other children, and all overwhelmingly confirmed this. One 13-year-old boy showed me an injury he sustained from a classmate, and a kindergartener witnessed fighting “every day at recess.” Another boy told me a girl in his 8th grade class had become “violent” after the pandemic, and he had to grab her arms when she physically attacked him. When I asked him why he thought that happened, he replied, “her mom died of Covid last year. I guess she’s sad and anxious.” Many have succumbed to grief, not just to losing a loved one, but also losing opportunities, social interactions, and control. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross taught us anger is one stage of grief.³ During a time when children feel helpless and scared, many create a false sense of command through venting their anger aggressively.

Teachers and coaches share equally disturbing experiences. A veteran middle school teacher mentioned students daily express they “don’t feel mentally well” and request support from the school counselor. Students are also having difficulty retaining information, as they cannot close the gap between what was lost in 2020 and current educational standards. Kids are dysregulated and anxious, which affects attention and ability to retain information. Another teacher created a sharing circle for her middle school students for them to safely talk about their feelings, and their vulnerability shocked her. She mentioned an increase in substance use in youth, modeled by adults who have been increasing use of alcohol and other substances as a means of coping.

One of the most important protective factors is the presence of a nurturing adult in a child’s life. Parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and professionals play a significant part in a child’s sense of safety. It is important for adults and children to seek support from a mental health professional. Parents can model core life skills to strengthen a child’s resilience, such as problem solving and stress management. Children benefit when adults foster and support their strengths and skill development. Abilities in athletics, academics, and the arts reinforce confidence in oneself. Parents have a responsibility to maintain a proper routine for sleep, activity, and nutrition. Family time is imperative and can be incorporated in the routine. Most importantly, parents must practice and model self-care. As they say on airplanes, “in the case of emergency please secure your own mask before assisting others.”

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² The Washington Post, October 26, 2021

³ Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*.