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The pandemic has drastically affected young people's mental health and views regarding mental health; however, there is hope in sight. One of the largest contributors to a decline in generation z's mental health is social media and being home the past year due to the pandemic has only skyrocketed their screen time. Social media is a platform for exposure, and has been used to educate generation z, thanks to increased destigmatization of mental illness coupled with more conversations regarding personal experiences with mental illness. These conversations help break down barriers and prevent feelings of isolation.

Natives to the digital world, Gen Z are often characterized as tech-savvy kids who spend too much time on their devices. This group is unique in the way they process, they can consume more information than ever before and at a faster rate. They are not overstimulated, despite widely held belief, they are paying attention (Business Insider). Gen Z's second-leading cause of death in 2017 was due to suicides; it is no shock they are referred to as, "the loneliest generation." (Western Governors University). Because they are paying attention, Generation Z is experiencing pressure unlike any older generation at this same age, and their mental health is suffering because of it. A survey in the United States conducted by the American Psychological Association in 2017 revealed 3.2 million teenagers said they had at least one significant depressive episode in the previous year. Generation Z's mental stability is a catch-22; it is keeping them from spending time with others or participating in activities which, in turn, can cause more depressive and anxious thoughts.

Social media platforms with constantly updated content just a refresh away can fuel addictive behaviors. Teens feel about platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Tik Tok the way gamblers do about casinos. Why keep pulling the lever on the slot machine? The erraticism of social media or slot machines -- in this case -- is what keeps one playing. Knowing success is possible will keep the slots running. Similarly, the uncertainty of what post is next or how many likes are ahead is what motivates users to spend hours of their day on apps. Social media platforms are built to be addictive, and the creators are doing nothing to stop it. Edward Tufte, in the Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma,” states elegantly, “There are only two industries that call their customers 'users': illegal drugs and software.” (Vanderslice). Dopamine is a chemical released in the brain during pleasing encounters such as food, music, or quality time with loved ones (McLean Hospital).

Social media has consistently drawn a direct line from itself to the steady decline of Generation Z's mental and physical health. This mental preoccupation can lead to negative thoughts and feelings of isolation. Spikes in mental illnesses such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety have been linked to excessive social media use; it has even caused physical sickness like nausea and headaches. According to McLean Hospital, “The earlier teens start using social media, the greater impact the platforms have on mental health,” (McLean Hospital). That is especially concerning, keeping in mind the youngest in Generation Z is five years old this year (Kasasa). Social media keeps teenagers' minds preoccupied, interrupts their sleep schedule, and can expose them to unrealistic standards; the severity of these effects can be dependent on the amount of use (“Teens and Social Media Use...”).

In addition, social media perpetuates unrealistic expectations for adolescents creating heightened insecurities. Social media tends to work as a highlight reel, it shows the best parts of

people's lives with a filter on top, yet this is common knowledge it is still easy to fall into the trap of comparison. In a study conducted on the effects of social media, undergraduate students who spent more time on Facebook than their peers reported a stronger belief that others were happier than they were ("Teens and Social Media Use: What's the Impact?"). Social media can provide a disillusioned feeling of connectivity to the user (Western Governors University). Generation Z, having grown up with social media, are constantly comparing themselves and measuring their lives to others. Although I thought I was the epitome of cool, I was incredibly awkward. Whether it was the frizzy, untamed curly hair, or my use of texting lingo in everyday conversation, I was given more than ample room for growth. Most will agree middle school is hard; students are developing while trying to create an identity. However, now kids are seemingly skipping the awkward middle school phase. Due to the exposure of social media, they compare themselves to others online and are deeply disappointed when they end different results. It is absurd they expect themselves to have a brand and aesthetic at 12 and 13 and then try to compare themselves to 20-30-somethings who had the chance to be awkward in middle school (McLean Hospital). Despite social media being a major mental health risk for Generation Z, a more recent and pressing issue is becoming noteworthy.

The current coronavirus pandemic is amplifying the mental health issues among Generation Z. Ten months ago students across the United States cheered at the thought of having an extended spring break. When they discovered they would spend the rest of the semester online some thought it would be fun to spend a little extra time at home. The severity and reality of the situation quickly became apparent. Pre-pandemic, those in Generation Z with mental health struggled since March, it has become worse. "Researchers found that the prevalence of major depressive symptoms among young adults remains higher than historical norms, with 47.3

percent reporting at least moderate depressive symptoms in October.” (staff). Namely, for fear of catching/spreading the virus to friends and family, limited social interaction, and overall uncertainty of what the future holds has encouraged the steady decline in mental health among youth. Sixteen-hundred students were polled, by the Social Learning Network, during March and April of this year, found that 62.4% (998 students) said their mental health had dwindled during isolation from COVID-19. In the same poll, a whopping 18.5% of students (296 students) said they felt happy during quarantine (Davis). However, parents across the nation have been scrambling, with schools taking their kids in and out of school since March. Children are spending some of their most important developmental seasons online, away from teachers and their friends, meaning their education and social skills could take a fatal blow. Like kids and pre-teens, teenagers and young adults are struggling to build social skills.

The isolation and fear of the pandemic have made Generation Z more aware of themselves. My 12-year-old second cousin discovered, not long after March, she had an anxiety disorder. She became panicked at the thought of crowds or her family being in public. The fear of loved ones testing positive was overwhelming. By that same token, since the start of quarantines and self-isolation, when in stores or the public in general, seeing mass amounts of people or even being within proximity to someone fills me with anxiety. The coronavirus pandemic is creating unrest among Gen Z, and not only are many of them amid their most transformative years but are also having to navigate a sickness with unknown long-term effects. In an interview, Dr. Aaron Wendelboe, an epidemiologist, told News on Six that COVID-19 is currently the third-leading cause of death in the United States (Stephens).

Some professionals suggest that staying educated on how stress can affect the body, to be more attune to personal and other’s health. Practical solutions managing mental health involve,

exercise, communication with close ones, and finding way to feel in control. Exercising has been proven to produce endorphins and reduce tension within the body. Going for walks, sitting outside for 30 minutes a day, or even stretching before going to bed will effectively improve sleep and positively impact your mental and overall health. Maintaining communication with others is one of the most effective ways to combat negative emotions. Staying connected to others ensures you will be less likely to feel isolated—a common feeling for those who battle with suicidal thoughts. So, finding the time, to chat with a friend or family member while having a cup of coffee, driving to the grocery store, or even finding a pen-pal can be great initiatives. Lastly, discovering ways for you to feel in control are wonderful. For example, creating a daily schedule, meal planning, or picking out your outfits in advance can help combat harmful feelings (Intermountain Healthcare).

Since the start of the pandemic me and my good friend have found ways to stay connected while remaining safe. Once a week she comes to my house, and we sit on my front porch (six feet away) and catch up. I provide the coffee and she provides the company. During the summer and early part of fall, it would be so nice to be outside in the evenings. We decided to have a sleepover in my backyard, like camping. We would watch movies, eat candy, and look at the stars. Those are just two examples of how young people can stay social but remain safe during the pandemic. We have also found online services such as Netflix Party, a free browser extension, that allows you and a friend to watch a movie together with a chat bubble next to the movie. It has been so much fun to watch movies with a best friend even from a distance.

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