By Marina Lelecas

Light in the Darkness

In mid-March 2020, teens' bustling, busy lives came to a sudden halt. Families were isolated in their homes. Schools cancelled classes and sent students home. Social activities were no longer being held, and businesses shut down. The coronavirus pandemic in the United States began in early 2020. This virus had practically the entire country quarantined from March to late summer. Businesses and social institutions began placing Covid-19 regulations and safety precautions in August, allowing for an end of quarantine. However, the effects of isolation over those five months were something that, rarely, every teen could relate to.

Isolation has proven to have detrimental effects on mental health. According to psychologist, Kara Harrington, and Professor Martin J. Sliwinski (2020), loneliness causes cognitive decline that often leads to poor sleep, high blood pressure, and symptoms of depression.

There was an observed increase in challenges of depression and suicide this past year. A study of longitudinal data found that mental health had worsened 8.1% over the past year - the group that worsened the most was young adults. According to the CDC (2020), Monash University compared mental health results from the second quarter of 2020 to the second quarter of 2019. Those with symptoms of anxiety were up 25.5% from 8%. Those with diagnosed depression were up to 24.3% from 6.5%. Mental health conditions worsened disproportionately - there was a large increase in young people.

The University College London conducted a study of 90,000 people living in the UK. They found that as Covid-19 presented hardships, 40% of people previously diagnosed with mental health challenges reported thoughts about death and suicide. The study also found that, while depression levels got slightly better in June for most test groups, those with mental health challenges continued to struggle just as much. In fact, in September, suicidal thought rates were at about 30% for those with a mental health diagnosis. Directly after September, rates began to climb higher rapidly. In June, the rate was above 40 percent.

There are ways for families and individuals to cope with isolation and loneliness from the pandemic. According to The Conversation (2020), a key to better mental health is maintaining good relationships. Those who feel supported in their relationships have a 55% lower risk of dementia. Maintaining normal social activities helps plateau the cognitive decline because strong, healthy relationships allow people to cope better with stress and not bottle up their feelings. In order to maintain healthy, pandemic-proof relationships, people must make a conscious effort to preserve them. However, sometimes they are unable to due to stress on their mental health. So, if someone notices a relationship slipping, and they can do anything to help it, they should.

There are many ways to cope with stress directly from the pandemic as well (CDC, 2021). Taking care of your body is key. People should avoid harmful and addictive substances but engage in a healthy exercise and stretching routine. Getting lots of sleep is important, as well as continuing to do things you enjoy on your own. Luckily, technology provides us with many free games, movies and shows at our fingertips that are great to watch together as a family. While social media can

sometimes be a burden, in this case it proved very beneficial. Throughout the pandemic, social media has inspired much creativity and community involvement. There were many trends that inspired people to be involved, be creative, and use their thinking skills. For example, someone posted a video about how to make whipped coffee, and many people tried it as well as creating their own fun coffee recipes. Many celebrities also kept their fan bases involved during this time with online interviews, concerts, and group activities. In June, one of my brother's favorite video game YouTubers hosted a family game night that my family participated in. It was a lot of fun! Something else my family did over quarantine was have themed dinner and movie nights - we did Harry Potter, Disney, and music themes. The most important thing families can do to keep busy and involved is to take advantage of their resources. Families should also engage in physical activity together. My family went on nightly walks and did several Youtube workout routines together. It was a great way to stay active and talk to each other at the same time.

While this time may be challenging, there is always a light in the darkness. As humans, God gave us the capability to get through challenges like this. People just have to remember that we are all going through this together, and that it is going to get better.

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