

# Fears loom for teens undergoing vital brain development during COVID—telling stories might help

February 19 2021, by Donna Pendergast and Stephen Dobson

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Credit: Unsplash/Priscilla Du Preez

"At the end of the war men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience", wrote Walter Benjamin after the first world war. So too, school students may reflect on the pandemic of 2020 and its effect on their experiences.

Almost every day, they heard anxiety-provoking news from across the

globe, doled out in rapid fire. Yet many will be poor in the stories of their anticipated rituals and rites of passage to retell in later years.

They have other stories though, of cancelation and loss.

Gather any group of students together and they spontaneously tell different stories— of how their formal was canceled or modified; how their classes were delivered remotely; how they adjusted to the rules of social distancing; or how they missed the opportunity to celebrate their milestone birthday with friends.

And they are instantly captivated by each other's experiences.

The telling of stories is a [crucial coping device](#), enabling individuals to situate themselves in relation to a bigger event and to gain perspective on the human experience.

We recommend storytelling using oral, written and creative arts formats, linking key events to form a plot, to adapt and improvise, and to share the [story](#) to reveal how very different people can share the same life experience. And how human nature can transcend this moment.

## **Missing stories**

The loss of significant events—whether traditions such as school graduation celebrations, or more mundane everyday losses such as routine sport or other extracurricular activities—can have profound, [long-term impacts](#) on students.

Rite-of-passage events, such as formals, are important cultural markers, cementing peer relationships and firming the foundations for ongoing well-being.

They are the stories we tell again and again during our lives, locating our belonging with and for others. But it is not just a simple loss of moments and unmade memories.

At this crucial stage in the development of the adolescent brain, the foundations are laid for decades to come through their experiences.

The adolescent years, known as the [second sensitive period of brain development](#), are important because this is when shaping of the brain occurs in earnest, in response to the unique environmental experiences of the individual.

This process of synaptic pruning—which starts with the onset of puberty and continues for at least the next five years—results in unused connections being removed. While those that are used are strengthened and "hard wired" with a coating of a substance called myelin.

Memory and processing are enhanced and there is a heightened vulnerability to risk-taking and sensitivity to mental illness because of the intense brain shaping under way.

The specter looms of brains shaped by unmet expectations, disrupted routines, missing significant events, ongoing anxiety, fear and stress about what may be ahead the next day, week, month or year.

Our understanding of neuroscience points to such experiences as paving the way for [lifelong reduced outcomes](#), such as poorer health, lowered educational achievement and the loss of optimism and hope.

## **Everything is different**

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund estimates 1.6 billion students and 91% of schools in 2020 [experienced emergency](#)

[education](#). That means there was an adaptation to the usual routines of teaching, learning, attendance and curriculum, as a response to the COVID-19 disaster.

There is much talk of [schools](#) and [universities](#) needing to help our adolescents become more resilient, [acquire greater grit](#), and to be equipped with positive psychology strategies such as learned optimism.

There is a physiological tipping point though, when toxic stress resulting from strong, frequent or prolonged activation of the body's stress response system, can lead to adverse impacts on brain structures. And students will not learn as before, especially if their brains have become [hardwired during times of stress](#), anxiety and trauma.

How can we ensure our [young people](#) are happy and uncompromised along [well-being indicators](#), including a person's ambitions and understanding of the qualities of their life?

Meeting and slightly exceeding expectations is the key to happiness and well-being. When a person is [happy there is an alignment](#), or a slight increase between what is ideal or expected, and reality.

In a year of unmet expectations, negative impacts on well-being and subjective happiness are unavoidable. This can be seen with numbers seeking the support of mental-health providers [increasing dramatically](#) during 2020.

There is a brooding concern identified globally and by the [Foundation of Young Australians](#), that every aspect of how young people "live, learn and work has been forever changed by COVID-19 and will continue to be felt by young people in the decade to come."

## **The importance of telling the stories of 2020**

Young people can benefit from opportunities to create and remember stories, and to use storytelling as a way to come to terms with their experiences of the pandemic, to aid healing and to create optimism for the future—both for themselves and their communities.

Storytelling requires a listener, and hence a community of shared experience emerges, building understanding and acceptance. These are crucial for [promoting a sense of belonging](#) and well-being.

The acceleration of change and the likelihood of a "new normal" points to the need to tell the story of how and why change has occurred, and how the individual has experienced this change.

Research in [health settings shows](#) storytelling can be therapeutic. People telling stories as a way of dealing with topics such as trauma, anxiety and illness, are "encouraged to work through their experiences and reflect on and deepen their understanding of what really matters in their lives".

[Health professionals](#) have increasingly been drawn to collective storytelling for this reason. Now, more than ever, it is needed in schools and in universities, where teachers intersect with the lives of students constantly and have the capacity to make a significant impact.

The lived experiences and disappointments can be shared through the development of [storytelling skills](#), such as learning how to appreciate multiple points of view and that listeners and tellers can perceive events differently. These can provide us with a way to chronicle, share, and make meaning of experience, thereby enabling a retelling of the events, even when they reflect a poverty of expectations.

Teachers are the pivotal gate keepers of the future in so many ways, not only in grade setting but in recounting stories of success, both personal and from near and far, opening new future-oriented windows of

opportunity to think and act.

In doing so, we reconnect with the important processes of adolescent cognition to rewire the brain, leading to the potential for a more optimistic, hopeful perspective rather than one of disappointment, loss and regret.

The importance of storytelling for all students will continue to grow as we tread the uncertain path of 2021 and beyond.

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