

Risk of teen substance use may increase while social distancing

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With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, parents are struggling with many unforeseen obstacles while caring for their teenagers, including potential substance use.

The [coronavirus outbreak](#) has been a stressful situation for many, which may drive people, including children and teens, to use substances like alcohol or [tobacco products](#) in order to cope.

Recent data has shown that people sheltering at home from coronavirus reported significantly higher rates of negative mental health effects relating to worry or stress, compared to those not in social isolation. These effects may be pronounced in households with adolescents, as this group is at a higher risk for mental illnesses such as depression, and do not have the same access to key mental health services during this time.

Similarly, restrictions on social activities, such as hanging out with friends, exercising and going to school can lead to boredom. Teens often report using substances as a means to relieve stress and

to "kill time" when feeling bored.

"Teens are spending significantly more time at home and greater exposure to headlines regarding COVID-19 can increase anxiety," said Elisa Trucco, FIU psychology assistant professor and affiliate of the FIU Center for Children and Families. "It's important that parents talk with their teen about how they are feeling during this time given the [increased risk](#) for substance use."

Past traumatic events, such as Hurricane Katrina, have demonstrated that the influence of a crisis may have long-term effects that may develop over time. According to an analysis published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, hospitalization rates for [substance use disorders](#) rose by 35 percent three years after the hurricane, compared to the year before the storm.

Experts are also warning tobacco, nicotine and marijuana users, both smokers and vapers, that they may be at an increased risk of suffering from COVID-19 because of the way the disease attacks the lungs. This is especially worrisome for youth, as rates of adolescent vaping has skyrocketed in recent years. Emerging evidence has found that exposure to the aerosols produced by e-cigarettes damages lung cells, therefore lowering the ability to respond to infections.

"Although parents' concern for their teen's safety might feel overwhelming, there are ways for parents and adolescents to find adaptive coping strategies during this time," said Trucco.

Trucco recommends taking breaks from news updates on TV and social media to avoid repeated stressors during the day. "Make sure to take the time for both you and your teen to unwind during the day with activities you both enjoy, and by connecting with people you trust to talk about your concerns and feelings," she added.

Trucco also recommends for families to take care of their bodies by eating well-balanced meals, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, and exercising. Additionally, parents can try to avoid modeling maladaptive coping strategies by abstaining from using [substances](#) to cope with increased stress.

"Parents should also be more attentive to warning signs of stress and substance use among their teen during this time," said Trucco. Possible signs of [substance use](#) include increased secretive behavior, shifts in personality (e.g., silent, increased mood changes), and changes in appearance (e.g., poor hygiene, different odors on clothes).

While stress manifests differently in each teenager, Trucco points out that it is important to watch for any behavior changes that may include excessive worrying or sadness, unhealthy eating or sleeping habits, irritability, difficulty with concentration, or unexplained headaches or body pains. Parents should do their best in ensuring that all caregivers in the household cope with COVID-19 in a calm and confident manner to provide support for the teen.

"In times of difficulty, youth may experience [positive outcomes](#) in addition to the often-documented negative outcomes, like a deepening of their relationships with others—especially when feeling genuine mutual support from close friends and family who are going through a similar experience," said Trucco. "Most youth show remarkable levels of resilience during times of stress, and life may take on new value as teens experience a greater sense of appreciation and gratitude for their health and well-being during a [time](#) of great uncertainty and loss."

Provided by Florida International University

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