

How Young People's Social Anxiety Has Worsened in the Pandemic

They expected their 20s to be a time for friends and the passage to adulthood. Instead, they drifted into isolation. Now thousands of young people are struggling to socialize again.

By Eduardo Medina

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One student had several panic attacks a week, alone in his room. One felt her hands shake when walking on busy streets. Another hid in a bathroom while at a restaurant with friends, wondering why she was hyperventilating at her own birthday party.

They are all living with some degree of social anxiety, a growing problem among young people as the disorder, amplified by the pandemic and intensified through months of isolation, fuels social withdrawal and entrenches reclusive habits.

About 9 to 10 percent of young adults and adolescents in the United States have the disorder, defined as an intense fear of being watched and judged by others, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. Now many have felt their extreme self-consciousness grow more severe, psychologists say.

That was the experience of Garret Winton, 22, of Tallahassee, Fla. He recalled an afternoon last May when he curled up in bed and placed two fingers on his neck. One hundred thirty beats per minute, he guessed. The sign of another panic attack, his fourth that week.

He had detected his disorder in middle school, tamed it at college and lost control of it during the pandemic, especially that afternoon as he hyperventilated alone in his room, confronting the factors that increased his anxiety: isolation, draining shifts as a nursing assistant and unanswered texts from friends piling up.

Now, short of breath and seeing black spots in his vision, he was reminded that over the course of the pandemic, he had lost much of the progress he had made on managing his social anxiety.

"It was getting better," Mr. Winton said. "But the pandemic halted and pushed it back."

As the country continues its gradual re-emergence from lockdowns, some young people are grappling anew with the disorder's symptoms, encountering newfound insecurities, a fear of public spaces and a reluctance to hang out with friends. The result, experts said, has been a harmful weakening of their socializing muscles, underscoring the pandemic's potential long-lasting effects on the mental health of a generation.

Intertwined with these feelings, many young people say, is a pressure to enjoy their youth while knowing the pandemic and their social anxiety have prevented them from taking even the simplest steps of early adulthood, like meeting new co-workers in person, going on dates or simply having fun with friends on a night out.

"As we start to socialize more, we're going to probably see greater rates of social anxiety than there were before the pandemic," said Paula Yanes-Lukin, an assistant professor of psychology at Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

When Nevandria Page, 25, moved to Ottawa in June to pursue a master's degree, she initially felt excited about exploring a new city. She had always enjoyed eating out with friends and discovering new cafes in the past.

"But then when we were out, I was feeling really nervous and anxious, and I felt like everyone was staring at me," Ms. Page recalled. "It felt like I was really exposed and really vulnerable."

She dreaded leaving the house. Ordering coffee made her stutter. And while wearing new blue box braids for the first time one afternoon, she sensed others were looking at her, so she leaned against a building and cried softly, nervous about others' judgment.

"I was alone throughout the pandemic, and I think that feeling of loneliness followed me, despite being able to go out again," Ms. Page said.

Several studies and psychologists across the country expect the disorder to become more prevalent in the coming months, leading to greater rates of depression, which already affects about 13 percent of adults ages 18 to 25.

"For youth in particular, this is a concern because this is a time when they're building those social skills, and they haven't had as many opportunities as older adults," Dr. Yanes-Lukin said.

Lauren Ruddock, 27, from York, England, has had social anxiety since she was 9 years old. After years of making headway, she said, she now feels as if her mental health has moved backward because of Covid.



Lauren Ruddock, 27, says the pandemic reversed some of her progress in managing the social anxiety that has troubled her since age 9. Lauren Ruddock

She had gone from being afraid of tripping while throwing out the trash to getting comfortable with dining by herself at restaurants, a form of exposure therapy. In January 2020, she had even managed to read her poetry at an open-mic night. More than a year later, she's still trying to push herself to arrive at that level again.

"I feel like I've taken a couple of steps back," she said. "But I don't want to stay within the four walls of my house forever because that's only going to make the social anxiety worse."

Young people, typically defined as those ages 13 to 25, do not have fully developed frontal lobes of the brain, which exacerbates their anxiety symptoms, said Dr. Leela Magavi, a psychiatrist in Newport Beach, Calif.

"A lot of young adults ask repetitive questions for reassurance," Dr. Magavi said, such as whether their peers will still like them or if they have changed throughout the pandemic.

For some, she said, their amplified worries have led to seclusion and depression.

In-person schooling has made isolating more difficult, but students' anxiety about returning to classes could be more prevalent because of "social phobias" spawned by the pandemic, according to a study from *The Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*.

That's why many schools across the country are trying to offer more mental health resources this fall.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham is asking professors to look out for warning signs of a socially anxious student, such as tardiness and disengagement in the classroom, after seeing a 20 percent increase in patients at the student counseling center since 2019.

"If faculty are not aware of social anxiety and its impact, they may assume that students don't care or that they are disinterested," said Dr. Angela Stowe, the director of the university's student counseling services. "Really, it has much more to do with the fear of being called on or being wrong or looking stupid."

Nanichi Hidalgo-Gonzalez, 21, of Tallahassee said she was nervous about returning to Florida State University for in-person classes this year.

Before the pandemic, she said, she was a "social butterfly who loved talking to people." Now, she is seeing a therapist for her anxiety. And despite having received a Covid-19 vaccine, she continues to confine herself to home, mostly leaving only for gas and groceries.

"If I go out sometimes, I just feel like I'm in a bubble, and you're about to pop it," she said.

At a restaurant with friends for her birthday this year, she felt nauseated and claustrophobic, signs of a panic attack. "I want to live my life; I want to experience this college thing," she said. "But then I feel like I just want to stay home because I don't want to go out and get anxious."

Mr. Winton can relate. He has steadily tried to tame his social anxiety over the summer, doing activities he knows will help like working out and responding to friends' messages.

On a recent warm night, he received a text from a pal: Was he free to meet up with friends for Taco Tuesday?

Yes, he replied.

He got in his car and drove to the Mexican restaurant, his heartbeat quickening. As he parked, he could see his friends inside. His seatbelt was still strapped.

"OK, Garret," he recalled telling himself. "You know these people. You can do this." He repeated the refrain as he stepped out. "You can do this, you can do this."

He walked to the door and went inside, where friends and tortillas were waiting. Then he pulled up a chair. Finally, he thought. This was progress.