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Panacea Challenge

June 21, 2021

Mental Health of Teens due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March of 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) swept through the world, affecting billions of people and leaving millions of teenagers stranded at home when they should be developing important life skills and becoming more independent. Instead, their world has come to a standstill, where they are forced to stay secluded from the rest of the world. They have spent hours in front of screens to attend school, and depend on wifi and video calls to communicate with their peers. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on normal daily routines, social interactions, and will continue to affect teens long after everything returns to a new normal.

Now that COVID-19 restrictions are becoming relaxed after the development of vaccines, it’s important to see what the past fifteen months have done to a typical teenager’s brain. Common psychological reactions as a result of the pandemic are feelings of extreme fear, anger, sadness, or more. They may have difficulty sleeping, or staying awake for long periods of time, or fall victim to unhealthy coping mechanisms like alcohol or drug use.

FAIR Health Nonprofit, an organization dedicated to bringing transparency to healthcare, released a study this year in which researchers focused on the billions of insurance claims made during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the study, there were “sharp spikes from pre-pandemic 2019 to 2020 in a range of psychological conditions” (Kluger). These conditions included, but were not limited to, major depression and generalized anxiety disorder. Moreover, researchers found that there was a “334% spike” in self harm among 13 to 18 year olds in just one year. This information illustrates the clear negative side effects of the pandemic, and how it affects teenagers internally. They are forced to cope with an immense change in their lifestyle and simultaneously attend school, go to work, and so on.

Something to keep in mind is that many teenagers do not like to speak about their mental health. To some, it may be an embarrassing topic; they may be ashamed to talk about it. To others, they simply cannot express their feelings out loud. Mental health is an incredibly complex topic, and there is no one way to treat those who are affected. One of the most innovative ways in which professionals can help these teens is by using technology, something that is a part of our everyday lives. Digital safety tools can help curb bullying, harassment, and other factors that affect mental health, and can also “passively detect and flag signals of depression and anxiety” of users (Neiman). While COVID-19 vaccines have been distributed throughout many countries, some may still be hesitant to step into a hospital; for these individuals, the developing practice of telemedicine can be extremely helpful.

A product that could help with this process would be a mobile app that gives teenagers a simple, confidential way to connect with medical professionals like psychologists and psychiatrists who specialize in helping teenagers. In addition, surveys and informational articles should be published in the app, allowing teenagers to read and connect with people who may be experiencing the same struggles. Many teens are more likely to seek help when they see that they are not the only ones struggling, and building a community of peers that support one another can be very beneficial in the long run. By partnering with companies like MindRight Health, which provides mental health coaching over text; and Project Wayfinder, a mental health curriculum for middle and high school students (developed by Stanford students), the app can become a one stop shop for teenage mental health. Many teenagers prefer mobile apps because of their convenient spot in their smartphones and easy to use interface. The worldwide stereotype is that teens spend all their time on their phones, so by giving them an easy to use app, they will be able to help their mental health without even booking an appointment.

Mental health is about what goes on inside a person’s head: a perfectly “normal” kid on the outside might be battling their worst demons on the inside. By developing a virtual application, more awareness will be brought to teenage mental health, and it will help curb the stereotypical beliefs behind mental health.

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