

Teenagers' experiences of **life** in **lockdown:**

implications for college and university support

We have all experienced significant change and disruption during the pandemic. Young people have been particularly impacted at a time when they are negotiating their transition through school to college or university. **Dr Ola Demkowicz** and her team reflect on their TELL research (Teenagers' Experiences of Life in Lockdown)

Will my young adult years have to be spent socially distancing?' This question from a 17-year-old further education student encapsulates a concern shared by many teenagers this year. Usually, older teens are becoming increasingly independent, spending time with their friends, setting out on further and higher education studies, and taking steps towards entering the workforce. In 2020, though, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that teenagers' experiences have been far from normal – and there seems to be little end in sight.

This year, teenagers have faced a host of new issues and concerns. The initial March to June 2020 lockdown meant teenagers became constrained to their own households, isolated from their peers. Exams were cancelled, and the replacement grade system quickly became as confusing as the final

question on a non-calculator maths exam. School, college, and university closures brought disruption to learning and routine, and a lack of finality as teenagers prepared for their next steps. More recently, new programmes of study have come with entirely new concerns – online learning, building communities virtually, and, now, becoming locked down in halls of residence.

The TELL Study (Teenagers' Experiences of Life in Lockdown), was a project set up by researchers across The University of Manchester and Liverpool John Moores University, led by Dr Ola Demkowicz, Manchester Institute of Education. The aim was to explore subjective experiences of the initial lockdown among UK-based teenagers aged 16 to 19 years, with a particular emphasis on their wellbeing and how they were coping. We focused on capturing written accounts of experiences among a relatively small number of individuals in order to



create a rich, deep understanding of life in lockdown for this group. In May 2020, we advertised for participants across social media and via a range of organisations and networks (including education settings, charities and youth organisations). One hundred and nine individuals wrote about their experiences anonymously, explaining what lockdown looked like for them, what it felt like, and how they were managing it. We explored these written accounts using reflexive thematic analysis¹ to understand patterns and nuances among participants' experiences. The project's main findings were published in an evidence briefing² in August 2020 and we shared our participants' advice for other teenagers on caring for their wellbeing in July 2020.³ Here, we focus on some of the study's key findings and reflect on the implications for professionals working in further and higher education. To contextualise

and illustrate findings, we offer excerpts of data (with consent from participants to share anonymised quotes in publications).

The teenagers who shared their experiences with us described how lockdown had prompted a range of intense, difficult feelings that changed over time, including sadness, worry and anxiety and anger. They highlighted various factors that were contributing to this – such as feeling overwhelmed, trapped, isolated, uncertain about the future, and concerned about the transmission of COVID-19 – though sometimes they had a hard time understanding where these feelings were coming from, which could be confusing. Of course, not everyone experienced this in the same way or felt the same all of the time. Many described experiencing both negative *and* positive feelings in lockdown, given that some of the usual daily pressures had been removed, but

some described how they felt OK most of the time. Some of our participants described specific challenges that made lockdown particularly hard emotionally, such as having prior mental health difficulties or being confined in households with a lot of conflict.

'I've already got a history of mental health issues, being shoved into a house with none of my friends and any sense of normality shredded has certainly not helped.'
(18-year-old university student)

Despite the challenges of lockdown, some teenagers told us that they were trying to adopt a positive mindset and were taking steps to take care of themselves this year, using a range of strategies, including creating routines and goals, keeping busy and distracted, and spending time with pets. However, this wasn't easy for

everyone – some found self-care difficult, some had lost their ‘normal’ coping strategies because of restrictions, and some were using strategies that they thought were bad for them, like smoking, binge-eating and emotion suppression.

‘I know that it is unhealthy to suppress your emotions and not deal with anxious thoughts, but that has been mainly my coping strategy.’
(16-year-old school student)

As we move forward through the pandemic, it’s important to remember that this is a strange time for teenagers. It is likely that they are experiencing lots of difficult feelings and have all been trying to cope with this in their own way. Ensuring there are opportunities to talk openly about these feelings and experiences, particularly for those who have faced difficult circumstances this year, may be particularly important. Of course, one size won’t fit all, and there needs to be therapeutic choice available. For some, opportunities for emotional reflection and release through groups (such as in group sessions or group meetings with personal tutors) may be valuable, or regular ‘check-ins’ within one-to-one or group advisory/academic meetings. For others, this may mean encouraging them to go down a more formal, structured route, such as college/university support and counselling services. It may be useful to think about more casual opportunities to check in with therapeutic professionals, such as offering drop-ins where students can informally discuss what’s on their mind. In all of these discussions, it’s not always necessary to try to help students resolve those feelings, as they’re often very normal reactions to a difficult situation – just listening and offering reassurance that this is normal may go a long way.

Recommendation one: offer therapeutic support in a variety of formats. Given the complexity of the current situation, one size of

therapeutic provision is not going to fit all. Counsellors and psychotherapists might offer interventions over the internet, over the telephone, or face to face. Further, these might be offered through drop-in sessions, group sessions, or within one-to-one work.

“ The teenagers who shared their experiences with us also expressed a lot of uncertainty about the future ”

It may also help to openly discuss self-care and coping, encouraging individuals to reflect on how they have been doing this. Where this is something that individuals have been finding difficult, it would be beneficial to jointly explore alternative options and strategies that they could use moving forward, to help them feel more equipped for the ongoing disruption expected during this pandemic. At a broad level, this could be achieved reasonably well by academic staff, with guidance and support in place from support and welfare services to help them lead these conversations. There are some useful tools that could facilitate this kind of reflective discussion, including our ‘advice for teenagers, from teenagers’ briefing,³ focused on caring for wellbeing during the pandemic, and self-care resources from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families.⁴ As always, of course, self-care is not easy for all individuals at all times, and some may need more focused input and support via college and university support services. Our participants told us they felt pressured to cope well in lockdown; it may be particularly valuable at this time to provide reassurance and acknowledge how difficult it may have been to cope with this situation

for those who have struggled, as some told us they felt pressured to handle things well in lockdown.

Back in May when we asked participants about their experiences, many also told us they were worried about what education would look like in 2020/2021. For instance, many expressed concerns about missing out on the experiences that usually happen at the start of university – freshers’ week, exploring new places, meeting lots of new people – and they also felt worried about online learning, and how safe they would be in relation to COVID-19. The unusual start to college and university life that teenagers had in September is yet another sacrifice in 2020, given that they have already missed out on rites of passage like exams, prom, and the last day of school.

‘I feel as though it’s taken away the experiences of my teenage years. The parties, proms, exams etc. And I don’t even know if I’m going to be able to start college properly in September. A fresh start, a new chapter in my life I was ready for and really needed might be gone or not be as I hoped.’
(16-year-old further education student)

It is understandable that these losses and the lack of normality are frustrating for teenagers. Yet, it’s challenging to consider how we can go about creating normality and meeting teenagers’ developmental needs, while also limiting the transmission of COVID-19. Students have continued to move into their halls of residence this year, but at a heavy emotional cost. They have been unable to participate in typical student social events, and many have faced severe lockdowns as a result of rapid COVID-19 transmission (or even contracted the virus themselves). College and university leaders and staff need to think carefully about how they can create normal experiences while also accounting for the pandemic, ensuring there are opportunities to create social connections and feel involved in

educational and peer communities. The key will be communicating with students themselves (as well as consulting with evidence) to explore how this could be done in a way that meets their needs and keeps them safe. Beyond this, setting clear, early expectations about how things are going to work will be valuable, ensuring students understand the logic behind new procedures and adjustments and that they have clear warning about such changes. Where there are losses for teenagers (if exams are cancelled again, or there are group experiences that cannot take place, for instance), recognising and acknowledging the personal meaning these can have to students in discussions and messaging will be helpful. Professionals in therapeutic and support services may be particularly valuable as spaces where students can talk without fear of judgment about their feelings around the loss of normal experiences, where they can receive empathy as well as support in exploring safe ways to fulfil needs at this time.

Recommendation two: be aware of the way that the pandemic is influencing the reasons that young adults are seeking support. For instance, academic changes might be associated with loss, health concerns may heighten experiences of anxiety, and career concerns might be associated with broader worries about an individual's future. Therefore, during any assessment processes that services adopt, professionals should be mindful that student requests for support are likely to be influenced by the current context.

The teenagers who shared their experiences with us also expressed a lot of uncertainty about the future. This included concerns about what educational studies would be like, but also about their future career options. Students described missing out on important work experience opportunities, for instance, and worries that this would affect the strength of their personal statement or their CV.

Many also described concern about the future of the job market and how that would influence their employment opportunities – and indeed, as the job market continues to dwindle, initial evidence is suggesting particular hits for young people.⁵

'I feel the lockdown and the COVID-19 situation will have a large effect on my future and hinder my chances of progressing in my career as fast as possible. The economic downturn will be felt for a few years, if not longer.'
(19-year-old university student)

Close communication and collaboration between support and academic staff and careers services may be especially valuable at this time. Teenagers' feelings of uncertainty about the future, and the loss of control they may be experiencing, seem difficult to cope with, and as the pandemic continues, are unlikely to diminish soon. Therapeutic and pastoral support may be particularly valuable for those struggling, and the use of short-term goal-setting within these conversations may be especially important at this time to help students regain a sense of control. Support staff can also play a key role in signposting and encouraging students to engage in career services. Offering such support may necessitate attention to emerging issues in this area; for instance, students may be feeling vulnerable at this time, given the impact of the pandemic on the industry they are beginning to enter.

Recommendation three: continue working closely and develop deeper

ways of collaborating with other support services. As the young people we heard from were concerned about their future in a variety of ways, ensuring that there are connections between mental health and wellbeing services and other support services, such as careers services, could be helpful to individuals trying to make sense of their future plans. Counselling services might consider deepening these collaborations by offering additional support, such as providing clinical supervision to front-line support staff who are engaging in increasing amounts of emotional labour.

Finally, we noted that many teenagers were feeling frustrated with, and mistrustful of, the UK Government (and other decision-makers) at this time. There were teenagers in our study who felt that their age group had been overlooked by the Government, with little attention being paid to what was best for their learning and how they could be kept safe upon their return to physical education spaces. More recently, we have seen teenagers being scapegoated for rising COVID-19 cases in the UK, leading to further frustration among this age group.⁶

'I am unsure if I want to go back [to university] in September because I'm unsure that the Government has the best supervisions.'
(19-year-old university student)

College and university staff could play a valuable role here. First, those working directly with students can take the time to listen and understand students' needs, and advocate for



