

# 'Generation C will bear the brunt of the fallout from this pandemic'

*Eleanor Steafel* on how the aftermath could be more deadly for the young than the coronavirus itself

In the early days of the pandemic, while people washed their hands to the tune of *Happy Birthday*, few could have predicted the weeks of disruption and grief that were to come. But after the virus had carved its devastating path through our care homes, it became clear that the collateral damage from Covid-19 could prove to be far more damaging than the virus itself, and for none more so than the young.

"Generation C", as they have been dubbed, may be the least likely to become fatally ill with Covid-19, but it is the young who stand to bear the brunt of the fallout from this pandemic. They have coped with cancelled exams, gap years and Saturday jobs. They've missed months of school and had their time at university cut short – and, on top of it all, they've had to miss out on so much of the joy of being young as their social lives were cancelled and their freedom curtailed.

Adolescence isn't always a happy time, but education at least provides some sense of structure and purpose, not to mention the chance for fun and friendship. For many young people, lockdown has brought on a pervasive loneliness and aimlessness, which can be a catastrophic state of mind.

Papyrus, a helpline for the prevention of young suicide, has



warned of a "longer-term problem of emotional distress" for young people. Ninety per cent of calls, emails and texts to its helpline in recent weeks have referenced the pandemic, with children and young adults concerned for their own mental health or about the wellbeing of loved ones.

Ged Flynn, chief executive of the charity, which last week launched an emergency appeal to raise awareness about the current risks to young people's mental health, says there has been a surge in calls in the last three weeks, with many young callers concerned about a loss of income, the reduction in mental health service provision, domestic violence and abuse. "I fear that a whole generation of young people may feel the impact of the current crisis for a good while yet," says Flynn. "We are already taking high volumes of calls, texts and emails from young people every day with thoughts

**'We are taking high volumes of calls from young people'**

of suicide. Call rates are increasing." Though every case is different, Flynn says some themes are emerging. "Students tell us about their concerns over exam cancellations and uncertainties around their academic future," he says. "Many say how lonely it is being separated from a partner, family or friends and that the loneliness and isolation has a significant impact on feelings of suicide."

Ian McCracken had no idea his son was struggling until Lewis took his own life in April. For the past eight weeks, McCracken has tried to fathom some tangible reason for why his bright, sociable 17-year-old boy felt he had no option but to die. "None of us saw this coming," he tells me from his home near Belfast. "I truly believe – and none of us know this for sure – that coronavirus killed him, even though he didn't have the virus."

Like so many teenagers, Lewis had found it increasingly difficult being cooped up in the house, not being able to go to school or get out and see his friends. His job working at Marks & Spencer had come to an end just before lockdown began, and McCracken now wonders if the sudden loss of work, school and social life had a greater impact on his son than he had realised.

"He was like a caged tiger. He'd just passed his driving test in January. He had all that to look forward to. He had all his online mates from gaming and videos, which when lockdown first came he absolutely loved, and he was doing Zoom classrooms and all those sorts of things.

"He'd been telling us he was feeling low, but I think everybody through this



PAUL FAITH; GETTY IMAGES

Spreading awareness: Ian McCracken, who lost his son Lewis, above left, through the coronavirus lockdown

lockdown has been bored and lonely. I didn't know how much it had impacted him until I found him."

In his small town just outside Belfast, McCracken says he knows of "three or four" youngsters who have taken their own lives in the past few weeks. "Nobody saw any of these coming," he says. "I truly believe if [Lewis] wasn't locked down and had the normal routine of going to school and stuff, then you and I wouldn't be having this conversation. He'd still be with us."

Lewis's family and friends are raising money for youth mental health charity Boys in Mind, in the hope of spreading awareness of "the risks to the mental health of young people during this period". For many young people, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions, particularly as access to support services has been restricted, and as two million children are estimated to have faced heightened risk at home in lockdown.

Mind reported in early May that one in four people who had tried to access help to deal with mental health issues in the previous two weeks had not been able to do so. Meanwhile, Young Minds reports that "one in eight children and young people already have a diagnosable mental health condition", with its research suggesting the majority of those at risk believe the crisis is "exacerbating their needs".

Ben Brown was 22 when he took his own life in April. He was struggling before lockdown, but his father Christopher wonders whether having his plans dashed and being cooped up inside a small student flat may have contributed to Ben's state of mind.

"There were a number of things he had planned for the coming year, which would include going to Sandhurst. All of these things were cancelled or postponed. We can assume that that would have had a large impact."

Ben never let on to his family or

**'I truly believe if Lewis wasn't locked down, he'd still be with us today'**

flatmates that he was struggling. The night before, he had spoken to his mother Helen on a Zoom call, as normal. "There was no indication of any difference. His flatmates had no indication of any difference."

As restrictions slowly lift, we are coming to realise that life is going to be very different for a very long time. But in the midst of it all, young people are being left to fend for themselves.

It's Generation C that will emerge from lockdown to a job market saturated with unemployed people, a dearth of internships (a recent report published by the Institute of Student Employers estimates entry-level jobs will fall this year by nearly a quarter, with a 40 per cent drop in internships), and with their mental resilience having taken a serious knock. It's why charities including Young Minds and Papyrus are calling for the Government to take "urgent steps" to reduce the impact of



the outbreak on children and young people's mental health.

In the weeks before Ben died, he donated money to Papyrus. Like Lewis's family, Ben's loved ones are hoping to pull some legacy from their tragedy by raising money for the charity, to spread the message that help is out there. "We will do anything we can to stop other parents having to suffer this anguish," says Brown. "You never get over this."

Lewis's family and friends are raising money in his memory for Boys in Mind, which aims to empower boys and young men to talk about their emotions: [justgiving.com/fundraising/rememberinglewis](https://justgiving.com/fundraising/rememberinglewis)

Ben's family and friends are raising money for Papyrus, the charity for the prevention of young suicide: [justgiving.com/crowdfunding/loughborough2istanbul](https://justgiving.com/crowdfunding/loughborough2istanbul)

## 'MANY ARE SUFFERING IN SILENCE' FEARS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING

As a paediatrician who works in and researches child health, I can say for sure that children have been affected by Covid-19. I myself have looked after young people with the virus, including the small group with the widely reported systemic inflammatory response syndrome. But my concern for young people lies not with the effects of the virus itself, but rather the far bigger impact on young people's mental health and future prospects.

Even before Covid-19, we knew that one in eight children had a mental health disorder and, for young women aged 17-19, rates were as high as a quarter, half of whom have self-harmed.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen children and young people presenting in crisis because of the effects of lockdown on their mental health. My worry is for those who are suffering in silence.

Given that presentations across the board in paediatric services have plummeted, it's likely that a lot of children are struggling and aren't getting help. We also, therefore, don't know the extent of the problems they are facing. My colleagues and I in child health are anticipating a deluge of children to present with myriad health problems – but, in particular, a surge in children needing mental health services.

It is really important, then, that these services are ready to meet this demand.

This isn't as easy as it sounds, especially when you consider that the provision was frequently

inadequate before Covid. Add to that the significant concern about the safety of children (some of whom have not been seen for many months) and we have a lot of important work ahead of us.

The NHS already had a 10-year plan that placed mental health as a big priority. One part of this was to increase the chance to catch mental health problems at school. The fact that most children remain out of school poses a huge problem.

We have seen some remarkable things happen in the UK throughout the coronavirus pandemic, not least how the NHS quickly cut through red tape to reconfigure itself overnight. We even built a high-class Covid hospital at rapid speed.

We have to come together to find similar remarkable solutions to support schools in enabling them to open to more children.

When we look back on Covid-19, we will see that children and young people have been expected to make huge sacrifices. Many will carry the effects on their health and wellbeing with them throughout their lives.

Decisions have been made for them in the national interest. It is now in the national interest, and also the nation's responsibility, to make them a priority, to mitigate the effects of lockdown and support them in every way we can.

*Dr Lee Hudson is consultant paediatrician at Great Ormond Street Hospital and associate professor at the UCL Institute of Child Health*



### SIX COPING MECHANISMS HELP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN LOCKDOWN

- 1. Talk to someone about how you're feeling**  
It's important to acknowledge your feelings during this time and it's OK to be affected by what's going on. Talking to people will help you to make sense of things. Speak to someone you trust, whether that's a friend, a family member, a teacher or a helpline.
- 2. Take a break from the news**  
Being exposed to the news constantly can be really overwhelming. Try limiting your exposure by only checking the news at certain points during the day.
- 3. Maintain your routine**  
Young people have had their routines completely disrupted because of coronavirus. As restrictions start to ease, you might need to establish and maintain a new routine and find other coping mechanisms to manage the changes.
- 4. Keep staying connected to people**  
Even as restrictions start to ease, it might still be difficult to meet up with people. It's important to keep in contact with friends, family and people you trust.
- 5. Find activities that help you manage your mental health**  
Think about some activities that can help when you are feeling overwhelmed, like breathing techniques, writing down how you feel, playing music or talking to a friend.
- 6. Reach out for help**  
Remember you are not alone and help is still out there. Visit the YoungMinds website for more information on getting support for your mental health.

**Help is out there**  
If you are finding things tough you can talk to the Samaritans any time of the day or night, for free on 116 123 or by emailing [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org).

If you or a young person you know is struggling to cope, you can also contact Papyrus, the young person suicide prevention line. Their advisers at HOPELINEUK provide confidential advice weekdays 9am-10pm and weekends and bank holidays from 2pm-10pm. Call on 0800 068 4141, text 07860 039 967, or email [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)

**Roxane Caplan, Parent Helpline Manager at YoungMinds**