

Student mental health

How has a global pandemic affected the mental well-being of Aragon students?

Online school

Family dynamics

The pandemic has affected every aspect of life including the foundation of connection: family. Family dynamics have been changing due to an increased amount of time together, financial difficulties and lack of interaction with friends.

Some families have struggled with members traveling for work which has decreased the level of connection that they feel. Even though virtual communication helps, it's not the same as seeing that family member and talking to them in person.

"Last August, my dad went back to China for work but could not return until December, [and was] essentially trapped in China, because all the flights were canceled," said senior Celine Wen. "Our family became less connected because we have been separated for so long due to COVID-19. We FaceTimed almost every day, and we made sure to connect with our distant family as well [and speak to] with my grandparents. But because of the time difference, it was really hard to know what was happening and talk for longer than half an hour."

Students are also having to deal with more responsibilities during the pandemic such as helping their parents more around the house or taking on extra chores.

"Since [my dad has] been home, it's been better on the family because there's one more person helping with all the shopping and stuff," Wen said. "But actually, my dad does not speak English at all, and my mom speaks limited English. So I'm the one really in charge of translating everything. Recently, my mom actually had a medical emergency and could not take care of herself. So I had to translate all the hospital calls and even go on grocery shopping trips with my dad, because he cannot communicate by himself ... everything really is on me: all the responsibilities. So it has been really busy and hard for me."

As compared to increased responsibility that high school students feel, college freshmen are missing out on the newfound independence they would have gotten if they were living on campus and going to classes in person.

"I was never really super close with my parents," said college freshman Maggie Humphrey. "So I was itching to get out of the house, and then I couldn't. It was just kind of rough. I mean, I've been here [on campus] for a little bit less than a month now, and it's been great. I haven't really had that much of an issue adjusting."

The pandemic has affected everyone and some family dynamics are bound to be tense. However, Wen believes understanding both sides of the story is important to stay connected and less stressed out about family situations.

"I would say, because family is the bubble that everyone is kind of trapped in right now, it might be really hard for some teenagers because they have to deal with their parents every single day," Wen said. "But it's important to also understand what the parents are going through and the fact that they are also feeling lonely. And it also might be financially hard for them. So I feel like understanding that is just very important [as well as] being patient."

Humphrey also suggests that students find a way to create time for themselves and a place where they can escape from family tensions.

"I feel like there's nowhere else to go really, so you see each other pretty much constantly, especially on weekends where you're not doing much," Humphrey said. "Definitely set up your own alone space in any capacity that you can. That really helped me with being at home."

Learning how to cope with changes in family dynamics is vital to the mental health of students. For some, family tensions have increased, but others have seen more desire for connection with their family. In either case, healthy communication and understanding is key to keeping healthy relationships with family.

Aragon's exclusively online school structure has brought about not only large lifestyle changes, but also mental health implications.

Biologically, humans are considered to be socially-dependent creatures. Communication is a powerful tool that has helped humans over the course of evolutionary history, and even now in the 21st century, highlighting the importance of social interaction for humans. Without this much needed social interaction, humans are putting themselves in an environment which they might not be biologically compatible with.

"Being able to meet people and in any situation and body, I think, is super important," said Wellness Counselor Araceli Cordova. "For life in general, you're always going to be working with others. Most jobs require you to work as a team or to work with people that help you do your job, and so I feel like it's super important to be able to communicate what's going on with you."

In an attempt to mimic the social interactions students would have had while learning in person, chat messages and video calls through services such as Zoom and Discord are being used. However, such technology still cannot perfectly replicate the in-person social interactions that humans need.

"[In online schooling], physically, we [are] sitting down all day, [and] not really being able to interact with people face to face, [or] being able to read body language and facial cues [can be tiring]," Cordova said. "It does contribute to feeling tired a lot, overwhelmed with a lot."

This lack of physical presence further makes video calls exhausting, making it hard for the human brain to relax and resulting in a phenomenon called "Zoom fatigue."

According to the BBC, video calls can make it difficult for people's brains to process "nonverbal cues like facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, and body language," causing the brain to consume a lot more energy than an in-person conversation might.

At Aragon, this mental fatigue has caused some to experience a decline in overall mental health and well-being.

"There has been a big difference in how students are doing in school and their overall mental health," Cordova said. "With COVID affecting the teens right now, there's a lot of anxiety around the uncertainty of the situation. [Students now are experiencing] a sudden change in their daily routines and schedules and expectations."

With this change in students' daily lives it has become increasingly important to take time to focus on one's mental health and well-being due to the issues that drastic environmental change may cause.

Lack of social interaction

Since stay-at-home orders were put in place in March, many schools across the U.S. have remained closed, forcing online classes to replace in-person learning. Unable to meet like they did on campus, teenagers increasingly face isolation and loneliness.

Outside of school, adolescents may also find it difficult to interact with their peers. Due to social distancing guidelines, the opportunities to hang out have lessened dramatically, if not disappeared. Of the 3,300 adolescents aged 13 to 19 which America's Promise Alliance surveyed, 29% reported feeling no connection towards school adults nor their classmates. Furthermore, 30% say they felt unhappy or depressed.

"I think that social interaction is one of the necessities for human life, as we are social creatures and depend on family and friends to maintain our mental health," said sophomore Arav Agarwal.

Overall, the pandemic has made socialization difficult. Outside, people must wear masks for protection, covering their facial expressions. In addition, internet connection issues and lack of presence of others during virtual meetings lowers the quality of communication. Besides family members, an important source of emotional support comes from friends. Students have found ways to maintain relationships with close friends with text messaging, gaming and outdoor gatherings with masks. However, contacting old classmates and meeting people in a new school year remains a challenge.

"I am still able to connect with my really close friends, but very rarely am I able to connect to those who I don't know as well or ... school friends," Agarwal said. "I think it depends on ... how well I knew them before quarantine."

Noticing the effects, some schools have encouraged more bonding activities. Aragon, for example, has hosted events such as lunchtime gatherings in an effort to meet new people and develop closer bonds. Certain teachers increase the use of breakout rooms on Zoom for students to work in smaller groups and collaborate with one another. To stay connected, some class councils have also created Discord servers. However, some students feel these resources can be made more accessible to boost participation.

"The student body is not always motivated or understands how to use these resources," Agarwal said. "If there were ways to encourage or demonstrate the positive effects of the resources, they would be more beneficial."

Financial insecurity

Financial insecurity plagued the nation long before COVID-19, but the pandemic has exacerbated situations for many families and has plunged others into uncharted territory. As a result, mental health has taken a backseat as the breadwinners of the family are forced to choose between working in person and risking personal safety or telecommuting.

According to NPR, 64% of households that had a member infected with COVID-19 also had another member lose their job. The unemployment rates rise daily due to high rent, domestic violence and inadequate pay, and job insecurity is strongly related to increased anxiety, especially during the pandemic. In a University of Connecticut study published in September 2020, increased financial burdens are linked to greater symptoms of depression as well as changes in social attitudes.

"There was a pandemic before there was a pandemic," said April Torres, San Mateo Union High School District manager of mental health services. "So we had a pandemic around mental health before we had COVID. The anxiety, the depression, the suicide rates were going up, all of these things were happening. Top that off with the pandemic, people losing their jobs and people having to be moving in with other people. Just so many different facets. So [COVID-19 has] really stretched and taxed our mental health services that are outside providers because they're so inundated."

With COVID-19 restrictions in place across the U.S., family units have changed radically. Many gig economy workers have had to stay away from home due to risk of transmission. Others may have had to work from home causing an increase in stress balancing work, family and student's school work. In addition to these factors, students may have also had to deal with an increased exposure to abuse, violence and/or neglect at home; an increase in substance abuse in the home; an economic hardship due to loss of parent employment; or the experience of the death of a family friend or relative due to the virus or other causes.

While there has been an uptick in students and families visiting wellness centers, the district has been well prepared. The district was among the first in the county to recognize the rise of mental health issues, leading to a partnership with Care Solace, Peninsula Healthcare District grant, and meetings with all these different schools.

"But the silver lining in that is that they're reaching out; they're connecting," Torres said. "Parents are more aware of what is considered normal and when to worry. So they're taking advantage of these resources."

Coping mechanisms

Social distancing is necessary to reduce the spread of the virus, but the consequences of lacking social interaction include feeling lonely and isolated, which in turn increases stress and anxiety. Learning healthy coping mechanisms are a necessary step in dealing with stress in a way that is enriching and reassuring.

Students who are usually used to being in an environment surrounded by their peers have had a difficult time adjusting to the changes.

"It's more than stress, it was really like restlessness, like not knowing what to do, like, not being able to go anywhere," said Senior Niyati Reddy. "And I think if anything, the stress came out of just feeling a little lost about, like, what to do with my time."

This sense of stress is reflected across the student body.

"My stress levels throughout quarantine have been a rollercoaster because sometimes I'm more efficient when doing schoolwork but other times I'm drowning and it's hard to keep up," said junior Ethan Lee.

Coping mechanisms are described by GoodTherapy as "the strategies people use in the face of stress and/or trauma to help manage painful or difficult emotions. Coping mechanisms can help people adjust to stressful events while helping them maintain their emotional well-being."

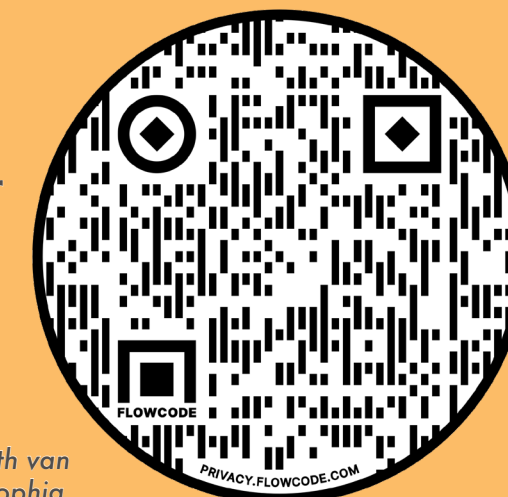
Activities such as exercise, cooking and reading all help some take their mind off stress.

"Some coping mechanisms I have towards stress are taking some time to take a deep breath, take a nap, watch Netflix or Youtube, or spend time with my family," Lee said. "It's super important for me to take breaks from school work, even when I'm really busy."

Reddy turns to family activities and exercise to cope with quarantine.

"In terms of how I cope with isolation, my family, and I played board games, every weekend, we actually started playing virtual poker with my uncles, and cousins, on Saturday nights," Reddy said. "[Running] definitely is a productive way to channel that sense of restlessness. I always feel really gratified after doing a run because I know it's good for me, and it's good for my health and it makes me feel accomplished and like I've done something useful for that day."

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