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Mental health professionals voice looming concerns for Cayman teens

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8-10 minutes

This article was originally written and published by Daphne Ewing-Chow in January 2021. It received the PAHO | CDB | CBU award for responsible journalism during COVID-19 in March 2021 and is being republished in light of recent circumstances as a support for the community.

Amy is a 15-year old girl attending a prestigious private school in Grand Cayman. Once a socially and emotionally well-adjusted honour student, symptoms of severe anxiety surrounding otherwise mundane events began to present in April 2020, during the onset of the island-wide COVID-lockdown.

“I am constantly paranoid that no one likes me, or that I will let someone down, or fail school, and there are certain places I just cannot stand to be anymore, including home,” she confides.

Amy is not alone.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a mental health crisis in our region at a scale we’ve never seen before. It’s a perfect storm in every country, as we see growing needs and reduced resources to

address them,” says [Pan American Health Organization Director](#), Carissa Etienne.

According to a US study, commissioned by the National 4-H Council, 70 per cent of young people, ages 13-19 years are struggling with their mental health in the wake of COVID-19. Global studies have found that stress scores for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have been reported by parents to be [up to 4 times higher](#) in children quarantined than those not quarantined.

Factors affecting the mental health of children during the pandemic have included loneliness and isolation, obsessive social media use, family-related stress, worries about the pandemic and schooling and disruption to regular schedules, as well as the psychological impact of delays in milestones.

Cayman’s stringent virus containment measures, including 24-hour lockdowns and mobility restrictions, that began in March, eradicated community transmission and allowed children in the Cayman Islands to return to school before most countries in the Caribbean, but psychologically vulnerable adolescents were left to pick up the pieces as the mental health system became overburdened.

[Dr Marc Lockhart](#), a board-certified psychiatrist and Director of Inpatient Psychiatry and Behavioural Health at [The Health Services Authority](#) in the Cayman Islands believes that Cayman has yet to really see the mental health impacts of the pandemic on adolescents.

He suggests that the true impact of the social isolation, delay of milestones, academic pressures of online learning, disruptions and uncertainty caused by the pandemic have yet to be felt, in the face

of already stretched psychological support on-island.

Dr Lockhart indicates that part of the problem of accessing care is that there are currently many internationally-based tertiary-level and boarding school students on-island who would have otherwise been overseas, seeking providers abroad, but who were forced to return home due to the pandemic to participate in online schooling and have thus added to the high local demand for mental health services.

This has also been compounded by the exacerbation of previously existing mental health conditions.

According to a 2018 survey administered by [The National Drug Council](#) and youth mental health support organization, [the Alex Panton Foundation](#), 10 per cent of Cayman's youth had been diagnosed with a mental health condition before the pandemic, while one in three had contemplated suicide. Thirteen per cent of adolescents had previously attempted suicide according to the 2018 survey.

[Dr Shannon Seymour](#), Director and Clinical Psychologist at [The Wellness Centre Ltd](#) in Cayman has said that there is “a definite increase in both teens and young adults; not only in symptoms of anxiety and depression but an increase in maladaptive behaviours: use of substances, online shopping, unsafe sexual behaviour, school refusal.”

“We are definitely seeing an increase in the severity and the intensity of mental health issues in the youth,” Dr Lockhart agrees. “This is presenting between early teens and early college age. The numbers might not be higher but the acuity is.”





(L-R) Dr Marc Lockhart and Dr Shannon Seymour

“The inability to travel among students at college-age is creating a lot of problems,” continues Dr Lockhart. “Online schooling has created disruption, uncertainty and motivation problems and with the limited number of mental health professionals on the island, compounded by the uptick in demand, many who need it are not getting help.”

Tania, a 17-year old Caymanian student enrolled in boarding school in Canada was forced to return home over Christmas to attend online classes and has reported feelings of dislocation and anxiety, as have some of her peers.

“This has affected the mental health of the international students so immensely,” she says of the disruption. “We are battling conflicts at home and are struggling to focus. I don’t understand how my final grade is going to be determined and as a member of the class of 2021, this is causing panic.”

Dr Lockhart believes that the psychological effects of the various restrictions, online schooling and the inability for college and boarding school students to return to classes won’t be felt for

another few months.

“With mental health disorders, the true onset of this kind of trauma is more insidious. Symptoms gradually build,” he says, emphasizing his concern that as the mental health needs of the adolescent community increase, there will simply not be enough resources to provide.

And there are statistics to back this fear.

According to the results of a May 2020 survey run by the Alex Panton Foundation, 77.78 per cent of adolescents believe that treatment of mental illness in Cayman is not easily accessible. Thirty per cent of respondents indicate that this is due to a lack of mental health services on island. More than half have also voiced concerns surrounding financial obstacles to receiving mental health care.

The Youth Ambassadors Programme (YAP), a division of the Alex Panton Foundation run by Cayman International School teacher Bill LaMonte, is a social group that allows teens to share their mental health experiences with one another. The programme saw an uptick in membership during the pandemic, with many members echoing the concerns raised by mental health professionals.

“Teens and young adults are realizing this pandemic isn’t ending any time soon and it’s impacting what they’ve been told are supposed to be the best years of their life; senior years of high school, first year of university, social events,” says Dr Seymour.

“Developmental milestones simply aren’t happening. It’s adding grief and loss and a sense of hopelessness to the already elevated anxiety and uncertainty.”

Recognising the impact of the pandemic on mental health in young people, the R3 Foundation recently granted \$25,000 to the Alex Panton Foundation in support of its Emotional Literacy Programme.

In August, The Red Cross began conducting mobile assessments of child and teen mental health through their mobile unit.

“I was a part of the Red Cross mobile health screening, and almost every night we were meeting children and teenagers who were experiencing fairly severe mental health difficulties,” said Dr Seymour.

"We have taken extreme actions, expensive actions, to protect human life from COVID-19. We now need the same collective efforts to mitigate the mental health crisis that is looming in the immediate future.”

Mental health professionals are advising parents to look out for the following warning signs of mental health issues in teens and adolescents: Excessive paranoia, worry, or anxiety; long-lasting sadness or irritability; extreme changes in moods; social withdrawal and dramatic changes in eating or sleeping patterns.

[The following article](#) provides some tips for supporting teenagers who are struggling with their mental health.

Sources of support

The Alex Panton Foundation. Email:
support@alexpantonfoundation.ky

The Cayman Islands Government offers advice and support to teens and adolescents via its website at <https://www.explore.gov.ky/coronavirus-blog/mental-health-support-children>

Cayman Counselling Centre [1 \(345\)-949-8789](tel:13459498789)

For government's Mental Health Hotline, call 1-800-534-6463 (MIND) Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

For non-critical services provided by the Department of Children and Family Services, email DCFS@gov.ky or call 916-2837 or 926-6853 in Grand Cayman and 929-7932 in Cayman Brac Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm.

For critical services, including child protection and domestic abuse, by the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (M.A.S.H), call 1-800-534-2273 or 945-0545 or email MASH@gov.ky.