

What are the risk factors during the coronavirus pandemic for people with ADHD?

By: Margaret H. Sibley, Ph.D

The biggest concerns for adolescents and young adults with ADHD during COVID-19 are social isolation, motivation problems, and difficulties engaging in online work or schooling. These risk factors create a perfect storm for the onset of depression, school dropout, or work underperformance.

Emerging studies from the COVID-19 pandemic show that **ADHD symptom severity appears to be increasing** during this global event. Several factors may be to blame. First, **students with ADHD must adjust** to low-structure, online learning platforms. These school environments demand **more self-discipline** than regular school, which can make concentration and motivation very challenging. For older high school and college students with ADHD, **disengaging from virtual school may pave a slippery path** towards formal dropout. **Warning signs** include a **build-up of missing work, avoiding virtual class** meetings, and **slipping grades**.

Second, **social isolation is a known consequence of COVID-19** and is a risk factor for depression and suicide. During COVID-19, social isolation may be **particularly severe for people with ADHD**, who often have few close friends or may have trouble getting motivated to set-up

social activities. On top of this concern, **increased ADHD symptoms can be triggered by high stress situations**. COVID-19 brings stressors that include safety concerns, economic hardship, and increased family conflict during confinement. In addition to worsening ADHD symptoms, **ongoing stress exposure can also create risks for depression**. To prevent these concerns, individuals with ADHD and their family members can: (1) ensure that **proper academic supports** are in place at school, (2) **prioritize social interaction** (even if it means getting creative) during COVID-19, (3) **practice stress reduction behaviors** such as outdoor and physical activity, spending positive time with loved ones, and practicing favorite hobbies, and (4) **reach out to mental health providers early on** if you notice signs of emerging school disengagement or depression. Both **mental health therapy and medication can support** children, adolescents, and adults with ADHD through these challenging times.



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