



## Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

### *Teens' Brains and Pandemic Stress*

**Jeanne Blake:** Ian, thanks for taking time to join me.

**Ian Gotlib, PhD:** My pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**Jeanne:** Your research found that the stress of the lockdown in the pandemic prematurely aged teens brains of those that you imaged by three years. This is the kind of change in the brain you'd observe in someone who experienced a chronic childhood adversity or stress. Tell us a bit about your research.

**Dr. Gotlib:** That's a nice summary, actually. We had an ongoing study of children and young adolescents we started eight or nine years ago that was interrupted by the pandemic lockdowns. And when we resumed these longitudinal assessments of these kids, we had this big gap where we were shut down for almost a year. And so, we had an opportunity to see if the mental health and brain development of adolescents following these lockdowns was the same as the mental health and the brain development of adolescents who we assessed before the lockdown. And they are not. We found that after the lockdown, adolescents reported poorer mental health; increases in depression and anxiety and sadness. We also found that their brains appeared to look older than the brains of comparably aged adolescents did before the pandemic. There's been an accelerated maturation or aging of their brains that occurred in parallel with these increased rates of depression and anxiety.

**Jeanne:** Do you think there's a connection?

**Dr. Gotlib:** Yes, I think there's absolutely a connection. We know that at really severe clinical levels of depression and anxiety there are changes in the brain that happened. We would be silly to think that didn't happen during the pandemic given what we knew about these increased levels of anxiety, depression, suicides, suicidality, suicidal thoughts in adolescence during the pandemic. Of course, it has. We just haven't looked before.

**Jeanne:** Do you worry that parents might hear your words and think their children are irreparably damaged?

**Dr. Gotlib:** Well, I haven't until this moment. But let me say that nothing is irreparable here. Kids are resilient and to me, it's probably more important to pay attention to the mental health findings than it is to this three-year acceleration in brain development, because we can do something about the mental health difficulties. There are treatments that work. We just need to be sure that we're doing everything we can to support our teenagers and adolescents. When they're experiencing higher rates of sadness or depression, we can do something about that.

**Jeanne:** What are some of the interventions or experiences that can help build resilience that you want the trusted adults in kids' lives to be aware of?

**Dr. Gotlib:** We know there are what we call "empirically supported" treatments, like cognitive therapy for depression or anxiety. But even things like meditation or talking to a guidance counselor at a high school, are going to be important and we know can help normalize these feelings that are perfectly understandable during such a disruptive period in their lives.

**Jeanne:** Based on what you heard and saw - the increased levels of sadness and anxiety – what guidance do you have for parents in how they *are* with their children?

**Dr. Gotlib:** I think it's important to recognize that when kids appear sadder to know there probably are also alterations in the brain occurring at the same time. People are a whole entity, right? Biological/psychological, and to make sure that they are aware that there are supports that can be offered – that [teens] could be talking with peers. They could be talking with – again – guidance counselors, with therapists if it's a more severe case. But this is not unexpected. It's not a *weak reaction* to the pandemic, this is now you know, it may not be the modal, that the typical reaction, but it's a common reaction.

**Jeanne:** And you mentioned some of the potential interventions, you know, school counselor, peers.

**Dr. Gotlib:** Exercise, activity, there are things that you can do without ever mentioning depression or sadness.

**Jeanne:** Essentially, what you're talking about is building resilience. And there are ways to do that, that are well documented: Giving to others. And the simple act of being present with the child and creating opportunities for them to talk – not just about bad stuff that's going on, but the good stuff that's going on in their lives. And being able to reflect from that time of lockdown and how things are better now. That can help build a kid's resilience.

**Dr. Gotlib:** It can. Give them space if they need space. But let them know you're there. Let them know that you're happy to work with them to arrange for them to talk or join groups.

**Jeanne:** What about in the schools? What do you want educators to be aware of based on the findings of your research?

**Dr. Gotlib:** I think it's a very important question. And I think just knowing what resources schools themselves have available to kids who might need them. But also knowing that being accepting of how a child feels, how an adolescent feels, without saying “Snap out of it” or “You shouldn't be feeling like this.” They could well be feeling like this for a good reason. And just knowing that there are resources to give them some space, to build in more physical activity into the curriculum – to let them take advantage of that and endorphins all sorts of giving opportunities, the thing that you mentioned – that we know that giving to others increases our own mental health. Giving those kinds of opportunities, maybe as a class to adopt an elephant, or a class to do something good for someone else, might be a very helpful useful activity.

**Jeanne:** You plan to do additional images in two years, what do you think you will find? It's not a fair question to ask a scientist!

**Dr. Gotlib:** It's a very fair question. Let me give you two likely outcomes. One: we'll find that this accelerated brain aging has slowed with the normalization of society. The other is that it's continued – that this kind of set them on a new trajectory. And we'll have a better sense of that when they hit 20, we're going to we're scanning them again, when they reach age 20. In terms of their mental health, I don't see any reason that these higher rates of depression, anxiety need to continue. If they're back in relationships again, and we've gone from online to in-class, spending more time with peers, and that itself should be helpful. Then I expect these rates will drop.

**Jeanne:** This is fascinating and it will be interesting to hear what you find in two years. Thank you Dr. Gotlib for taking time.

**Dr. Gotlib:** Jeanne it's my pleasure. And I'm happy to talk with you in a couple of years.

**Jeanne:** All right, we'll book it!

*This interview was edited for brevity and clarity*

**Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic*, is a leadership communication advisor, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.**

**Ian Gotlib, Ian H. Gotlib, PhD. is the Marjorie Mhoon Fair Professor and Director of the Stanford Neurodevelopment, Affect, and Psychopathology (SNAP) Laboratory at Stanford University. He is lead author on a study showing physical changes in the structure of teens' brains as a result of pandemic stress.**