

Queen's Psychology's **Tom Hollenstein**

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Most teens show ‘flexibility’ adapting to pandemic: researcher

by [Steph Crosier](#)

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While some adults may be struggling through the constant changes brought on by the pandemic, one local researcher says most adolescents are resilient and have the ability to adapt easily.

“Adolescence is both vulnerability and opportunity. There’s flexibility,” **Tom Hollenstein**, associate professor and chair of the Development Psychology Program, told the Whig-Standard. “If you think about what development really is ... it is a learning process of adaptation to the circumstances that we are in. Adolescence is a second surge of adaptation to local conditions.

“The pandemic would be something to adjust to, but adolescents are far more flexible than middle-age adults.”

Where teens may struggle is their slight inability of being able to develop an identity through many cancelled or limited extracurricular activities.

“Adolescence is the age where you say, ‘I am the tennis player; that’s what I do.’ There are often deep drives into particular identities. It could be music, it could be anything,” Hollenstein said. “Some have been able to continue that, but if it’s wrestling, it has become more difficult because of the close contact and things have been cancelled.”

Everyone is different, and not every teen will be adaptive. Hollenstein suggested doing three things: reminding them that “we’re all in the pandemic together,” so it becomes a social norm; get them into volunteering and helping others to give them purpose; and help them acknowledge what they can control and let go of what they can’t.

“You can’t really control government policy,” Hollenstein said as an example. “You can have opinions about it, you may wish it were different, but then the things you can control is how do you work within that? How do you achieve your interpersonal goals with that restraint in place?”

Hollenstein’s research has also had to adapt to the pandemic. He and his team had been following children and their parents through adolescents already when the pandemic hit. While the research’s questionnaires were not pandemic specific, Hollenstein said that preliminary results show that while anxiety was high during the pandemic at first, it soon dropped and depression rose. Similar results came with another group they’ve been following for two years and check in with every six months. They will check in with the group again next month.

“The nice thing here is that we had four time points — two full years of information about how they changed — and we can use that to understand better for whom any changes may have happened,” Hollenstein said.

What is common between teens and adults during the pandemic is attitude. As someone who observes people for a living, Hollenstein has found that many of the problems public health agencies are facing containing the pandemic are similar to adolescent risk-taking behaviour.

“If you ask adolescents, ‘Is driving really fast risky?’ they say, ‘Yes.’ No different from adults. They know what is dangerous and what is not. They’re not stupid,” Hollenstein said. “But the thing that they then do is say, ‘But when I do it, I’m better at it,’ ‘I can do it safely.’ So, the risk pertains to others, not themselves.”

Nine months into the pandemic, Hollenstein said he looks around and sees that the majority of people are doing that with COVID-19 safety measures. Many are coming up with reasons for why certain activities are safe for them to do but maybe not for others.

“I think it is because of the novelty of it, and that’s kind of what adolescence is like for everything,” Hollenstein said. “Everything is new ... when you get to something new, even when you understand the risks involved, you kind of exclude yourself from the potential dangers.”

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