

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### **Brain Health and Dealing with the Stress of High School or College During COVID-19**

We are all struggling with the changes COVID-19 has brought to our lives, and it has created significant disruption and challenges for adolescent and young adult students as well. They are faced with making many adjustments just to successfully participate in and maintain their academic studies, their relationships with their peers, and to stay physically and emotionally well during this public health crisis.

Caitlin Nevins, PhD, director of psychological services for McLean Hospital's College Mental Health Program, says college students have seen their lives upended as they have had to leave campus and adjust to new living and learning situations. College and high school students are both experiencing changes in their schedules, social interactions, and in many cases the loss of the events and ceremonies that are considered an essential part of student life.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Dr. Nevins offers these tips to help students and families navigate these changes.

**Validate the Experience.** It's important to remember that this isn't a vacation from school or a way to get out of classes. This is a sudden change, and a loss and many are experiencing feelings associated with grief. Students can practice self-compassion for what they are going through. Families can validate students' feelings and keep the lines of communication open about the challenges and physical, mental, social, and emotional difficulties of the change.

**Maintain Structure.** In addition to the change to online learning, students have lost much of their routine. It is important to maintain a foundation of brain healthy coping skills. Examples of brain healthy coping skills include: good sleep hygiene; brain healthy nutrition and hydration; self-care; physical exercise; time in nature; and activities outside of screen time. It's essential to maintain structure as much as possible, particularly in light of limitations on where they can go and what they can do.

**Make it Easy to Reach for Support.** It's important for students to be able to find support if they are feeling off kilter. Students should find out what resources their school offers. Even with limits on in-person appointment, many clinicians are able to provide assistance over the phone and through telehealth.

**Be Mindful of News Exposure.** While it's important to stay informed, it's also important to know when to take a break from stressful news. Watching a movie, reading, or joking with friends will help build resiliency. By being aware of how the news is making them feel, students can determine when it may be helpful to step back and practice extra self-care (good advice for everyone!).

**Stay Connected.** This is an isolating experience so students may want to consider moving beyond texting or social media to more interpersonal communications, such as phone or video calls with friends. This is a time to get creative about maintaining vital social connections.

Even though this is a stressful time for students, Dr. Nevin says: "If anyone can do this, college students can: they're probably the best generation to understand how to stay connected and be resilient in times like this."

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI works collaboratively with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, research, innovation and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and performance optimization*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference. **To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).**