



## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Strategies Address Youth’s COVID-related Brain Health Issues

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children’s Hospital Association have declared a national emergency in child and adolescent brain health. How do we respond?***

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented all of us with brain health challenges. That is especially true for children and adolescents, who are faced with life changes such as remote education, isolation from friends, and uncertainty about the future, not to mention anxiety about their health and the health of the people they love. Children and adults alike also have had to deal with COVID fatigue as the pandemic nears the two-year mark.

Studies have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four children and adolescents are experiencing a surge of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, suicidality, eating disorders, and substance misuse. These conditions likely will have lasting impacts on them, their families, and their community.

“We already had seen an increase in depression and anxiety in these younger cohorts before the pandemic. The problems preceded it,” said Karestan Koenen, professor of psychiatric epidemiology at Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health. “But it looks like the pandemic doubled these problems. And also reports of increased behavior problems, especially in children with ADHD or autism. And substance use increases in teens, expressing more anger and irritability.”

In response to the mental health care gap, Massachusetts General Hospital developed the PRIDE Training Institute. The PRIDE project is led by Harvard Medical School associate professor of psychiatry Luana Marques, Ph.D., and Harvard Medical School psychiatry instructor Soo Jeong Youn, Ph.D.

The institute trains and coaches those who work with children and adolescents to use cognitive behavioral skills to improve emotion regulation and build resilience. It uses the TEB curriculum to help professionals observe the connection between a young person's Thoughts, Emotions, and Behaviors and develop strategies to help break out of negative cycles. Find out more about TEB [here](#).

At the BHI, we are involving youth leadership to promote and protect brain health, fight brain illness, and improve brain performance through the Brain Health Scholar Program. In September 2020, 69 young people over the age of 16 who have an interest in science, medicine and/or health and well-being were selected as Brain Health Scholars. The scholars work with scientists and clinicians from the BHI and assist with the research agenda for the BHI's Brain Health Community Survey in Sarasota and Bradenton. Many scholars from the pilot program, not only integrated the science into their own lifestyle, but influenced the thoughts and behaviors of their peers and family members related to protecting their own brain health and preventing and fighting brain illness.

This month, the BHI will open nominations for the second Brain Health Scholar program. The program includes nominated student thought leaders and action takers from high schools, youth development programs, and colleges primarily from the Suncoast region.

***Do you know a youth thought leader interested in promoting and protecting brain health and a career in life sciences? [Nominate](#) that person as a Brain Health Scholar.***

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

*Researchers from Harvard University's psychology department worked with colleagues from the University of Washington to [develop a set of strategies for caregivers](#) to help young people develop resilience to pandemic-related stressors that can trigger potential mental health problems. Here are their suggestions:*

- **Limit passive screen time.** Researchers found that early in the pandemic, young people who spent less time on the internet and digital devices exhibited lower internalizing and externalizing mental health symptoms.
- **Reduce news consumption.** The group suggests parents should ration younger children's pandemic news consumption and instead talk to them about what is happening, taking care to listen to their concerns and respond in an age-appropriate way.
- **Promote a structured daily routine.** The report found youths of all ages who had a structured daily routine displayed lower externalizing symptoms six months after the start of the pandemic, compared with children with less structure in their daily lives.

- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
  - Stress resilience
  - Nutrition
  - Physical activity
  - Sleep
  - Social connection
  - Emotional wellbeing
  - Meaning and Purpose
  - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
  - Engaging with nature
  - General health
  - Positive impacts

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

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).