Approaches for Gen Z Students to Cope with Mental Stress *RIGHT NOW*

MAJOR CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR
MICHAEL D'INNOCENZO
with **EDITOR AND PROJECT DIRECTOR**
DR. ALICIA BOSLEY

HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY.

How do we pick up our lives after major global and national crises, and return to the pursuit of old hopes and dreams?

Splashed across the cover of a New York Times Magazine was **a new label for 2020: The Lost Year** (New York Times, September 13, 2020). The following years did not prove much better, with ongoing variants of COVID-19, social and political upheaval, and continued economic strains for the United States and much of the world (Barry, 2021; Vick, 2021). Although these challenges have been felt by most people, the stress and travails of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic have been uniquely disturbing for Gen Z students.

It is important to distinguish the group we are focusing on for this issue guide. **As a cohort, Gen Z is generally identified as those born between 1997 and 2012** (Dimock, 2019), thus including junior and senior high students, some upper elementary school students, and most college undergraduates. They are the youngest generation of Americans with a commonly understood name (such as Boomers or Baby Boomers, Gen X, or Millennials) and comprise the majority of the U.S. student body. Thus, the youngest of the Gen Z generation are finishing the formative years of elementary school, while the oldest are completing college and/or entering the workforce.

Significant challenges facing Gen Z students during the pandemic, economic strife, and sociopolitical division have included disruption to educational and social systems, increased loneliness and isolation, socially-learned fear and mistrust of others, exacerbated family economic challenges, and barriers to care. Many of these impacts were particularly felt by young people from minority groups: the Center for Disease Control (CDC) stresses that racial and ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by the social, economic, and secondary health characteristics of COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). Therefore, in considering the topic for this issue guide, it is important to consider that Gen Z's demographic data reveal it to be more diverse cohort than its predecessors. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020) reported that the rates of child poverty peaked with the Gen Z population, meaning this generation comprises a larger-than-average share of lower-income Americans. Similarly, the Pew Research Center (2018) found that 48 percent of individuals within the Gen Z cohort are ethnic or racial minorities;

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meaning they may be overrepresented in the number of people of color negatively impacted by the pandemic. Further, Gen Z are more likely to identify as sexual and gender minorities than are older generations. A recent Gallup poll revealed that one in six adults in Gen Z identifies as LGBT (Jones, 2021), and a Michigan State University found that those who fall under the Gen Z age range report more diverse gender identities. For example, 24.5% of Gen Z participants involved in the study identified as nonbinary, as opposed to 7.4% of Boomers (Puckett, 2021). **Thus, it is likely that many Gen Z individuals are faced with disparate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic,** which must be taken into consideration when considering ways to support young people in the coming years.

The pressures placed on this youngest generation by the pandemic, social and political unrest, and economic downturn of the 2020s have been heavily documented. Recent headlines dramatize the urgency of dealing with Gen Z's mental stress and distress. The New York Times describes the ways in which "young people's despair deepens as COVID-19 crisis drags on"

(Kwai & Peltier, 2021). Meanwhile, the Wall Street Journal discusses the full extent of the mental health impacts of the pandemic, pointing out that **"pandemic loneliness is hitting young adults especially hard"** (Chaker, 2021). Most concerning are multiple front-page announcements in publications including National Public Radio and the Washington Post that student suicides have risen in the months since the beginning of the pandemic (Chatterjee, 2021; Svrluga & Anderson, 2021).

Three concern-gatherings were held by the primary contributing author and editor/project manager. In these deliberative forums, **Gen Z students and their allies interactively considered how to proceed to best support young people in the coming years.** As in the Kettering NIF experiences,

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our participants were asked to focus on their deepest values, and to consider how their goals and actions can relate to others. While most people will likely find something to agree with in each proposed approach, there

will also likely be areas of disagreement for each. Cooperation and tradeoffs are often needed to make progress on policy, social norms, and individual satisfactions; both were encouraged in each concern-gathering.

This issue guide presents four approaches, or options, to consider, each with its list of actions. Because of the complexity of these issues, very few can be addressed on a single individual basis. Therefore, this guide explores ways that groups, coalitions, and institutions can work together. Further, these options are not mutually exclusive: they may work best in addition to one another, rather than in opposition to one another, and those interested in addressing the problem do not need to choose only one of the listed ideas.

THE FOUR APPROACHES WE OFFER ARE:

1
Build friendship bonds and expand social and cultural opportunities.

2
Expand college leadership to support and assist Gen Z Students.

3
Close the pandemic learning gap and invest in academic excellence.

4
Seek government assistance at national, state, and local levels.

Build Friendship Bonds & Expand Cultural & Social Opportunities

As Mike D'Innocenzo would likely emphasize, quoting Benjamin Franklin,

> "Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of."

Our first option involves encouraging and providing more avenues for students to enjoy life despite the ongoing effects of the pandemic, economic challenges, and social tension of the past several years. One of the best ways to do this is through social connection, both with closer friendships and more casual connections. Research has also shown that enjoyment of leisure activities and (safe) socialization are positively correlated with psychological and physical well-being (Pressman et al., 2010; Ribiero et al., 2018).

Actions considered in this option can be pursued individually, by groups, and/or by forming a university, agency, or community steering committee to propose courses of activities, as well as a time frame for them.

1.
ARRANGE GROUP *field* TRIPS:

a. **To scenic and historic local places.** Experiences that are shared can build relationship bonds, help to overcome loneliness, and expand pleasures.

b. **Coordinate bicycle tours** of such areas and others. Cyclists in numbers enhance safety; they expand cultural awareness as they provide measured exercise.

c. Plan small group travel to **major sports events.**

d. To go to, and participate in the revival of, **drive-in movies, outdoor concerts.**

2.
SCHEDULE *cultural, creative,* AND *social* EVENTS

a. Open participation events such as poetry readings, open mic nights, and so on, on-campus and open to all students.

b. More organized events such as sing-alongs, musical performances, concerts, one-act or improvised theater, stand-up comedy, and so on.

c. As laughter has been shown to be highly therapeutic (Louie et al., 2016), student groups or university administration can incorporate humorous activities, such as screening comedy movies, trips to a comedy club, or bringing a comedian on campus.

d. Journal prompts could be given to students to address certain topics they may not realize are affecting their lives, such as stress eating, feeling easily aggravated, self-isolating, and so on. Reflection can be quite healing and instrumental in achieving wellness, and journaling is a great, low-pressure yet meaningful outlet.

3.
ENCOURAGE *engagement* IN *collective* LEADERSHIP

a. **explore developing leadership skills,** including thoughtful protest and reform. There is pleasure, skill and satisfaction in learning responsible advocacy (part of it is having the camaraderie with other students who share the journey). This could even lead to meaningful action on a larger stage, locally, nationally, or internationally.

b. **Interested students can** put their ideas, goals, and memories out into the world by taking on a role in campus and local newspapers and other publications. This could be an opportunity for Gen Z students to take ownership in what comes out of the pandemic, rather than simply be impacted by it.

c. **Explore national volunteer service,** such as the Peace Corps, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) Coalition, or Greenpeace – this could involve students in endeavors they care about, begin to make a desired impact on the world, and provide opportunities for connection and socialization with like-minded people.

d. As human beings are innately social creatures, and isolation has been shown to contribute to psychological outcomes such as increased anxiety or depression, students can **collaborate with important community adult leaders** who have expressed eagerness to associate more closely with Gen Z students. Multigenerational associations can provide an important element of interconnectedness that can be challenging to maintain on transitory college campuses.

TRADEOFFS FOR OPTION ONE:

In what will quickly become a running theme in this Issue Guide, **time is a constant commodity to be carefully managed.** While any of the above options, and similar others, may provide enjoyment of life, socialization, and avenues for joy, they may feel like "one more thing" to manage on top of the already busy schedules of a college student. Students who are more shy or introverted may find group pursuits intimidating or overwhelming. Finally, while these activities may provide a creative, social outlet for many, some do come with significant planning and organization, which may be a burden.

Expand College Leadership to Support and Assist Gen Z Students

As Mike D'Innocenzo would likely emphasize, quoting Thomas Jefferson,

> "But of all the views of this law [universal education] none is more important, none more legitimate, than that of rendering the people the safe, as they are the ultimate, guardians of their own liberty."

Every college is committed to expanding learning and social maturity for its students; what can change now to address pressing current needs for students?

1.
BOLSTER AND EXPAND *mental health* SUPPORTS:

Extend hours of campus counseling and crisis centers, given the heightened levels of anxiety, stress, depression, life disruption, and suicidality discussed above. Because some people have anxiety in face-to-face or telephone discussions, **a texting option would likely be helpful** in reaching students who may not otherwise access this resource. It is important for counselors to be able to relate and understand specific school related issues. Since time and funding are problems, perhaps **help from graduate students** in the various counseling and psychology masters' programs at universities **could help offset this cost.**

2.
DEVELOP FURTHER *financial* SUPPORTS:

Expansion of student loans and tuition deferment is recommended. While some efforts have been taken to address this, if universities and colleges were to lend additional support for student borrowers, more advantageous outcomes may be achieved due to educational institutions' closer understanding of student's financial stressors and needs. College and university leaders can **lobby banks to provide funds and other assistance** (for example, from the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act).

3.
EXPAND *social support* AND MENTORSHIP:

a. Colleges and universities can sponsor **life skills seminars,** once a week (mandatory for first year students and highly encouraged for others). These could additionally be open to the public, as it is not just Gen Z students that could benefit from this type of training. Incorporating relevant and required assignments can aid attendees while simultaneously provide training for graduate students in the counseling and psychology disciplines.

b. **Develop community relations** between Gen Z students and college alumni, particularly those living near campus. These connections can result in advice for student success and finding balance, as well as **more tangible outcomes such as internships, part-time jobs, and adult associations.**

c. Arrangements can be made for **students to connect with local elders** for camaraderie and sharing insight into how others are weathering the current economic, social, and post-COVID stressors, along with other life crises. These projects could further be associated with national organizations (e.g., Braver Angels, which connects people across many worthwhile divides: (young/old, red/blue, rural/urban, and different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups).

d. There are opportunities available to first year students to have a **peer mentor.** However, these opportunities are often not advertised well enough to the undergraduate population. Posters could be hung up around campus, alongside a booth in the student center **advertising the program.** Tutors and mentors could be strengthened and provided more readily for students seeking academic assistance in the changing academic environment.

4.
PROVIDE *platforms* TO SUPPORT *student-guided* EFFORTS:

a. **Students can meet in groups** to develop concern-gatherings, as delineated above. Following this, when Gen Z team meets with college leaders, **they can bring the emerging concerns to ask for review of their plans and support** from the college in light of the continuing pandemic. Plans can then be developed between student and college administration.

TRADEOFFS FOR OPTION TWO:

As in all endeavors, there is always the question of how limited time is used (for example, how many meetings are productive versus being another task to complete?). **Financial costs** for universities and colleges (including expanding staff, travel, and programs) **may be prohibitive.** College leaders may have other priorities in dealing with elected officials and banks. They **may want to cultivate alumni mostly as loyal college donors,** rather than as peers for current students. On many campuses, Student Government Associations (SGAs) have already had extensive power and large funds (from tuition) to finance programs.

Close the Pandemic Learning Gap, and Invest in Academic Excellence

As Mike D'Innocenzo would likely emphasize, quoting Chaucer, (updated for gender inclusion):

> "Gladly would [they] learn, and gladly would [they] teach."

Students' lives were disrupted in so many ways during 2020 and 2021; it is hardly surprising that they felt less engaged in advancing knowledge and learning skills (Ang et al., 2021). In 2022, with vaccination required for all students, faculty, and staff on many campuses, it was hoped normalcy would resume. However, for many 2022 felt a bit like a "catch-up year", with students and faculty alike regaining the skills necessary to simply function in the classroom and on campus. It may be in 2023 that Gen Z students can begin to return to disciplined, focused studies and move forward academically.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

1. As discussed above, time is a critical factor. **Time management is often a continuing challenge** for folks of all ages but is especially significant for young people, eager to deepen their studies and also to have time for social and cultural activities, in addition to employment to pay for their education. Gen Z students (in small groups) can **meet with advisors, early in the term,** to discuss among others strategies, such as those in the classic study by Alan Lakein, How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life (1985). This book shows ways to plan, evaluate, and make needed adjustments.

2. Developing critical thinking skills is vital for students, and for citizens, of all ages. Critical thinking, while a perpetually important ability, takes on particular significance now due to the increasing prevalence of information overload, "fake news", and social media bubbles (Marr, 2022). As the youngest generation of U.S. adults, Gen Z are tasked with the adaptation of these skills for successful navigation of the workforce and society, while also faced with near-constant bombardment of information. Thus, **learning critical thinking skills** is essential to help young people weed out the truth from the embellishment, identify bias in others as well as themselves, and evaluate multiple, conflicting points of view. Some analysts say that young people can be a shaping force in enhancing discourse for everyone, and fostering civil quests for common ground and respectful tradeoffs. **Classes and special campus groups** can contribute to this skill and attitude development.

TRADEOFFS FOR OPTION THREE:

As before, reading, integrating material, and discussing any text takes time, and reading Lakein's or similar texts **may not feel like a priority for many Gen Z students.** Alternative options, such as apps or short articles with concrete, behavioral bullet points may be able to provide enough structure for people to begin managing their time. It is also important to consider that, while most people struggle with time management, this is not universal and may not be an attractive goal for some. Further, although developing critical thinking skills does help cut down on the spread of misinformation, it **can come across as threatening or condescending** to many to have their current thought processes challenged, particularly in the face of the current contentious and polarized sociopolitical climate (Pen.org). Finally, funding advisors to support Gen Z students in developing time management and critical thinking skills **may prove prohibitive for smaller colleges and those with less funding.**

Seek Government Assistance at National, State, and Local Levels

As Mike D'Innocenzo would likely emphasize, quoting Susan B. Anthony,

"We assert the province of government to be to secure the people in the enjoyment of their unalienable rights."

All levels of government have provided assistance in various ways during the recent crises. For example, the federal government has suspended payments and interest on student loans since March of 2020; many state and private schools offered tuition and fee reimbursement for students during the first semesters of the pandemic; and COVID-19 grants were available to students following the initial outbreak of the pandemic (studentaid.gov). While these were swift and helpful responses that buffered young people from the worst impacts of the pandemic and subsequent economic downturn, many of these benefits have tapered off or ended. Furthermore, many Gen Z students, like the larger American population at large, have been feeling helpless and pessimistic about subsequent social upheaval following these events (APA, 2022; Stern, 2022). Thus, additional increases in financial, social, and psychological support are indicated for better positioning Gen Z students to meet their short- and long-term goals.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

1. Groups can determine resources that might be needed to support Gen Z students in the ongoing pandemic and economic downturn, and purposes for their use (and how such funds will be managed on campus). **Resources could be provided for multiple needs,** including funds for student loans, books, and those experiencing food insecurity during academic terms; training and other support for mentors and special projects; and additional coordination for two-year programs at nearby community colleges to facilitate transition to jobs or 4-year programs at colleges and universities.

2. Gen Z students can **make appeals** (in-person meetings with elected representatives) for districts where their college is located, and/or in their home districts. They can **ask others** (e.g., parents, university leaders, prominent local people). For lobbying, one effort is seldom enough; it is worth planning a sequence of follow-ups for all on your team.

3. **Governments can establish and expand** mental health centers and 24-hour crisis centers and more generalized counseling and therapy services, as discussed above. Access to mental health was a noted issue for many during the pandemic, and few organizations have the means to provide these services in a widespread way like the government does.

TRADEOFFS FOR OPTION FOUR:

In addition to money spent, the basic cost of all endeavors is time, which can be particularly intensive in appealing to the government (as indicated above, one effort is generally not sufficient for effective lobbying). Thus, individuals and groups will need to **consider where best to invest time most effectively to deal with stress, practical needs, and mental pressures for Gen Z students.** Also, **there are time costs for all allies,** including college officials (who may be supportive but have many other demands on their time, as well as other priorities in working with elected officials). Furthermore, government support is valuable and an effective way of addressing problems; however **not everyone has full trust in the government,** and not everyone will agree with using government funds and time in these ways.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Considering key ideas and specific options and actions proposed in this issue guide will help us work toward changes for young people that will affect Americans across age, race, socioeconomic background, and gender.

Our youngest generation, like those who came before, will need support and tools to succeed. In assisting them, these are **some key questions to consider:**

What is needed to help Generation Z students now, as we begin a new year and the COVID-19 pandemic shifts, changes, and continues?

We cannot address every issue, so which ones matter most to us?

The issues chosen in this guide for action include promoting ways to build friendship bonds, and expand cultural and social opportunities; expand college leadership to support and assist Gen Z students; close the pandemic learning gap and invest in academic excellence, including building skills to balance the multiple stresses and demands of student life; and seek government assistance at national, state, and local levels to ease the psychological, economic, and societal demands on Gen Z students. Do you agree these issues should be central? Are there others you would include?

As all choices have trade-offs, do the benefits described here outweigh the associated trade-offs?

What are the risks of the suggestions here? Are there unintended consequences that may prove problematic?

If we pursue these options and actions, how will they potentially impact other groups of Americans, particularly those in different circumstances than college students?

What else is missing in this conversation? What steps should come next? What other groups might be prioritized in our current world? How might these ideas shape the nation and the future?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

To know Michael D'Innocenzo was to know the very spirit of humanism, scholarly pursuit, and joie de vivre. While I only knew him for a few short years, he has impacted me as profoundly as many people I've known my whole life. He challenged and supported my work as a brand-new professor, celebrated my joys as enthusiastically as I did, and showed infinite concern and attention to my struggles even while dealing with his own significant challenges. And I am far from alone here: Mike had a way of making everyone feel unique, notable, and deeply cared for without coming across as insincere or inspiring jealousy. He brought out the best in people, and was the ultimate advocate for a collaborative and just society. This issue guide was inspired and led by Mike, and in working with him on it I was caught up in his pure, enthusiastic drive to continue giving back to the youngest generations as they approach and embark upon adulthood. Thus, this guide may be formatted somewhat differently than other issue guides, but this is intentional, as I hope I have managed to retain some of the writing style, magic, and love for others that was, and is, Mike D'Innocenzo.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

CONTRIBUTING
STUDENTS
In alphabetical order

Jonathan Caputo

Graduate Student, Counseling and
Mental Health Professions
Hofstra University

Averee Dovsek

Senior, Rhetoric and Public Advocacy
Rhetoric and Public Advocacy Honor Society
Hofstra University

Ryan Fallert

Senior, Rhetoric and Public Advocacy
Rhetoric and Public Advocacy Honor Society
Hofstra University

Emily Levine

Senior, Public Relations
Wellesley College

Steven Nappi

Senior, Political Science
Rhetoric and Public Advocacy Honor Society
Hofstra University

Zoe Pasquier

Graduate Student, Counseling and Mental Health
Professions
Hofstra University

Sage Wenninghoff

Sophomore, Rhetoric and Public Advocacy
Rhetoric and Public Advocacy Honor Society
Hofstra University

Joseph Verderber

Graduate Student, Counseling and Mental Health
Professions
Hofstra University

CONTRIBUTING
FACULTY
In alphabetical order

Philip Dalton, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Civic Engagement
Rhetoric and Public Advocacy
Hofstra University

Stephanie Freese, Ed.D.

Administration and Policy Studies
Docent, Nassau County Museum of Art
Advisory Committee Member, Center for Civic
Engagement
Supporter/Leader, Women's Diversity Network

Andrea Libresco, Ed.D.

Leo A. Guthart Distinguished Professor in Teaching
Excellence
Department of Teaching, Learning, and Technology
Director, Minor in Civic Engagement
Director, Minor in Peace and Conflict Studies
Graduate Co-director, Elementary and Early
Childhood Education

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