

March Newsletter

How “COVID-19 Fatigue” is Affecting Children and Families



About a year ago, the COVID-19 pandemic sent the world into a frenzy. At first, we shut the world down. We closed business, locked our doors, and only left the house to purchase food, water, and toilet paper. Eventually, we stepped foot into the world and started “living” again. However, to safely return to normal (or some version of normal), we had to abide by a long list of COVID-19 restrictions.

The Coronavirus pandemic turned home into the daycare, the school, and the office. Each day, parents face the impossible job of teaching and entertaining their children while simultaneously making it through an 8-hour workday. Also, kids of all ages now spend hours online as they work through virtual classes and online homework. The little things that brought variability to boring school days and the long work week are nothing but a memory. The pandemic and its incessant restrictions are sucking the excitement out of our daily lives, leaving us susceptible to COVID fatigue.

What is COVID Fatigue?

If you search for this using Google, symptoms of COVID will come up. However, there are two kinds of COVID fatigue. First is COVID fatigue - a symptom of the virus. Second is COVID fatigue - one’s mental and emotional reaction to the long-term stress of the pandemic. Simply put, we are TIRED of the COVID-19 pandemic and all its restrictions.

Many would agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has been (and still is) a huge stress. Typically, humans respond to stress through fight or flight.

We spent this past year fighting COVID-19 by attempting to live our lives according to the restrictions that slow the virus's spread. However, after one year of putting up with COVID, people of all ages are tired of pushing against the nerves, the heartache, and the struggles of this pandemic. People's COVID fatigue is accurate, and it's getting worse every day.

Dr. Patrick and Julie Fuller's Experience with COVID Fatigue

Dr. Patrick and Julie Fuller are pediatricians at Shoreview pediatrics and loving parents of four children. In an interview, Dr. Patrick and Julie share how this year-long COVID pandemic has affected the attitudes of their office, their patients, and their children.

How has COVID impacted you as a pediatrician?

Dr. Julie Fuller

Initially, it created anxiety among medical professionals, patients, and parents because the media quickly released information about COVID in large volumes. Since the virus was new and a lot of the data conflicted with each other, it was difficult for Dr. Julie, as a professional, to decide how to best practice under COVID and if she was correctly answering the questions her patients and families asked about COVID-19.

However, Dr. Julie found that as the pandemic wore on, anxiety turned to sadness. Co-workers got sick, which added fear and stress to the office. During COVID, the office had to work together more, but all the interactions happened through zoom. There were no lunches in the break room, and the office continually canceled their get-togethers and parties. Emotionally, work has been harder on Dr. Julie because she feels socially disconnected from her office family. The office has restructured their days so that well checks are in the morning and sick visits are in the afternoon. For Dr. Julie, this has created monotony because there is no more variability in her workdays. Dr. Julie said, "everything about work is predictable, and it makes people very blah."

How has COVID impacted your patients and their families?

Dr. Julie Fuller

Dr. Julie noticed that it'd been a huge stress for parents to try and educate their kids while simultaneously working from home. Dr. Julie reports that the prolonged exposure to COVID has made family communication "edgy." Families feel cooped up because there's nowhere to go for entertainment, and they are continually together all hours of every day. For kids, specifically, Dr. Julie finds they are more anxious, sad, and bored.

Dr. Patrick Fuller

Weight gain has become a huge issue. Both kids and parents have experienced large amounts of weight gain over the past year. For infants, toddlers, and grade school

children, Dr. Patrick finds that their demeanor is relatively unaffected by COVID. Infants are not scared of masks, toddlers are too young to understand what was going, and school-aged kids seem to be compliant and okay with the changes being made. In this age group, it was more the parents who suffered. At the start of COVID, the daycares were closed, the schools turned to online, and parents worked from home. The biggest question was: "What should the parents do with their kids while they work." Because the virus affected the elderly more than the children, parents could no longer ask grandparents to help out. Dr. Patrick said there was a large increase in private school enrollment because these schools were in person, and the public schools were not.

Also, Dr. Patrick said that online school was a big disadvantage to most children. Unless the child was introverted or extremely self-motivated, kids did not favor online school, and most children struggled with their grades. Dr. Patrick said, "Children and teens who were A and B students became C and D students." In general, online school made kids less motivated, and more started to struggle. Parents wanted an answer for this, and the number of requests for ADHD screens increased. Also, parents observed their children's learning patterns since school was online and both parties were home. As a result, more parents may be noticing and worrying about their children's learning difficulties. As a whole, Dr. Patrick believes the amount of psych referrals Shoreview has made (for ADHD or other concerns) has increased in the past year. Among patients, there is more melancholy and lost motivation. People are semi-depressed, depressed, or show signs of dysthymia (persistent depression).

Have the reactions from children and teens changed throughout the year?

Yes. For middle schoolers and high school teens, Dr. Patrick noticed that his patients were sad at the start of the pandemic. They were upset over missing sports, canceled proms, and being socially isolated. Now, Dr. Patrick says his patients are "fatigued by the whole thing." They never felt they were at a high risk of COVID, and, at this point, they just wanted to be with their friends. Also, Dr. Patrick says that teen girls appear to have it harder than teen guys. Girls are generally more social beings. Therefore, not being able to physically get together with their friends has taken a toll on them. Teenage males need social interaction, but they've seemed to satisfy their need by increasing the amount of time they spend gaming and interacting with their friends online.

Have you experienced COVID fatigue as a mom of four children?

Dr. Julie Fuller

In the beginning, Dr. Jukie felt like she should hover more. She was conflicted between letting her older kids do stuff and possibly bringing the virus into the house and not excommunicating them socially. Also, having two parents in their 90s added new stress to a family situation. Dr. Julie was now grocery shopping, running errands, and doing

outside things to prevent them from getting sick. Emotionally and mentally, this took a toll on her as the pandemic progressed. She wanted to give them socialization and help them have a happy living situation, but she also felt obligated to keep them as isolated and safe as possible.

Have you witnessed COVID fatigue in your kids?

Initially, having everyone home was a blessing. It was unusual for Dr. Julie's family of six to be home all at the same time. However, as the pandemic dragged on, she noticed times when it became challenging for all her kids (with vastly different personalities) to live under the same roof 24/7.

What to do about our COVID fatigue?

Here are some things you can do, individually or as a family, to overcome your pandemic burnout:

- 1. Develop a routine, especially if you work from home!**
 - a. Knowing when your kids start class, eat their lunch, and end their day can help parents know when they can be "at work" and when they need to be mom/dad, teacher, or lunch helper.
- 2. Add flexibility into your routine.**
 - a. While having a routine can reduce stress and anxiety, habits eventually become boring, especially if there is too much consistency in your daily routine. It is important to maximize the hours of the day that aren't spent in class. Allow your child to pick their lunch food or what to play at "recess."
- 3. Keep moving**
 - a. It is crucial to get up and move. Virtual school/work can lead to hours of sitting. Find time to take a break and engage in some type of physical activity. It can be anything from a walk to a quick game of hoops.
- 4. Normalize being NOT okay**
 - a. We all have bad days. Lately, we might be having more of them. Now, more than ever, it is important to tell your kids and yourself, "it's okay not to be okay."
- 5. Lean on each other**
 - a. Stress shouldn't be faced alone. The COVID pandemic is one giant year-long stressor. Don't hold back your feelings from your kids and help them not to hold back theirs from you. Encourage open communication in your family and work together to help each other overcome these traumatic times.
- 6. Seek outside help!**
 - a. Sometimes 1 through 5 isn't enough. Sometimes we need help from professionals. NEEDING HELP (physically or mentally) IS OKAY!!!

Wrapping it up

As the pandemic dragged on, Dr. Patrick and Julie Fuller experienced COVID fatigue as both parents and pediatricians. We have been fighting to live and cope with the daunting restrictions brought on by the COVID pandemic for a year, and WE ARE TIRED FROM IT! However, there is a light at the end of this very long tunnel; because every day we spend living the “new normal” COVID created is a day closer to finding our way back to the “normal” we were used to.