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Politics

Students With Cognitive Differences Say COVID-19 Derailed Their Routines

The pandemic has presented huge social and academic challenges for neurodiverse students.

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Abby Leaver can fit her whole life into a dorm room. Within the confines of small, apartment-style student housing, the Bellevue College resident assistant (RA) attends online classes and violin lessons, participates in Zoom happy hours and online games with friends, and cares for her cat. She's doing the things many college students are

doing this semester as they cope with the coronavirus pandemic — but she happens to be doing it with autism.

Leaver, a third-year student, is a participant in Bellevue's Neurodiversity Navigators program, which supports students with a variety of cognitive differences. A classically trained violinist, Leaver was hoping to transfer to a four-year university with a strong music program after completing her associate's degree. But when COVID-19 struck in Washington, Leaver's home state, and then the country, her plans were derailed.

"If I didn't have the training and self-advocacy that I've accumulated over the past two years... I would be floundering," she says. "I would have fallen behind and never caught back up."

Leaver is one of nearly a dozen students, parents, educators, and experts *Teen Vogue* spoke with to understand the state of neurodiversity — the concept that neurological differences like ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and Tourette's should be respected like other human differences, rather than viewed as disabilities — in higher education during the pandemic. Over the past two decades, universities nationwide have **developed programs** for neurodiverse students; but the arrival of the coronavirus was a change nobody planned for, and it has left administrators *and* students unsure of how to adapt a system that was built on in-person connection and routine.

Over the past seven months, some students **have completely dropped out of college**. Some have been surprised to find that **remote learning suits their needs**, while others crave face-to-face instruction and find it difficult to stay focused. These experiences are hardly unique to neurodiverse students, but for these young people, navigating the fiery hellscape that is 2020 comes with additional challenges, like battling social, professional, and academic systems that put people with cognitive differences at a disadvantage at every turn.

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Before the pandemic, things were going pretty well for several of the students *Teen Vogue* spoke with: Leaver was enjoying her courses and working as an RA; Hedy

Dolan, a sophomore at the University of Montana, was playing the clarinet in the marching band and creating videos for her TikTok account, @hedydolan, where she shares content about autism with over 7,000 followers; and Tyler Shore, a sophomore at Appalachian State University, was excited about two upcoming performances with his therapy group, a skit from the Nickelodeon sitcom *Drake & Josh*, and a rendition of Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off."

In mid-March, after the closure of college campuses and lockdown orders were instituted nationwide, all three students went home. Challenges arose immediately. Leaver found online music classes unmanageable and had to drop several courses. Dolan initially struggled to remember to wear a mask and wash her hands for long enough. Shore was disappointed about missing his performances and felt cooped up at home. "I really couldn't do anything out and about, other than with care providers," Shore says. "I really couldn't do anything other than go on walks, go to stores, and go and get food."

For Lena Olson, an Ohio teenager who's pursuing both high school and college coursework, the springtime transition to online learning was "a train wreck." Olson, who experiences ADHD and has other mental health needs, says her issues with object permanence made it difficult to succeed in remote classes. "When I left school," she recalls, "I would feel like [homework] wasn't my problem anymore, because there wasn't any physical representation that I needed to do that."

Programs like Neurodiversity Navigators acted swiftly to transition their services online. Director Sara Sanders Gardner says that despite academic support from the program, some students weren't able to complete coursework in the last two weeks of the winter quarter during the initial shift to remote learning. In the spring quarter, though, many of Sanders Gardner's program participants adapted well, and some discovered that virtual classes were easier for them than in-person instruction.

Jennifer Closson, director of the University of Montana's Mentoring, Organization, and Social Support for Autism/All Inclusion on Campus (MOSSIAC) program, agrees, saying that many of her students succeeded in online speech therapy this past spring. But state law prohibits Closson from practicing, even virtually, in states where she

isn't licensed, which means that she can't work remotely with students like Dolan, who lives in Colorado.

These educators say that one notable impact on their respective programs was a drop in freshman enrollment for fall 2020, which suggests, Closson notes, that some neurodiverse students decided to delay matriculation or begin college closer to home due to the pandemic.

“I think that just coming back to campus [this fall] is a huge success for my participants,” Closson says. “I'm very proud of them for not letting [COVID-19] upset their lives to a point where they didn't feel like they could continue their studies.”

And they are continuing, albeit mostly via laptop screens in dorms rather than in classrooms. Dolan, Leaver, and Shore agree that online classes are not ideal, but they've found strategies to succeed and are generally feeling okay. Some classes at all three schools have been remote this fall, but classes at Florida's Beacon College have been in-person since the beginning of the semester.

Beacon was the **first accredited higher-learning institution** designed specifically for students with learning differences. Administrators at the small liberal arts college “never even considered” online instruction for the fall, according to Oksana Hagerty, assistant director of the school's Center for Student Success. “You really can't substitute interaction in the physical space,” Hagerty says.

As these schools' diverging approaches suggest, there's no one-size-fits-all solution for neurodiverse students adapting to learning in the age of COVID-19. Brooke Olson, the cofounder of iTaalk, an assistive learning technology foundation — and mother to Lena — says that “Zoom does not work” for many people with autism spectrum disorders because of **object permanence issues**.

By contrast, María Hofman Hernandez, assistant director of the Scholars With Diverse Abilities program (SDAP) at Appalachian State University, says that some of her students with anxiety are “really thriving” with less in-person interaction.

“I always say that if you've met a person with autism, you've met *a person* with autism,” says Marjorie Solomon Friedman, a licensed psychologist at UC Davis. “It's

such a diverse spectrum.”

Although online classes are starting to seem like the new normal, daily reminders of the wholly unprecedented times in which we live abound. At Appalachian State, SDAP-coordinated activities have operated largely in-person this semester, but moved online for two weeks when a student contracted COVID-19. In Montana, MOSSAIC students were able to go on socially distant hikes or outings for ice cream together — until the weather turned and COVID-19 cases ticked up in the area at the end of October. Recently, Closson says, she played Dungeons and Dragons for the first time over Zoom with her students.

To Sanders Gardner, who is autistic, the pandemic has loudly announced what she as an educator has quietly suspected: School inclusion and accessibility initiatives have long been feasible, but are rarely implemented. “Things that disabled people have been asking for for a long time are now accessible,” she says, like student requests to move scheduling for counseling appointments online. “They were like, ‘No, we can’t do that.’ Well, within two weeks of COVID-19, they could do it.”

Leaver sees this moment, in a year marked by social upheaval, as an opportunity to reframe public perceptions of neurodiversity. Autism isn’t a medical issue, she believes; rather, it’s a social-justice issue that’s been “co-opted by the medical system.” She urges people to abandon medical language and “normative assumptions” when they think about autism and focus on individuality.

In a separate conversation, Sanders Gardner echoes Leaver’s sentiments: She says that a “social-justice approach” to neurodiversity entails “not trying to fix the person, but trying to provide access and remove barriers, rather than trying to make them fit into the typical world.”

They also agree that the most meaningful way neurotypical students can support their neurodiverse peers during the pandemic is through connection. “Autistic burnout,” Leaver explains, is a phenomenon some people experience when they’ve depleted their executive functioning and self-advocacy reserves, and it’s important

for someone to notice and have their back. She urges people in positions of authority, like teachers and administrators, to extend “grace and compassion” to students who may be struggling.

“If you’re a neurotypical person and you ever catch yourself wondering how someone’s doing, reach out to them, hit them up, and give yourself a reason to sustain that connection, because it’s super valuable,” Leaver says. “It’s super important. And we’re all in a state of survival at the moment — so look out for everyone’s survival.”

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