

## Why YMCA Manchester want to change the negative opinion of students during the ongoing pandemic

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**We're used to the repetitive frustrations of 'I need a holiday' and 'I'm sick of DIY'. Not forgetting the constant complaints of having to wear 'these suffocating masks'. With a second national lockdown comes the recirculation of who is to blame, has re-emerged. Once again students are at the forefront. Targeted for the coronavirus upsurge, students are constantly battling with the negative comments.**



**Here at YMCA Manchester, as young volunteers (MHC), we're keen to change the negative stereotype of students. Not only are we experiencing the ongoing emotional 'coronacoaster', but we are also having to live with being the butt of societies blame game. We want to highlight the harmful labels placed on students and its damaging impact on our mental health. Instead, we want to promote a more humane and inclusive view of young people. Hear our voice.**

### Students spread the virus

The phrase "Party tonight at 10:00pm – everyone's welcome!" is negatively associated with students, the public perceive that we put socialising before saving lives. The media consistently promotes the image that all students are spreading the virus through selfish reckless acts, putting their needs above the greater good. Although we recognise that some students, like everyone else, are failing to stick to the government guidelines, there are far more who care, are responsible, and are mindful. Many are sacrificing socialising and are staying indoors, in order to minimise the spread of Covid and keep their families safe.

It's easy for the media to play the blame game and label students as bad, however, this is damaging for our mental health and can lead to devastating consequences.

### Students' mental health suffers during the pandemic

It's tough, actually let's not sugar coat it, the last few months have been extremely challenging for some students. Many have moved away from home, to somewhere unfamiliar, in a time of uncertainty and a world filled with anxiety. Some students are resorting to drink and drugs to help them through this overwhelming and extremely difficult time, but instead of looking into the reasons **why** students are turning to abusive substances, many simply slate them, labelling us selfish and party animals.

It's not how students would have imagined their time at University with many facing online lectures and zero face-to-face teaching. This has led to students being increasingly vulnerable, it's incredibly hard to spot the signs and identify students who are feeling depressed, lonely, and anxious.

The truly heartbreaking reports of University students suffering in silence during the pandemic has led to suicide statements becoming increasingly common, with a mental health crisis seemingly taking over Universities. Finn Kitson, 19, who studied at The University of Manchester, is amongst the ever-growing list of student names that have sadly taken their own lives during the pandemic. An article confirming that Finn's death was not coronavirus related received backlash from Finn's father who tweeted 'If you lockdown young people because of Covid-19 with little support, then you should expect that they suffer severe anxiety'.



Your immediate response to hearing such tragic news is usually 'It's so devastating that student felt so low' and 'Their poor parents, it's just unimaginable'. Phrases like these can be infuriating. People fail to consider how their common unconscious bias can harm students' feelings and mental health stability.

Students need support and not just from internal University sources, but the wider public as well. Those people that feel a constant need to negatively comment on students with no consideration of the impact they are having, MUST stop.

### **Anxious and alone**

Many students are facing campus lockdowns, leaving them particularly vulnerable to emotional distress. Some students at the University of Manchester felt like they were treated like caged animals when the University decided to increase its security measures to 'protect' those from the virus. Several fences were placed around the accommodation blocks, with students having no prior knowledge. A home, is a place where you should feel protected and safe, rather than a place you feel like prisoners.

Having to self-isolate at University can be challenging, let alone when you are friendless and are living with complete strangers. For some, support from back home is not available, a comforting FaceTime chat or a 'pick me up' phone call is non-existent. Instead, some students are left feeling abandoned and alone. Students who thought they would meet new friends, 'friends for life' are instead faced with little opportunity to interact with others as Covid ensures they are confronted with more struggles.

Homesickness is fairly common for students to experience, but with Covid can prove even more difficult. In previous years there was always the option for students to return home if it all got too much but self-isolation has taken this comfort away, leaving some students feeling confined and anxious. For those having to isolate alone, they face further mental challenges as the winter months brings dark and dull nights and vitamin D deficiency, ultimately lowering their mood.



A little empathy and sensitivity for students, as opposed to judgement and neglect, could really help young individuals. An act of kindness or simply a friendly smile could help someone through a hard day and in the extreme, even help save a student's life.

### **Don't just assume**

People constantly jump to conclusions, 'Why aren't those students social distancing?' and 'See this is why the virus is spreading, no masks and no distance!'. But those students, the ones who have just been instantaneously judged, could be from the same household, living together in halls and are off on their daily walk, a walk they see as escapism until society knocks them down again.

Young individuals who are not wearing masks can also be targeted. The public commonly perceive that 'face masks aren't fashionable or cool enough' with younger generations rejecting face coverings. Other dismissive opinions include they've forgot their masks as 'they aren't a priority' and 'the masks ruin their make-up'. Health reasons which exempt those from wearing masks are one of the last things to be considered by some. Asthma, COPD, and Autism are among the list that exclude young, as well as old, from wearing a face covering if it would cause extreme distress. Yet health related motives are sometimes dismissed in society, with individuals suggesting negative and inconsiderate reasons when observing students who do not have a mask on.

Judgements like these are becoming far too regular and it is views like this that can harmfully impact on young people's mental health, feeling frequently judged by society.

### **Student appreciation**

Have people considered that these students, the ones they are vilifying, are the next generation of people that might treat them in hospital, teach their grandchildren or care for them as they get older? Instead of constantly criticising and blaming them for the coronavirus spread, surely students need to be supported, praised for their academic efforts and above all we need to ensure they are protected in society.

Blaming students is the easy option, you put them in **one** category disregarding the fact that individual students do not account for **all** students. One category does NOT fit all. It must be acknowledged that some students are responsible for the spread, but not **all** students.

### **Encouraging change**

The student stereotypes and judgemental opinions are not going to change without our own conscious efforts. As a young volunteer at YMCA Manchester, I encourage you to take a step back and reflect on the damage your judgements may have on students. Collectively lets challenge this student stigma and change the way students are treated in society, especially during the ongoing pandemic.



Sometimes we need to rant, we need to strive to change negative impressions because if we don't, we are faced with increased numbers of student suicides where precious young lives become merely statistics, statistics that cannot go on.

So, be kind, don't stereotype and remember, support is available for those struggling.

**Instagram: @ymcamanchester**

**TikTok: @ymcamanchester**

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