

The coronavirus could be Generation Z's 9/11

March 18 2020, by Jean Twenge



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Less than two weeks ago, everything still seemed pretty normal.

On March 6, I was returning home from a short business trip; my flight was full, and the airport was full. My phone's newsfeed, however, was

far from normal: We were, [health experts](#) said, on the cusp of [a global pandemic caused by COVID-19](#).

I research generational differences and cultural trends—essentially, how cultural events impact people. That early March evening in the airport, I suddenly realized that this was the last time things were going to feel normal. I was reminded of Sept. 10, 2001—the day before everything changed the last time.

Except: In many ways, the [coronavirus outbreak](#) is bigger than 9/11. It might also be bigger than the Great Recession.

We don't know yet how this will play out, but the [coronavirus](#) outbreak could become the biggest and most impactful cultural event of our lifetime. Neither 9/11 nor the Great Recession so profoundly altered as many aspects of day-to-day life in such a short period of time the way the coronavirus has affected schools, work, travel, entertainment and shopping. Plus, 9/11 and the recession didn't have as direct an impact on so many people around the world. The outbreak and our reactions to it are not a lone event—they intersect with the trends of the past and will have an impact on the future of many people, especially the generation I [call iGen](#) – those born after 1995.

What happens next?

The outbreak is already having deep psychological effects on many people—anxiety, fear and worry are rampant. As we cut ourselves off from [social interaction](#), anxiety may turn into depression.

That may be especially true for iGen, also known as GenZ. Social interaction with peers is paramount for young people, and with schools closed, working at home encouraged, and larger gatherings canceled, that is all but over. Texting, [social media](#) and video chat can help fill the

void—but [virtual communication is just not as good as actual face-to-face contact](#).

This situation is especially concerning because this generation was already vulnerable. Between 2011 and 2018—the most recent data available—rates of [depression](#), [self-harm](#) and [suicide](#) soared among teens. 2020 might well make things even worse—especially if [mental health resources](#) are more difficult to obtain as the pandemic worsens.

Some crises, [like the aftermath of a hurricane](#), lend themselves to action. We can clean up; we can volunteer. Taking meaningful action boosts mental health; it feels good to help others and to change things.

But, at least so far, pandemic prep has discouraged big communal actions. While [health care providers](#) and grocery store workers rise to new challenges, most Americans have been forced to focus on passive tasks that increase anxiety rather than purpose—worrying every time we cough, standing in line for toilet paper, and reading articles about using hand sanitizer when [hand sanitizer has been sold out for weeks](#). I fear the pandemic will cement an attitude [I've found was already prevalent among iGen](#): The world is not a kind or fair place.

Where generations agree

Despite the clear warnings of disease specialists reported in the media, until fairly recently many Americans believed that [the threat of the coronavirus was overblown](#). That's somewhat understandable: In an age of social media hype and political polarization, it's sometimes difficult to understand what's worth our concern and what's not.

But it goes deeper. The last few decades have seen a [long, steady decline in Americans' trust in large institutions](#). In the General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults, trust in the media fell

from 85.4% in 1973 to 54.4% in 2018. Trust in Congress fell from 84.3% to 54.2%. Even doctors were not immune: While a whopping 94.1% trusted medical experts in 1973, that slid to 86.9% by 2018. This decline has been fairly similar across age groups and includes every generation.

Trust in institutions and experts is critical in times like these—and fewer of us have it. When trust is low and political polarization is high, we are less prepared to agree on basic facts and less prepared to work together. If you don't trust the government, you're less likely to listen when the government tells you to stay home.

Now that the scope of the challenge is clear, we're going to have to trust each other more and listen when public health experts tell us: No, this is [not a good time to visit an older relative](#). No, it's not a good idea to go [ahead with your spring break](#) as if nothing has changed. It's becoming clear that distrust kills.

The end game

Here's the possible upside: Big cultural events can lead to big changes in attitudes. Perhaps this crisis will renew our faith in the media, in doctors and public health experts, and in government. That will be the most likely to happen if we work together—not just Republicans and Democrats, but millennials and boomers, GenX'ers and iGen'ers.

Boomers know that there is life on the other side of cataclysmic events, a good lesson for younger generations to hear. But that might also be why many Boomers, most of whom are in their 60s and 70s, [stubbornly kept going out and risked getting sick](#). Some millennials and iGen'ers have also flouted the advice to stay in, [saying "I'm young—I'll be fine."](#) which risks spreading the virus to vulnerable people. GenX'ers are caught in the middle [between aging parents and iGen children](#), just trying to hold it

together.

Decades from now, we'll still be talking about the pandemic of 2020. What will you say when someone asks what you did for the greater good?

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