

OPINION

Generation Z cannot become Generation COVID-19

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It's a scientific fact: At 23, I've got about two more years until my prefrontal cortex is fully formed. Until then, it will continue to urge me to take so many risks.

But taking a risk these days looks nothing like it did a year ago.

When I graduated from university in 2019, I thought I'd be following the advice of my underdeveloped brain – not to mention in the footsteps of people older than me, who sigh nostalgically for their own youth – into all sorts of adventures and shenanigans. I saw myself meeting new people every day, and maybe even dating some of them. I saw myself moving to London, England, renting a flat with mice and outdated electrical wiring, and travelling around Europe to bask in the culture and history.

Heck, I even got my visa, despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and clung to the hope I could make it work – that is, until a new extra-virulent strain emerged from the very country I was trying to move to. I was so hopeful, so hungry, for all of it.

In hindsight, I was being a bit naive. I knew that moving during the pandemic wouldn't be easy, but I didn't know how to let go of the youthful optimism that it would all work out, because, to me, taking risks is an important part of becoming an adult.

Risks are about leaping into uncertain situations in hopes of stumbling on great, and otherwise unforeseen, opportunities. I always saw them as key to learning about myself and the world, even if I failed to get to where I might have hoped.

Unfortunately, coming of age during a global pandemic means the only risk I'm taking these days is getting on public transit, or going to the grocery store and visiting my parents in the same week. Sometimes I even peel myself away from the close relationship I've developed with my plants and actually visit a friend in real life.

In short, the nature of risk-taking has been completely turned on its head. And my prefrontal cortex is really unhappy about it.

The truth is that the COVID-19 pandemic has stolen a crucial window of time from millions of young people like me. It only piles onto the pain of the job losses, the shrinking of the economy, and the growing uncertainty and inequity that will inevitably shape our futures.

Are we Gen Z any longer? Or are we Gen C-19?

I'd hate to think that this pandemic, and the things it has taken from us, will be what defines my generation. But it's impossible to imagine it won't leave its mark on us.

As I try to settle in a career, the world – as seen through my iPhone – feels like an overwhelming place; a place where the opportunities feel endless. I haven't taken enough risks to begin to have the sense that these infinite opportunities can be mine if I grasp for them.

I've come to understand that taking a risk doesn't always have to mean meeting new people or moving abroad, but it does mean freely following your heart even when it doesn't align with what other people might expect of you. It could mean steering a touch away from what might be deemed as safe and sensible and discovering a new perspective, community or passion as a result. This age-old method of finding one's own path is not easy to do from within the four familiar walls of your home, and as we take another year to battle the virus, the hopes and dreams that are to shape young people's futures remain on the back burner.

This past year has been difficult, but this isn't the end of my generation's story. I know that we'll burst forward after this is over, powered by a reserve of pent-up eagerness and drive that has never been seen before. We'll move forward without hesitation, determined to make up for the months we've lost as we isolated from the world as we used to know it. And when we look back at these years in hindsight, the derailing of our plans will in turn create our legacy, having seized the opportunities we've found and then set into motion.

And without a doubt, I will have moved into that dingy London flat before that developing prefrontal cortex of mine tells me to stay put.