

The psychology behind why some college students break Covid-19 rules

By **Scottie Andrew, CNN**

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Back to school in the age of Covid 05:46

(CNN) — [Going off to college](#) is, for many young adults, their first real plunge into freedom and adulthood. It's where they're encouraged to take risks and find new connections in dining halls and laundry rooms.

But those collegiate rites of passage aren't possible if they're largely confined to an extra-long twin bed in a stuffy dorm room, peering out at the world through barred windows.

The fall 2020 semester looks a lot like that for some undergraduates who've returned to campus during the pandemic.

And as anticipated, some of those undergrads have already started to rebel.

Social students have [packed fraternity houses](#) and dorm hallways and [snaked their way through bars](#) -- all venues for coronavirus transmission. Schools including the [University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill](#) and the [University of](#)

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Meet the experts



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Students walk through the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in August. The university canceled classes after clusters of coronavirus cases appeared.

CNN spoke with the following experts about the drivers behind these risky decisions:

- **Hannah Schacter**, an assistant professor and developmental psychologist at Wayne State University
- **Ben Locke**, the senior director for Counseling & Psychological Services at Pennsylvania State University
- **Mary Karapetian Alvord**, director of the private practice Alvord, Baker & Associates who mostly counsels children, teens and young adults.

All three experts know college students well. Schacter teaches them; Locke counsels them on campus; Alvord is their psychologist back at home.

Collegiate life doesn't look at all like what it used to, but many of the exciting firsts college promises -- freedom, independence and friendships -- are still there, and they're still luring students to act in ways that can expose them or others to coronavirus, they said.

Teens are wired to take risks

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University of Idaho students wear face masks while playing a game outside of Sigma Nu fraternity during fraternity bid day, the final day of the recruitment process, in August.

That imbalance may drive them to make decisions others deem risky, like visiting friends or attending a party, Locke said.

"Their decision making ... is more about 'what's in the moment, what am I missing out on, what is the thing that would make me happiest in this moment?'" he said.

Teens are also particularly sensitive to the potential rewards of risky decisions at this stage in their life. It's not that they don't understand the negative consequences, but they struggle to regulate those impulses that lead them to take risks because the potential reward is too great, said Schacter, who leads a lab at Wayne State University on adolescent relationships.

"It's this combination of being restricted from social contact for a while at an age where spending time with peers is so essential to development, to making teenagers feel good, and so, there's some sort of calculation going on where the perceived benefit -- 'I get to spend time with friends' -- seems to be outweighing the potential costs," Schacter said.

When you plop students back on campus after a spring and summer spent cooped up in their childhood bedrooms, many of them will take those opportunities to connect with their friends and strangers. Their fear of the virus may be overtaken by their eagerness to connect, she said.

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"No one's going back to college because they want to sit in their dorm all weekend by themselves," Schacter said.

Peer approval is increasingly important throughout adolescence, and young adults depend on their social connections to build their identities. They still want to see their friends and meet new people, a hallmark of college that's become increasingly difficult when classes are conducted with students six feet apart -- or [states apart, over Zoom](#).

So some will party.



University of Idaho sophomore Natalie Talcott, right, photographs Ireland Neff, left, and Sage Huggins outside Delta Delta Delta sorority during sorority bid day, the final day of the recruitment process, on Monday, Aug. 17, 2020, in Moscow, Idaho. Sororities and fraternities at the university are taking a variety of precautions to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The first day of classes at the University are on Aug. 24. (Geoiff Crimmins/Moscow-Pullman Daily News via AP)

"Peers are so essential that it's no coincidence that we're seeing these behaviors more and that they're particularly peer-oriented," Schacter said.

And there is a risk teenagers take quite seriously -- the risk of rejection. So if they see someone they respect or

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They are getting mixed messages from adults

Colleges can't seem to decide whether it's safe for students to return to campus. Many universities gave students mere days to move off-campus in March and resume classes virtually. Months later, they're canceling in-person classes after clusters of coronavirus cases appeared.

But because schools have reopened, students may assume that they'll be safe to resume life as they knew it, Alvord said.

They may also have internalized the general advice toward the beginning of the pandemic, Alvord said, which [government officials](#) have [repeated](#) in bids to reopen schools -- that children and teens are far less likely to [get sick from coronavirus](#). (The risk of death is still relatively low, but some teenagers have [died from Covid-19](#)).



The University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill announced that it would cancel all in-person undergraduate learning following a cluster of Covid-19 cases on campus.

"The knowledge base has shifted, but I think it's sort of reinforced for a lot of them that they were not part of the high-risk group," Alvord said.

Reopening schools and bringing students back to campus open up opportunities for exposure they wouldn't have had at home. The very act of resuming in-person classes makes it more likely for some students to do risky things

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obey social distancing and mask guidelines, Locke said.

"The polarization of mask wearing as a public health expectation is something that's embedded in the arrival of students," he said.

They're still processing the pandemic

Disappointment is inevitable in times like these. Dashed expectations coupled with the challenges brought on by the pandemic that affect students in different ways leave them to navigate the uncertain present on their own.

"This is incredibly hard," Locke said. "None of this is normal, none of this is baseline, all of this has elements that are disappointing in it."

Preliminary health data has already confirmed what Locke and other psychologists feared was true -- that [young people have been overwhelmed by anxiety and depression](#) since the start of the pandemic. The [National Center for Health Statistics and the US Census Bureau](#) estimate that more than



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Some students may seek out activities that restore a sense of normalcy, or they could seek out the experiences they longed for that the pandemic threatened to cancel.

"There's this desire to hold on to the way that it used to be, the way they wanted it to be," Locke said. "It's one of the hardest parts of the pandemic -- to reckon with a reality that none of us developed knowing about."

Young people whose experiences with coronavirus are more personal may be more willing to obey those safety guidelines. But many Americans, luckily, have been spared by the virus. It may still seem foreign or improbable to young people who haven't experienced the virus, which could it seem less serious, the psychologists said.

"People often talk about how adolescents feel invulnerable," said Locke. "And that may or may not be true. But that sense that your behavior impacts your entire community, or could cause your neighbor to die two months from now, is a really hard thing to take in."

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The trouble with the Covid-19 pandemic, though, is that even a few students who break pandemic guidelines could set off a chain of infection that can -- and has -- canceled classes and activities, Schacter said.

Schools have struggled to figure out what methods work to convince students to stay safe. And it's not a problem unique to college students -- adults are ignoring the advice of public health officials, too.

It's already apparent, though, that schools telling students to abstain completely from social interaction or [threatening them with suspension or worse](#) doesn't work. It hasn't worked with other risky behaviors like drinking and driving or unprotected sex, either, Schacter said.

Alvord said universities need to share that responsibility of keeping those on campus safe *with* students. Shifting blame onto students could stir up rebellion.

At Penn State, Locke said he and his colleagues have tried to "shift [the students'] culture of thinking" to one of mutual

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Getting 100% of students to obey safety guidelines is one of the challenges of Covid-19 that feels unsolvable -- how can a school keep thousands of students in line when [sports teams with fewer than 50 members](#) aren't even immune

Regarding students with empathy, the psychologists said, and acknowledging the sacrifices they've already made could be a good, if imperfect, place to start.

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