

An Inside Look: Jewish Teens' Mental Health in the Face of AntiSemitism

In December of 2023, the FBI reported that following the October 7th, 2023 terror attacks in Israel, anti-Semitic incidents in the United States rose by 360%. This chain of events seems illogical. On October 7th, the largest massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust took place in the south of Israel near the Gaza Strip. Instead of being met with empathy from the American community following the traumatizing day, American Jews were met with more hate than we have experienced since World War II. Before October 7th, some Jewish people already struggled with their Jewish identity due to generational trauma from the Holocaust, exile from Middle Eastern countries, pogroms, and other extreme prejudices. While antiSemitism has always been an issue, it feels almost unavoidable in this post-October seventh world. Due to its proliferation on college campuses and social media, young people who are surrounded by this anti-Semitism have felt increased fear and anxiety. This new era of antiSemitism has also spread in academic institutions, where not only professors but also students, believe harmful rhetoric. Additionally, social media has been a superspreader of antiSemitic ideas and concerning misinformation about this conflict. For Jewish young adults, this environment of hate in their own country can not only cause lowered moods and higher anxiety but also have long-term effects.

[Authors note: We acknowledge that the war in the Middle East has led to an increase in hate-based attacks towards Muslim and Arab individuals as well as Jewish people. We are strongly against hate and violence towards all communities and encourage everybody to advocate against it whenever possible. We imagine that this time of turmoil has been difficult for all teenagers connected to this situation, and our love, hope, and advice go out to all who are struggling.]

We asked Jewish high school and college students about the impact of antisemitism on their mental health post October 7th. Participants rated their stress levels on a scale of one to ten before and after 10/7; **with average stress levels increasing from a 4 to a 6.8 on a 10 point scale**, where 1 is equivalent to least stressed and 10 is equivalent to most stressed. Of the surveyed people, 72% said they have experienced low moods due to concerns over antisemitism and 40% said they have personally experienced antisemitism. Results showed that the increased antiSemitism has not only had an adverse effect on mental health but has also increased fears over physical safety. In some cases, survey participants shared extremely disturbing experiences that they have had in recent months. One survey participant responded “I feel very anxious whenever I tell people I'm Jewish because I'm worried that they're going to automatically assume that I'm a Zionist and immediately give me hate because of the war. I get worried about talking about it in fear of people telling me I'm going to hell.” The response went on to describe their alarming experiences, “During the WWII unit, no one in my class was paying attention at all and a couple of kids even did the seig heil [Nazi salute] at each other from across the room. I feel scared to wear my necklace. it's unfair.” **These results are scary and a lot feels uncertain. Thankfully, mental health professionals are sharing important ways that young Jewish people can take care of themselves right now.**

It can feel isolating to be a member of a minority group, especially when you're facing hate. It's important to stand up to hate whenever possible, but also to take care of yourself when undergoing great amounts of stress. Mental health professional Alanna Shuman PNP, PMHNP remarks that those in “some kind of marginalized population [are] more likely to have long term mental health issues”; based on our survey, it's clear that more than half of respondents are already undergoing mental stress. Dr. Randi Shane, a professor of psychology at CUNY, states

“because adolescence is a time of forming your identity, having an experience like this is going to have a much bigger impact than [it would if it were experienced at] other times in your life”.

As a teen, it's dramatically important to take care of yourself. Jewish teenagers are going through a period of extreme stress, and taking precautions to reduce stress will not only help in the moment but also help avoid worse mental struggles in the future.” Alanna Shuman recommends talking to a trusted adult. “Teens don’t have the skills to handle [antisemitism], nor should they.” Whether it be a friend, teacher, parent, or counselor, it’s important to reach out. Adults can provide support that teenagers require during stressful times; no teen should go through this alone.

Additionally, be aware of your social media consumption. Dr. Shane believes that “social media gives young people a distorted view of what [other] young people think of [Jews].” Social media may make being Jewish feel, especially isolating as we can become subjected to a forum of unfiltered antisemitism and other forms of hatred. Taking a break from social media may help considerably in lessening stress related to antisemitism. It isn’t fair that Jewish people receive so much hate, but it is an unfortunate reality. Continue to stand up to hate whenever possible and remember to protect your wellbeing. Reach out to adults, separate yourself from social media, and refrain from further isolating yourself.

While it may seem daunting to speak up against hate, it is important now more than ever to stand up for your Jewish, Muslim, and minority-identifying peers. Silence can be more dangerous than acts of hatred; if we stay silent, hate will continue. Although it would be impossible to be present during every instance of antisemitism, it is always possible to support and be there for your Jewish friends.