

What it is like to be a youth with anxiety

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"Demons," a painting by a 17-year-old who wanted to show what living with anxiety was like. Credit: "Youth Voices" photobook

More people are temporarily experiencing anxiety now because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For young people already living with an anxiety disorder, it may be more intensified.

In light of this, professor Roberta L. Woodgate hopes people can

become more understanding of [anxiety](#), and that we collectively address the stigma that exists in society that prevents people with [mental health challenges](#) getting and receiving the help they need.

"Many people assume anxiety is not a real thing," says the Canada Research Chair in Child and Family Engagement in Health Research and Healthcare. "But it is very real and it's not something you 'just get over with.' And I think this current situation with the pandemic could help others glimpse into what living with an anxiety disorder is like, and perhaps that will make us more empathetic to this condition going forward."

What people with [anxiety disorders](#) experience is pain, which was overlooked before Woodgate undertook her novel study, "Youth's Voices: Their Lives and Experiences of Living with an Anxiety Disorder", to be published in special issue in the *Canadian Journal of Pain*. In the article, Woodgate uniquely documents how [youth](#) describe living with anxiety.

Focusing on pain was not her initial intent, yet it became quickly apparent to her that pain permeates every aspect of daily life for youth living with anxiety [disorders](#).

"Past studies focused on numbers, such as how many youths experience anxiety and the like, but none documented how the youth thought about it," says Woodgate, a College of Nursing professor.

To help people—especially schools and parents—understand what the mental condition of youths living with anxiety is, Woodgate created a series of materials, such as five short videos that have actors read interview excerpts from her study. The videos are animated with pictures the participants drew or photographed to help communicate their [mental state](#).

Recently, she also published a zine that explores the experiences of [young people](#) with anxiety and how it impacts their lives at school. The zine, or photobook, is filled entirely with photographs, captions, and interview quotes from young people who participated in the study. The aim of the photobook was to show the very real impacts anxiety can have on the lives of young people, at home and at school, but also the ways that young people cope with their anxiety. With COVID-19, even though young people may not be physically in the school setting, the anxiety they face is ever present and may be impacting their everyday lives.

"Young people go through many challenging life events and my studies are about getting their voice out there because they do have something to say about what they're going through and it's important we hear them," she says.

More information: Roberta Lynn Woodgate et al. The Lived Experience of Anxiety and the Many Facets of Pain: A Qualitative, Arts-Based Approach, *Canadian Journal of Pain* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/24740527.2020.1720501](#)

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