

Coping with COVID

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Abstract: *The recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it an unprecedented amount of change to the daily lives of individuals around the world. Stay at home/safer at home measures have drastically limited individuals' face to face contact. College students have had to quickly adapt to new modes of instruction, including various forms of distance learning. Many colleges have yet to make final decisions regarding how instruction will be delivered in the coming semester. The uncertainty COVID-19 brings in regard to daily living and higher education pursuits may lead to a variety of negative outcomes for college students, including increased stress and anxiety and decreased academic performance. The current research examines how undergraduate students attending a small college in the Southwestern United States are coping with the pandemic compared to the general adult population. 289 participants completed survey items related to coping, hope, and personality. Results reveal that college students employ significantly more maladaptive coping strategies than the general population in response to the stress surrounding the pandemic. Additionally, they have significantly lower levels of hope and possess lower levels of conscientiousness, emotional engagement, and openness to new experiences. The results of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, who should take these findings into consideration as they make plans for the coming academic year.*

Key Words: college students, instruction, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

2020 ushered in unprecedented changes to individuals' lives and sense of safety around the world. This spring, in response to the COVID-19 virus, stay at home/safer at home orders were enacted in the United States on a state by state basis (Lee, 2020). Many states replaced social distancing, initially suggested in February and March as a way to slow the spread of the virus, with mandates for residents to stay at home, except as necessary to perform essential activities. Although essential employees continued to travel to work (Yurkevich, 2020), those with jobs deemed non-essential moved their workplace activities to the online context (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Individuals with non-essential jobs that could not be performed remotely were, in many cases, laid off or fired from work (Falcone, Saladino, & Brown, 2020). School buildings closed, and K-12 public education moved online (Grosserode & Stern, 2020).

In the context of higher education, growing numbers of COVID-19 cases throughout the country led college administrators to make the decision to move instruction to a virtual environment for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester and, in most cases, the summer 2020

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semester. As a result of this decision, college instructors were faced with the unenviable task of quickly restructuring their on-ground classes so that content could be administered online for the remainder of the spring semester. Many of these instructors had little or no previous experience teaching remotely and struggled to find ways to meet the learning needs of all students (Lederman, 2020).

Along with navigating a new classroom environment, many college students were displaced from their residences. Most colleges closed the majority, if not all, of their dormitories and college student housing (Dickler, 2020). Students who had lived in dormitories throughout their college careers were forced to secure new housing arrangements, with many traditionally aged college students returning home mid-semester to live with their families. Leaving the college environment during the semester was not only an educational disruption, it also disrupted students' social lives and impacted their sense of community (Hess, 2020). In addition to adjusting to changes to their educational and living arrangements, many college students had to cope with the financial stress resulting from being laid off or fired from their full or part-time jobs. Statistics show that at least 20% of college students parent a child while attending school (Lewis & Goldrick-Rab, 2020). These students have had the additional responsibility of homeschooling their young children while attempting to complete their own coursework during the pandemic.

There is much speculation regarding how the pandemic will impact the way colleges and universities operate, both in the short and long-term. As of July 1st, 60% of colleges and universities plan to reopen their doors in the fall (Zahneis, 2020), employing safety measures ranging from mask policies to an additional semester of remote learning. Some experts believe that the pandemic may reshape higher education in a permanent way (Harrigan, 2020), normalizing online education and leading to a shift in learning modalities across the country. However, Newfield (2020), citing the work of Alpert, Couch, and Harmon (2016), suggests that universities should resume on-ground learning as soon as it is deemed safe to do so, as students learn more in on-ground classrooms than through remote instruction, specifically students of color. Concerns on campus abound: Notes one university president: "My biggest concern is making sure that the disproportionate financial impact of COVID-19 on low-income families, first-generation and underrepresented students does not set us back at a time when we were making real progress in ensuring that more of them have access to colleges and universities offering high-quality education" (Kimbrough, Cauce, & Stanley, 2020).

Researchers of the current study, all who are instructors at a small liberal arts (and primarily undergraduate) college in the Southwestern United States, were curious to learn more about how the changes brought about by the COVID-19 epidemic were affecting the lives of their students. Their university hosts a large number of first generation college students as well as following a mindset similar to higher education institutions designated as Land Grant universities, with the mission to provide access to everyone. The university involved in this study does not follow the typical admission policies related to national test scores or high school GPA requirements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The changes and uncertainty accompanying the pandemic have resulted in increases in the stress levels of the general public. The Harris Poll conducted a survey on stress in America from April 24- May 4, 2020, gathering data from 3,013 residents. Results reveal that the average reported stress level specific to the pandemic was 5.9, while the average stress level (non-specific to the pandemic, was 5.4). This number is significantly higher than in previous years (American

Psychological Association, 2020). For some individuals, completing even the simplest of daily tasks has become daunting amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Notes Gupta and Chadd (2020) “Many people have lost their anchor, their schedules, and are now operating in an unfamiliar infrastructure.”

However, even prior to COVID-19, college students were experiencing high levels of stress (Winerman, 2017) and rating their emotional health as fairly poor. “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2010” survey reveals that the percentage of students reporting good or above-average emotional health dropped from 55.3% in 2009 to 51.9% in 2010. This marks the lowest score since 1985, when the survey first posed the question.

“How students appraise and cope with their stressors can predict their perceived levels of stress” (Enns, Eldrige, Montgomery, & Gonzales, 2018, p. 227). In response to stressors, students may employ positive (also known as adaptive) or negative (maladaptive) coping mechanisms. Adaptive coping mechanisms include seeking social support, acceptance, and positive reappraisal (O'Brien Mathieson, Leafman & Rice-Spearman, 2012). In contrast, maladaptive coping mechanisms are more self-destructive and include behaviors such as binge drinking (O'Brien et al., 2012; Maycrantz & Houghton, 2018). Understanding students' coping mechanisms is particularly important when college stressors are compounded by a pandemic that turns the daily lives of individuals upside down.

Identifying pathways toward one's desired goals and finding motivation to use these pathways is characteristic of hopeful thought (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Hope, one of the central constructs in positive psychology, plays an important role in predicting academic achievement even after controlling for educational history (Gallagher, Marques, & Lopez, 2017). Therefore, identifying college students with low levels of hope and finding ways to help bolster these levels is important. Feeling and expressing feelings of hope may be viewed as a positive coping strategy. Finally, personality traits may also influence how individuals respond to stress caused by non-normative events, such as COVID-19. Research also suggests that personality traits and how an individual perceives stress influences psychological outcomes (Roohafza et al., 2016).

The research question that guided this study was “Compared to the general population, how are students at our university coping with the COVID-19 pandemic?” Although our study was primarily exploratory in nature, based on past research we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Students will report use of more negative coping skills than the general population.

Hypothesis 2: Students will report lower levels of hope compared to the general population.

METHODS

RECRUITMENT

After obtaining IRB approval, researchers began participant recruitment. In order to participate in the study, individuals needed to be at least 18 years of age. The researchers posted information about the study, with a link to the informed consent form and online survey (created in Qualtrics), to their respective Facebook pages. Information about the study, along with the survey link, was emailed to students attending college on the researchers' campus. After completing the survey, the participants had the option to enter a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card. Survey data was collected throughout the month of April 2020.

Participants

Two hundred and eighty-nine individuals completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 18-84 ($M=37.94$; $SD=15.88$). Students represented 38.1% of the sample, with a mean age of

26.34, $SD=9.12$ years. Individuals who were not students had a mean age 45.49, $SD=14.77$ years. The sample was predominantly female (74.1%) and white (69.6%), with 16.6% of the sample identifying as multiracial. African American participants represented 3.1% of the sample; Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and those who answered "race/ethnicity not listed" comprised 2.1% of the sample. 52.1% percent of the participants were parents. The majority of participants resided in suburban areas (43.7%), with those in rural areas accounting for 33.4% of the sample. The remainder resided in urban areas. Less than 2% of the population lived in states outside of Oklahoma.

The majority of participants ($N=236$) reported that they were employed prior to the pandemic. Since the pandemic began, 82.6% continued working, 10.6% were laid off, and 6.8% lost their jobs. Slightly over 20% of participants noted that their living situation had changed since the pandemic began.

Instruments

Participants completed several instruments, including The *Brief COPE* (Carver, 1997); the *Adult Hope Scale* (Snyder, Harris, Anderson, Holleran, Irving, Sigmon et al., 1991); and the *Ten Item Personality Inventory*, or *TIPI* (Gosling, Rentfrow, and Swann, 2003). In addition, participants were asked to answer the open-ended question "Is there anything else you would like us to know about your thoughts, feelings, or experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?" This item was designed to add information supporting the findings of the above mentioned instruments.

The *Brief COPE* (Carver, 1997) was used to measure participants' coping skills. The instrument is a 28-item, four point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 4 (I've been doing this a lot). The *Brief COPE* is composed of a series of scales representing positive and negative ways of coping in stressful situations. Carver (1997) suggests that the 14 scales, with two statements per scale, be analyzed independently of one another. Sample scale items include: "I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things." (*self-distraction*); "I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in." (*active coping*). According to Carver (1997), psychometric properties for the 14 scales of the *Brief COPE* range from a Cronbach's alpha of .5 (*venting*) to .82 (*religion*). The overall Cronbach's alpha for our sample was .70.

The *Adult Hope Scale* (Snyder et al., 1991) was administered to capture participants' level of hope. The scale is a 12-item measure (ranging from 1= definitely false to 8= definitely true) and is divided into two sub-scales: *agency* (goal-directed energy) and *pathways* (planning to accomplish goals). Both sub-scales have four items each, with the remaining four scale items serving as fillers. Sample *agency* item: "My past experiences have prepared me well for my future"; sample *pathways* item: "There are lots of ways around a problem". The Cronbach's alpha for our sample was .77.

The *TIPI* (Gosling et al., 2003) was used to measure the following personality traits: *extraversion*; *agreeableness*; *conscientiousness*; *emotional stability*; and *openness to experience*. The *TIPI* contains ten Likert scale items ranging from 1= disagree strongly to 7= agree strongly. Sample items include *conscientiousness*: "dependable; self-disciplined" and "disorganized; careless" (item reverse scored). Gosling and colleagues (2003) note that although the *TIPI* was created in order to provide users with a short instrument that optimized validity, it was not created with high alphas in mind. Because of this, the researchers did not run reliability analysis for the instrument.

DATA ANALYSIS

Researchers used SPSS to run all analyses. A series of independent samples *t*-tests were run to examine differences between student scores and the general public's scores on the *Brief Cope*, the *Adult Hope Scale*, and the *TIPI*. Response to an open-ended question about participants' experiences related to COVID were examined to gain more insight into respondents' experiences and thoughts.

RESULTS

Table 1

Differences between students and general public scores on the Brief COPE

	Students	General Public	Group Differences
Self-distraction	$M= 3.17$ $SD= .68$	$M= 2.85$ $SD= .82$	$t(262.5)= 3.55, p= .000$
Denial	$M= 1.50$ $SD= .76$	$M= 1.19$ $SD= .42$	$t(146.7)= 3.81, p= .000$
Disengagement	$M= 1.63$ $SD= .78$	$M= 1.22$ $SD= .47$	$t(159.5)= 5.03, p= .000$
Self-Blame	$M= 1.85$ $SD= .73$	$M= 1.50$ $SD= .61$	$t(202.3)= 4.74, p= .000$
Humor	$M= 2.47$ $SD= .97$	$M= 2.23$ $SD= .93$	$t(280)= 2.56, p= .011$
Acceptance	$M= 3.05$ $SD= .76$	$M= 3.37$ $SD= .65$	$t(281)= -3.5, p= .001$

Table 2

Differences between students and general public scores on the Adult Hope Scale

	Students	General Public	Group Differences
Agency	$M= 6.17, SD= 1.13$	$M= 6.57$ $SD= 1.05$	$t(278)= -2.63, p= .009$
Pathways	$M= 6.22, SD= 1.03$	$M= 6.50, SD= 1.04$	$t(280)= -2.03, p= .043$

Table 3

Differences between students and general public scores on the TIPI

	Students	General Public	Group Differences
Conscientiousness	$M= 5.26, SD= 1.33$	$M= 5.75, SD= 1.12$	$t(201.8)= -3.20, p= .002$
Emotional Stability	$M= 4.09, SD= 1.49$	$M= 4.90, SD= 1.50$	$t(286)= -4.47, p= .000$
Openness	$M= 4.30, SD= 1.26$	$M= 4.66, SD= 1.23$	$t(286)= -2.322, p= .02$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The quantitative results of our study indicate that our college students are currently struggling to stay hopeful and positive in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to open-ended questions further supported this view, revealing powerful insights.

Items within the *Brief COPE* focus on self-distraction, denial, disengagement, self-blame, humor and acceptance. As seen in Table 1, our analysis uncovered significant differences between the student group and the general respondent population. A few student comments related to these categories included positive thoughts such as “being able to amuse myself and keep busy is coming in handy” and “finding positive solutions and focusing on what is important is what is sustaining myself plus my family”. One student noted that the pandemic “is forcing us all to pause and re-focus, which is a very good thing.” Additional comments included “I take one day at a time”; “crises bring strengths out in people and communities”; and “it has changed my life for the better”.

Many comments included the removal of extracurricular activities for their children and being able to spend more time with family even though it was deemed necessary from an outside source.

Although our students mentioned several positive outcomes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, there were comments demonstrating other coping strategies that may be viewed as less emotionally healthy, such as “there has been an overreaction to this virus”; “I am angry at China”; and “the most stressful aspect...frustration and fury I feel toward other Americans who are...petulant, ignorant and yet massively arrogant...” Additional statements include “we are turning into a police state”; “this is blown out of proportion”; and “...I might be suffering from IBS due to monitoring what I eat...” Some comments revealed confusion: “Honestly it still doesn't seem real...some days I forget that the world is shut down and others it's all I can think about”; “I developed an animosity towards my job”; and “It's a bizarre dichotomy when you can feel so connected...when left to one's own late-night thoughts when the business is over, you can feel so utterly hopeless and alone.” One student seemed to utilize a combination of healthy and unhealthy coping skills, revealing “my sleep has suffered, I've started drinking way more, and I've started smoking again when I had quit completely for a year and a half; however, I've been journaling/writing way more often.”

Analysis of the *Adult Hope Scale* provided in Table 2, indicated that our student group has significantly less sense of agency and pathways than the general group, meaning they feel less empowered and less in control of their destinies. Comments such as “a lot of changes happened in a day with little warning”; “pieces of my identity were stripped away”; “I feel like my life has been ripped from me”; and “I had no time to pack, most of my clothes and textbooks are at school” poignantly demonstrate the loss of feelings of control over their environment and actions. Specific comments related to pathways included the following comments: “There is an increasing amount of hopelessness accumulating inside my mind” and “Most things seem pointless, like getting dressed, washing dishes, or housework”. A final comment in this area demonstrates an overall attention to the negative: “much more negative comments are being made from people who are normally positive.”

Results of *TUPI*, viewable in Table 3, show significant differences between the general population and our student group in the areas conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness. Many comments such as “I have felt very unmotivated” and “I have no motivation anymore” in addition to “even though I couldn't do anything I couldn't relax”, speak to the lessening of follow-through and ability to complete daily tasks. This, coupled with homeschooling children, completing their own coursework online, maintaining employment and caring for family led one student to simply say “there literally is not enough hours to do everything I need to do”. Emotional stability is another area in which students had many comments; “I've definitely experienced several moments of panic” and “[have] much more anxiety about the future” as well as “it's been hard and very unsettling”. As mentioned in the literature review, college students are experiencing more stress and anxiety than previous generations which is exacerbated by the pandemic and shown in these statements: “High alert and high levels of anxiety are predominant” and “it has been a disaster...more complicated and more stressful”. The third measure in the *TUPI* is openness, a particularly relevant issue for college students – new experiences should be part of their lives. However, during this time the ability to have new experiences has been limited. Our students' inability to participate in “normal” collegiate activities were shown in several statements ranging from “...looking forward to all of the experiences...in my senior year...however, that was all taken away...” Another student added “I'm sad...I will not have a graduation...we won't be able to complete all the amazing things we had planned this semester.”

In summary, the two hypotheses were upheld by the analysis of data gathered from the *Brief COPE*, *Adult Hope Scale* and *TIPI*. Students in their home university reported, to a significant degree, use of more negative coping skills than the general population. In addition, this student respondent group reported significantly lower levels of hope compared to the general population. These findings carry the impetus of caution when returning to coursework in the future semesters and the importance of colleges to provide additional mental health services as well as faculty and staff remaining supportive, flexible and understanding in dealing with students.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of this study. First, the college students at our university may not be fully representative of the larger college student population. As mentioned earlier, the admission requirements for our college may be less rigorous than those of other universities. Also, many of our students are first generation students and are somewhat older, on average, than the typical undergraduate student. In addition, the authors used Facebook posts to recruit participants which meant many participants would be following or somehow connected to one or all three of them. However, the three authors of this work represent three separate generations. The authors are also connected to the university which could mean that the number of student participants were skewed towards Psychology and Sociology majors and/or minors along with program alumni of the school. The time during which we administered the survey may have impacted the types of responses we received. Although there was a lot of media information available related to the high number of COVID cases in other countries during April 2020, the United States (especially the mid-west and southwest) still had very low numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Since then, the geographic location of cases and deaths from COVID have spread throughout the nation.

Continued exploration into this area is planned by the researchers. Our next project, already underway, is to dive deeply into our students' feelings toward a return to campus for the next semester while COVID-19 cases are high and ever present in the media throughout their university's home state. Future researchers might take a retroactive view contrasting the results of this study to a similar population in the future. One might find that positive coping skills and hope would grow within this population after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.

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