

## **COVID-19 student mental health check II**

Dianna Blankenship  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Irma S. Jones  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

### **ABSTRACT**

The year 2020 will be forever be known as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic which has affected the entire population in one way or another. What began in January 2020 still has the world population firmly in its grip a year later. The students' responses, in their own words, to changes in living, daily `routines, and health fears can be seen in the following paper. In this article, the responses of students in several undergraduate classes at a Hispanic serving institution in south Texas were collected and synthesized. The 155 responses were divided into seven frequently observed and repeated themes: jobs and job related, school and courses, routine, family, positivity, infection and stress. Findings for this second half of 2020 period differ from those collected during the first half of 2020 (Blankenship & Jones, 2020) in that two new themes (infection and stress) were added and two themes (graduation and shopping/groceries) were deleted from the mix. Teaching professionals must be mindful to continue providing added support to assist students as they navigate this changing time.

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, Quarantine, Schools during Pandemic, Jobs during Pandemic, Family during Pandemic, Stress during Pandemic, Infections during Pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will be forever be known as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected the entire world population in one way or another. The pandemic that began in January 2020 still has the world population firmly in its grip as January 2021 begins. This paper is a follow-up of students' mental health checks as the year 2021 begins and vaccinations against COVID-19 have begun. The responses of the authors' students, in their own words, who are living with changes and facing fears in their lives, can be seen in the following pages.

This assignment was provided in seven undergraduate courses for students to reply to a thread posted by the instructors. Discussion boards assigned in post-secondary online courses are used by the faculty to create a sense of community and discussion among all students within a course. As such, students were asked to reply to a thread then to also respond to two additional postings of their peers. One hundred and fifty-five responses were collected from seven undergraduate courses at a southern Texas university. These 155 responses were reviewed and subdivided into seven frequently observed and repeated themes: Infection, Stress, Jobs and job related, School and courses, Routine, Family, and Positivity. Because of length requirements, only portions of those responses that best represent the overall pulse of the students were selected. However, grammatical and mechanical errors were not corrected.

The optional Discussion Board thread to which students responded read as follows:

As we near the middle of this semester, each one of us has been greatly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and the necessary changes in our everyday lives. Perhaps you prefer a face-to-face course but were forced into the online learning environment this semester. Even if you signed up for an online course and were familiar with the online learning environment, you didn't expect to have your life disrupted by the social distancing requirements. So, take a few minutes between now and October 18<sup>th</sup> to share how you have been affected by the coronavirus this semester and how you coped with all the necessary changes. Although there is no minimum character requirement, you do need to reply to at least two other classmates. Hopefully, we can learn from one another, take comfort from our shared struggles, and look forward to a better and healthier future.

### **Theme I: Infection (new theme)**

In this discussion board, there were two new themes identified from student responses about their day-to-day lives this summer and fall, 2020 (Jones & Blankenship, 2019). Infection or fear of infection from the COVID virus was one of the top responses received. In early spring 2020, the top responses or fears had to do with jobs and the fact that many people were being let go as the pandemic began and stores and restaurants started to close. Although job concerns were still among the top three themes, infection took over the lead to become number one.

I did have a family member who had the virus in late April and was diagnosed with it and it was some rough times.

These passed months have been such a nightmare! My family and I got COVID from my dad. During this time, I was suspended from my job and my mom whom I live with was

sent home as well. Unfortunately, I did not qualify for unemployment and neither did my mom. Her job wouldn't even pay her for the COVID leave because it was a new job and with me it was because they needed to wait on results. So overall, we suffered and went through a lot because neither of us were eligible to provide for our family.

A few weeks before the semester started my sister, mother, and niece all contracted the virus. I was honestly very scared because I didn't know what to expect for my health because I am asthmatic and it hurt so much to know I couldn't do anything to help my mother who suffered the most from the virus with the worst symptoms.

The virus greatly affected my family having almost all my aunts, uncle, and even my grandma has had the virus at one point. My mom and dad also had it when the virus was first coming into the state and my sister and I both had to stay completely isolated from them for what felt like the longest time.

I believe I got Covid from all these customers coming in and out of my job and refusing the wear a mask. I got sick for a month and a half, my job did pay me two weeks, but after that, I wasn't getting paid and I was struggling to help my mom pay the bills

Unfortunately my parents both got sick at the same time. It was real hard for me not being able to hug my mom and not be around her, my parents were sick for like 2 weeks and then I ended up getting sick where I didn't have energy to do anything.

First, when the whole virus situation started nothing changed. Everything was the same for me: school, work, personal life, and my regular activities. Then I got sick with the virus which I had no idea. I needed to report it to work. I was sent 14 days to the house and was just stuck in my room.

In these troubling times, anxiety and stress (and depression, to a lesser degree) are associated with fear of COVID-19 (Tzur Bitan et al (2020). Student concerns echo these findings and are also in line with those observed by Mertens et al. (2020). Their online survey of 429 respondents, conducted only three days after the coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic, found the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to cause increased fear and worries. Their findings that increased fear was related to perceived risks for loved ones and health anxiety mirrors the anxiety displayed in the above student responses.

## **Theme II: Stress (new theme)**

Stress was the second new theme that was identified with this discussion board assignment. In the spring 2020, although student responses dealt with jobs and school, there wasn't as much discussion about stress as there was this last half of 2020. Here are some of the responses that indicate the students' stress level.

I was under enormous stress, because of not being able to go out and spent 24 hours locked up and alone Seeing on the internet and television that thousands of people died

all over the world generated this stress, and I was looking for a way to be able to distract myself from everything that was happening but even so I could not...

It has been quite difficult for me and my family, from anxiety and panic attacks to heated arguments. The global pandemic has impacted my family, because we all thought my mother, brother, grandmother and father had contracted the virus. I had several severe panic attacks while undergoing lockdown.

I have four K12 children, and my focus has been on them and also helping them adapt to online learning. We have been cooped up in our house basically since March. These confinements can begin to take a toll on a person's mental health

My job laid everyone off and told us they didn't know when we were going to get our jobs back because of the severity of the virus. I started to panic, and my anxiety got so bad I remember breaking out in hives.

My middle child suffers from anxiety and when things first began to close, and we had to explain why we could no longer do many of the activities they were used to. He had a very hard time dealing with it.

This time during the pandemic, my levels of stress have been rising so fast! Getting my time balanced between work, school, family and taking care of myself while working in a public place. In addition to this, I have lost loved ones due to Covid and it has been a real roller coaster at home.

This pandemic has pretty much ruined the year, especially since I lost my mother to it. I was also sick from the virus but thank God I don't have it no more.

I have seen how the pandemic has increased anxiety, depression and panic attacks. The reason being is that this is a scary time and Covid-19 is deadly because we can't know if we have been infected unless two weeks have passed and we must have symptoms, and in some occasions that it too late.

Once again, student responses mirror current research results. In this instance, a mid-July 2020 Tracking Poll conducted by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) researchers Panchal, Kamai, Orgera, Cox, Garfield, Hamel, Munana, and Chidambaram (2020) reflected worry and stress over the coronavirus negatively impacted 53% of U. S. adults. This is a sharp increase from the 32% reported in a March 2020 KFF Tracking Poll (Hamel, Lopes, Munana, Kates, Michaud, and Brodie, 2020).

### **Theme III: Jobs and Job-related**

This third theme of job- and job-related activities is a recurring one. In early spring 2020, job- and job-related issues were first on the list of concerns being discussed by students. With individuals and parents losing their jobs so quickly, yet still having to deal with bills, pay rent and purchase food for their family, job concerns ranked very high. That is not to say that it is still not a high-ranking theme; however, in the authors' opinion, having to live with less has

somehow impowered everyone to make do with less and help each other survive. The following responses deal with students' jobs and job-related concerns:

I had to get a work-from-home job, and I dislike it. I enjoy moving around and having small conversations with people that I don't see every day. Now I sit at home and work with people that are super rude. I am on my laptop almost 24/7 and I hate it because I was never in front of a screen for more than 4 hrs. before COVID.

Along with school time, I also have a full-time job so trying to balance both has been tough. I honestly feel like I wake up, go to work, come home and do school and repeat again in whatever comes home.

I was working as a server at a restaurant when the Covid-19 pandemic started. I am not going to lie, I was so scared when I first heard about this new virus, it honestly felt like I was in a movie. My job laid everyone off and told us they didn't know when we were going to get our jobs back because of the severity of the virus.

Since mid-March, my children and I have been at home. My job has been doing remote work since spring break and it was definitely something I had to get used to.

I'm working from home and I have people walking inside my room all the time.... Or sometimes it is like a zoo in here when I'm trying to talk on the zoom meeting for work. My co-workers can listen to everyone screaming, fighting, vacuuming, and other things.

#### **Theme IV: School and Courses**

This fourth theme is also one that is recurring. In early spring 2020, when lock-downs began and people were asked to quarantine at home, distance or online learning was not as prolific and schools had a difficult time bringing both teachers and students up to speed for online learning. Not only was the concern about "how" to accomplish this but also there were many households that did not have the devices and Wi-Fi to accomplish this. Although we are now in January 2021, some households are still not equipped with enough devices and Wi-Fi or hotspots to learn online. Some students may have several children that each need a device to be able to attend online classes, but the family has only one computer. So, although the theme may be recurring, the rhetoric is different.

Regarding my learning, it did change the way I prepared for my classes. I had to buy a computer and then my parents got faster WIFI and then some earphones, everything I needed for online classes.

Now the way the coronavirus affected me this semester, is I had trouble getting my own laptop since I was not working and then I needed to help get my brother who is in middle school a computer as well for his zoom classes. It was just a hassle in general.

This virus has impacted me financially because most of my savings which were geared for college went into getting my medications, as well as the treatment for COVID. I was

also going to graduate this December, but unfortunately, given the nature and severity of my sickness, was not able to fully pay for my classes, causing them to be dropped and having to wait another year to graduate (THANKS ALOT COVID!!!).

Back in March when I registered for classes, I thought I would be learning in a classroom until my 1-month old nephew, my sister in law, my mother in law and I got the virus.

I was expecting to actually be in a classroom and maybe getting together to classmates to study together and things like that, but we can't.

We are all doing our school virtually at home. You can just imagine our Wi-Fi, our computers, our space, and our parents.

I hate it because I have to be taking online classes when I would rather do face-to-face classes. I feel like I am learning but not getting the full experience of college.

Coronavirus also definitely affected my first-of-year college because I had some other plans which were to attend another college and move out but due to it I preferred to stay here due to all the circumstances.

I know it has been hard to do online because you have to kind of teach yourself most of the time. I share the internet with 3 of my siblings and my parents. Sometimes it is hard because it slows down, and everything is super slow and with the whole hurricane it was super difficult.

It's exhausting having to be in a computer from 8 am to 5 pm then come home and do assignments and read while on the computer. Sometimes its mentally challenging because my eyes are tired, my back hurts, and we don't have the freedom to go and socialize with our friends.

Well for starters, this is my first semester of college and I did not expect for it to end up like this. I imagined actually going to campus and going to class also and living in an apartment with roommates.

In this case the virus has affected my school experience in a big way as well. The semester for me has been a tad difficult with all of my classes being online. With all of my classes being online it is hard to find ways to balance schoolwork and my work.

### **Theme V: Routine**

As 2020 ended, individual routines had changed. The Mayo Clinic Staff (2020), refers to this as "coronavirus grief," caused by the sweeping mandated changes in how people "shop, worship, exercise, eat, seek entertainment and celebrate holidays and special events." These following are student responses regarding their routines:

Coronavirus has limited activities I was used to doing and even hanging out with friends.

There are nights I don't sleep because I stay up thinking of something to change in my routine because every day is the same thing.

The only thing that has been rough is not being able to go anywhere on weekends once the week is through. I haven't gone anywhere besides work, grocery store, or the occasional drive thru place since March.

The pandemic has really impacted our lives as we have had to adapt to the changes going on in our communities. We were given curfews and required to wear masks as well as keep a distance.

I have to sometimes hide in my closet to do homework because my little one does not take naps throughout the day and he wants to be grabbing my laptop. Aside from all that, I am currently baking from home to get that income coming in. So when is my "alone" time? Never.

I used to be very social, always had friends over at my house or vice versa, I would visit them. My life revolved around friends, sports, and Golds gym and it all quickly ended for me.

I can't visit my grandparents because of this pandemic and I have not gotten the chance to see them for the last couple of months. It is not the same as life was before this virus, we all are struggling and learning to live like this, it has changed everything. I hate that we can't just roam around like before and enjoy life.

I had to spend my birthday in quarantine because at the time everything was closed, and my parents didn't want for us risk ourselves with the virus.

Managing time now is way harder than ever because there are so many things to be aware of and since human contact is not recommended, it makes it harder for us to get the help that we need.

COVID-10 (Coronavirus) not only has taken away my daily routines, it has taken away a part of my life that I do not know when I will be able to have back. I started to realize just how much it took a toll on me when I came back to school.

## **Theme VI: Family**

I love my family and I love to spend time with them, but there are times where I want to be alone with my thoughts.

When the quarantine first began, I was kicked out of my dorm and forced to go home. This may not seem like an issue to many people but for me it was. I had moved into the dorms to escape the toxicity of my family and their opinions on my education.

The corona virus has affected all of us in different ways that we couldn't even imagine. For me it was difficult because with corona around, the bridge to cross to Matamoros, Mexico is closed. That affected me because my grandparents live over there and with the new guidelines I couldn't go visit them.

In the pandemic era, I still have had to adjust to changes. For example, now I am a mom, full time employee, student, and teacher. I have had to adjust from working at home as well as working from the office. I always have to wear a mask for 8 hours of my day. When I get home, I have to take precautions to make sure I am in the clear.

## **Theme VII: Positivity**

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be tough in ways that never could have been imagined, starting with an overabundance of family time added to homeschooling children and working remotely or even losing a job completely. These unexpected, fast changes in the way students live and their daily routines, together with uncertainty, can feel overpowering. While one may recognize that it is helpful for individuals to stay positive, it is easier said than done. Here are a few of the positive thoughts that were submitted.

The way I was able to cope with all these challenges is that once that I was fully healthy and new again, I got myself two jobs and I am currently doing 5 classes as well. The reason I am still working two jobs is because my mom hasn't been able to get a new job. I will not lie, it is hard, and I am learning to better manage it, but I know that at the end of the day it is all worth it.

Although we are going through bad times we have to see the good side and improve or take advantage of this temporary bad situation.

I am actually very grateful. first to God, because I was granted a second chance. Although I am in the statistics of people who have lost loved ones to COVID, I know that by accomplishing my goals and by not giving up in the face of adversity, I have honored those who are in a better place. I owe it to them, and I owe it to myself. I will fight on, and I will not give up.

Some things that me and my family have been doing to cope with the ongoing pandemic, we have been praying and helping each of our extended family members with arrangements. It has been a very difficult time, but I see a light at the end of the tunnel for us all, we will make it!

The biggest thing I did was kept my head high and my faith even higher when things looked like there were going to be over and they were too much, I just thanked God for another day of life, my family, and my job. Just remember God never gives you more than you can handle and you're going to get through it I promise you, you got this!!!

COVID is leaving the world in chaos and I know it will gradually get worse, but we must learn from it rather than tuck tail and run. Sometimes a curse can also be a blessing in disguise, we just have to wait it out and let God deal with this before things get better.

As a person who survived COVID, you can only do your best to take precautions and make sure you do not get infected. Prayer is always good. If you can relate to the old Spanish saying "La esperanza nunca muere" (hope never dies), then you know God never leaves prayers unanswered.

COVID 19 has been a burden and an eye-opening experience to most of society. The simple things in life came to an abrupt stop. Confinement and regulations in the attempt to control the virus for the benefit of all was a necessity. Now, hopefully something can be learned from this, and we stop taking things for granted.

This pandemic has given me an opportunity to exercise more, mentally find myself, grow closer relationships with family members, and even learn how to cut hair. This virus has taught me a lot, especially to cherish everyday of life.

At the beginning of the quarantine, I never thought it was going to be for so long. It really brought me down because I just felt like I was living the same day every day. However, if one thing that Corona has taught me is to live my life to the fullest because it can end at any time.

Not being able to hug family members is miserable, coming from a person who tested positive for COVID-19. Just like you, I was able to work on my physical self. The way you worded the last sentence "Cherish every day because tomorrow is never promised," is not just for the pandemic. People should take that saying not only during the pandemic, but for every day they are alive.

Things are not looking so great, but I know things can be a lot worse. The way I see it, I still have my family, I am still in good health, and even though they must love me from afar, I am surrounded by good friends.

These student reflections are encouraging and echo recent research in this area. For example, Yildirima and Gülerc's recent online study of 3109 Turkish adults measured perceived risk, positivity, death distress, and happiness. Their results suggested that, "positivity is an important aspect of developing strength-based preventions and interventions aiming to reduce psychological distress and improve happiness" (Yildirima & Gülerc, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Buckle's multinational research (2020) reflects that optimism is a crucial factor in navigating the COVID-19 crisis. He also concludes that businesses, institutions, and other groups can help foster this optimism. As educators, we must also help foster optimism within our students. One thing that educators can do is read *Coping with Coronavirus: How Faculty Members Can Support Students in Traumatic Times*. This compilation of eight articles from The Chronicle of Higher Education (2020) addresses various ways that faculty members can help students cope

and offers the gentle reminder that, “Professors, after all, are on the front lines, even if that line is now a virtual one” (p. 3).

## REFERENCES

- Blankenship, D., & Jones, I. S. (2020, September). COVID-19 student mental health check. AABRI Conference in The Cloud 2020. <http://www.aabri.com/VC2020Manuscripts/VC20036.pdf>
- Buckle, C. (2020, March 24). COVID-19: Why optimism is key. <https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/covid-19-why-optimism-is-key/>
- Hamel, L., Lopes, L., Munana, C, Kates, J., Michaud, J., & Brodie, M. (2020, March 17). KFF coronavirus poll: March 2020. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-coronavirus-poll-march-2020/>
- Mayo Clinic Staff. (2020, October 13). Coronavirus grief: Coping with the loss of routine during the pandemic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/coping-with-coronavirus-grief/art-20486392>
- Mertens, G., Gerritsen, L., Duijndam, S., Salemink, E., & Engelhard, I. M. (2020). Fear of the coronavirus (COVID-19): Predictors in an online study conducted in March, 2020. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102258>
- Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Orgera, K., Cox, C., Garfield, R., Hamel, L., Munana, C., & Chidambaram, P. (2020, August 21). The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>
- The Chronicle of Higher Education. (2020). Coping with coronavirus: How faculty members can support students in traumatic times. <http://www.collegeofthedesert.edu/students/hs/virus/Documents/Email%20Attachment%20Coping%20with%20Coronavirus%20Collection.pdf>
- Tzur Bitan, D., Grossman-Giron, A., Bloch, Y., Mayer, Y., Shiffman, N., & Mendlovic, S. (2020). Fear of COVID-19 Scale: psychometric characteristics, reliability and validity in the Israeli population. *Psychiatry Res.* 289:113100. doi: 10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113100
- Yildirim, M., & Gülerc, A. (2021, January 1). Positivity explains how COVID-19 perceived risk increases death distress and reduces happiness. *Personality and Individual Differences.* (168). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110347>