

**HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT AND IMPACT THE MENTAL  
HEALTH OF COLLEGE STUDENTS?**

by

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## Abstract

**Background:** As many people are aware, COVID-19 began in December of 2019 when a group of patients in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, began to experience shortness of breath and fever. COVID 19 is also known as the coronavirus 2 that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV). COVID-19 is very contagious and has spread rapidly over the world. COVID-19 is most commonly associated with respiratory symptoms that resemble a cold, flu, or pneumonia.

**Objective:** This study aims to identify the ways in which the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affects the mental health of college students.

**Design and Method:** The research is based on timely scholarly articles of literature which remains ongoing since COVID-19 started in 2019 and is still present and existing. The resources address the reasons as to why mental health is being affected and what are the factors that contribute to such.

**Results:** This study is significant because it shows how an infectious virus impacts the lives of many beyond what we already know, and because this is still ongoing research, there will be more information to come out; this is only just the beginning of scratching the surface of just the many impacts COVID-19 has had on people.

**Conclusions:** At this moment, there is a limitation of research done on this area of study, however there is enough to indicate that this is an issue and might continue to be depending on how ongoing COVID-19 is and how prevalent it can be in our lives.

**Keywords:** *Mental health, COVID, College students and the pandemic, college students, COVID- 19 mental health, impact of COVID, substance use and COVID-19, Mental health and substance usage*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This study aimed to focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of college students. I chose this topic for the sole purpose that I am currently living and have lived through the experiences firsthand of all the struggles that came along with dealing with a global outbreak of this infectious, deadly disease. I also am a strong advocate that mental health is essential. In general, education can add to our stress and affect us because any hard-working student will dedicate and put in a lot of time to do their work and stay on top of things. Still, it is hard to do when external forces outside of your educational career affect you and throw you off course, and COVID-19 is a prime example.

I was one of the few people I know who enjoyed learning online and not having to go on campus because it worked out more accessible for me to manage to get a job and go to work. I had more time to focus on specific goals because I didn't have to waste time commuting to school and spending most of my time there and coming home exhausted. In contrast, I could have more flexibility with my day by learning remotely. However, I did consider dropping out of college because although I loved the comfort of being home and having flexibility over my day, it also became depressing. It is easy to fall behind on work because when you are not in person, you don't feel as obligated to stay on top of your work and can push it aside, and then that's when procrastination kicks in. This paper aims to delve into the impact that COVID-19 has had on the mental health of college students because I know I am not the only one going through this experience. I wanted to know how fellow college students have felt during this time. The research question for this study is:

**RQ:** *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect and impact the mental health of college students?*

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

COVID 19, also referred to as coronavirus, is an infectious disease. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19, a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2, a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2022). The COVID 19 pandemic impacted the economy and financial loss, our health and livelihood, social interactions, and mental and emotional health. Therefore, to prevent the spread of COVID, social distancing, isolation, and quarantining became popular methods of staying healthy.

With the social and physical isolation brought on by the COVID- 19 pandemic, individuals experienced negative emotional and psychosocial impacts. Among undergraduate students, in particular, increased feelings of anxiety and depression in mental health compared to the pre-pandemic. In the peer-reviewed article “College from home during COVID-19: A mixed-methods study of heterogeneous experiences,” Morris et al. have suggested that challenges such as isolation from peers, lack of interactivity with their instructors, difficulty adjusting to family needs took both an emotional and academic toll on the undergraduate participants in this study. 59% of undergraduate students (16 out of 27 participants) described challenges to their mental well-being and expressed feeling more depressed or anxious. In the article, one of the participants stated that they felt

Just like helpless. I felt terrible because I did not think I would do how I ended up doing in my classes. I was so worried I was going to fail. I was so worried I wasn't going to be allowed to stay in my [department] because you have to maintain a certain [grade point average], and I was so worried I wasn't going to get my major because of my class grades. Um yeah, I was just in a hole for a while. My academic stress. It was too much at one point for me. I was just at a shallow point. I was just bedridden for like two to three weeks. (Morris et al., 2021, p.19)

Lack of sleep also affected the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the participants stated,

I mean, I'd say my biggest mental health challenge... Just like general insomnia has been pretty hard for me. Especially because I would spend a lot of time lying in bed, not doing anything when I had a lot of homework to do the next day, so then I would become stressed about whether I'll be able to finish that homework or not. And it was just frustrating because I would lose huge chunks of time. (Morris et al., 2021, p. 4)

There is a bi-directional link between psychosocial and academic stress. Another issue discussed in this article was disengagement from school during the COVID 19 pandemic. One participant stated,

If someone is watching me. I know that I have to be accountable. Still, online learning hasn't been as effective as it should have been, because when the camera is off, there's no way really for the (teaching staff) to know you're present and actively participating in class and like taking notes. (Morris et al., 2021, p.16)

Another aspect of the pandemic was remote learning which became challenging for some of the participants in this study because the demand of their family needs became a distraction while learning at home. For example, one participant who was the first in her family to attend college often felt urged by her mother to do housework and help out with her younger siblings. She, therefore, felt rushed by her mom's frequent inquiries that she wasn't able to prioritize school. One drastic role in the participants' mental health was interrupted by their autonomy. Participants felt "trapped" or that they were taking a step back developmentally when having to go back home. "It was challenging. Being independent and being pushed back home. It's a huge change because now you have more rules again" (Morris et al., 2021, p. 19). COVID caused a power dynamic between students and parents because of this global pandemic.

The article "Effects of COVID-19 on college students' Mental Health in the United States Interview Survey Study" by Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, and Sasangohar focuses on the major stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to understand their effects on college students' mental health. The results in this article prove that there was an increase in

stress during the pandemic. Mental illness affects a student's motivation, concentration, and social interaction, crucial factors for success, especially in higher education. Of the 195 students interviewed, 138 (71%) indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Multiple stressors contributed to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students. The stressors included fear and worry about their health and the health of loved ones (177/195, 91% reported negative impacts of the pandemic), difficulty in concentrating (173/195, 89%), disruptions to sleeping patterns (168/195, 86%), decreased social interactions due to physical distancing (167/195, 86%), and increased concerns on academic performance (159/195, 82%). It's also important to note that a shocking 44% (86/195) of the participants had reported experiencing increased levels of depressive thoughts, and 8% (16 out of 195) said having suicidal thoughts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the results from the PSS (Perceived Stress Scale) showed that there were moderate levels of stress among the participants.

Students reported pain, sadness, and uncertainty because of the spread and unprecedented characteristics of the virus in the article "A Qualitative Study of COVID 19 Distress in University Students" by Farris et al. One student stated, "When can I go back to a normal routine? My mental health relies a lot on a routine and staying busy, which is being largely affected." (Farris, 2021, p.14) Students overall reported a sense of extreme pessimism regarding the future. One stated, "This will never end, and life will never be normal again." (Farris et al., 2021, para.14) Anxiety seemed to be a prevalent emotion common amongst students because of the fear of contracting the virus, being asymptomatic, and spreading the disease to their families, especially older members. Nine common themes contributed to the stress (distress) and anxiety of students during the pandemic. They are explained in this article. The themes are viral outbreak distress, alarm about the virus characteristics, uncertainty due to outbreak interminability,

hopelessness and foreshortened future, fear of virus contraction and transmission, worry about family and close others, worry about one's health, dangers of proximity to virus and lastly dissatisfaction with public response). During the pandemic, there was a loss of structure and healthy routines. One student stated, "My daily behavior has changed because my routine has changed. I am still trying to become accustomed to spending all this time at home and doing work at home." (Farris et al., 2021, para. 32).

Many of the students who were participants in this study were anxious about contracting and transmitting the virus. Students expressed anxiety, fear, worry, uncertainty, and apprehension regarding family members and close friends. During this study, anxiety was often characterized by maladaptive cognitive processes (ex: rumination, heightened vigilance, attention to bodily sensations, and behaviors such as reassurance seeking and excessive use of person-infection control practices). There were also feelings of hopelessness concerning the future. "How do we recover from this pandemic that has taken so many lives? And "what if this is the end?" (Farris et al., 2021, para.14). On top of hopelessness, students expressed their worry about spreading COVID to their loved ones. "I have older parents, and I was terrified when I came home from college that I would be the one to give them the virus by quarantining them at home. But I didn't have anywhere else to go." (Farris et al., 2021, para. 17 ). Another stated, "The virus could potentially forever remove someone important to me or even me from this earth. Also, I'm worried if I get it, I could potentially be the one that kills the important person to me. My daily behavior is full of worrying about accidentally bringing in the virus." (Farris et al., 2021, para 17) Heightened fear equates to excessive safety behaviors.

The article "Undergraduate and Graduate Students' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic" by Chirikov, Soria, Horgos, and Jones-White discusses that the data shown on the

PHQ-2 and GAD-2 screening tools resulted in 35% of undergraduates and 32% of graduate and professional students screening positive for major depressive disorder. In addition, 39% of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder. Within this study that major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder rates were lower among low-income students, students of color, women, non-binary students, LGBTQ students, asexual students, pansexual students, and lastly, students who were caregivers. Results showed that the prevalence of major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder are higher among undergraduate and graduate students who did not adapt well to remote instruction. Among undergraduate students, major depressive disorder was more prevalent among low-income or poor and working-class students. Major depressive disorder was also commonplace among Black/ African American, Latinx students, Asian students; women, transgender, non-binary students; gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, and pansexual students; and caregivers of children or other adults. The percentage of students who screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder is higher among low-income or poor and working-class students; Latinx and multiracial students; women, transgender, and non-binary students; gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, and pansexual students; and caregivers of children or other adults. The research in this study shows that both undergraduate and graduate students experienced anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

The article “College Mental Health Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results From a Nationwide Survey” by Kim et al. focuses on the mental health of college students before and after the pandemic. The results, in this case, showed that depression, alcohol use disorder, bulimia nervosa, a binge-eating disorder, and comorbidity were higher, whereas posttraumatic stress disorder was lower during the pandemic. In addition, the screening rates of



MDD, BN/BED, AUD, and comorbid psychological conditions were more significant in the earlier months of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to late 2019. On the other end, rates of PTSD were lower during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic compared to late 2019. In the early months of the pandemic (fall of 2019), the students who provided data had higher MDD, BN/BED, AUD, and psychological comorbidity rates. However, the rates of PTSD were lower during the pandemic versus pre-pandemic times. Students identified as female were at high risk for elevated rates of AUD (alcohol use disorder) during the pandemic. On the other hand, students identifying as Black were at increased risk for high rates of MDD (major depressive disorder) during the pandemic. These results help to provide a picture of COVID-19's impact on college students and help to highlight the portions of the student population with unmet mental health needs during the pandemic.

In the article, "Impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of US college students," by Lee et al. discuss how COVID-19 impacted the mental health of college students. The results indicate that students closer to graduating faced increased anxiety (60.8%), increased feelings of loneliness (54.1%), and depression (59.8%). In addition, many students in this study reported worries for the health of loved ones, which impacted their mental health status (20.0%), and the need to take care of their family, which affected current plans (31.8%). However, almost one-half of students turned to exercise and physical activity to manage their mental health (46.7%). A third of the students did not have strained familial relationships (36.5%), whereas one-half did (45.7%). However, most found it harder to complete the semester at home (60.9%), especially among those who had strained relationships with family (34.1%). Overall, research showed increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness in 60.8%, 54.1%, and 59.8% of the weighted population. In addition, there was an increase in mental health disorders such as

anxiety and depression. Still, there were alternatives some of the participants in this study used to help their mental health during the pandemic.

Another article that discusses the mental health of college students during the pandemic is “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Mental Health of First-Year College Students: Examining the Effect of COVID-19 Stressors Using Longitudinal Data” by Fruehwirth et al discusses how the prevalence of moderate-severe anxiety increased from 18.1% (before the pandemic) to 25.3% within four months after the pandemic began; and the majority of moderate-severe depression risen from 21.5% to 31.7%. White, female, and sexual/gender minority students were susceptible to increased anxiety symptoms. Non-Hispanic black females and sexual/ gender minority students were at the highest risk of increases in depression symptoms.

The prevalence of moderate-severe anxiety symptoms increased by 40 percent from 18.1% pre-pandemic to 25.3% mid-pandemic—the changes in the majority of moderate-severe anxiety symptoms varied by demographic group. Before the pandemic, NH Black students reported the highest prevalence of moderate-severe anxiety (32.1%), while Hispanic students reported the lowest (14.3%). The prevalence rates for these two groups did not increase after the start of the pandemic. In contrast, the prevalence of moderate-severe anxiety increased significantly among NH (non-Hispanic) White, female, and non-FGC students. Among SGM students, the prevalence rates increased from 28.9% pre-pandemic to 46.1% mid-pandemic.

Moderate-severe depression symptoms increased by 48 percent, from 21.5% to 31.7%. The rate of moderate-severe depression symptoms also varied by demographic group. NH Black and Hispanic students reported high rates of moderate-severe depression symptoms, 32.1% and 25.7%, respectively. However, after the pandemic, the prevalence of moderate-severe depression only increased significantly (90 percent) for NH Black students. SGM students reported a high

prevalence of moderate-severe depression symptoms (42%), which increased significantly (50 percent) after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The article, “Psychological impacts from COVID-19 among university students: Risk factors across seven states in the United States” by Browning et al., discusses that the most common change in how students felt in comparison to before the pandemic which was increased lack of motivation, anxiety, stress, and isolation. For example, in the results section of the article one of the students stated, “I’m normally extremely motivated, and I’ve never struggled with depression, but have recently felt very sluggish and melancholy” (Browning et al., 2021 para.1 ). Another student described their feelings related to isolation as “I feel trapped. I don’t have anywhere I need to go since I can’t socialize, and I have schoolwork. But yet I still feel trapped due to actual restrictions and suggestions” (Browning et al., 2021, para. 1). At the same time, students were concerned about online learning. For example, one student commented: “I am constantly on edge about coursework: Did the computer register when I submitted my exam? Did I see everything my teacher posted in Moodle? What happens if my internet goes out and I miss an assignment?” (Browning et al., 2021, para 1.). The article then goes into psychological impact profiles, risk factors, and discussion and critical findings of the results. Qualitative data from open-ended responses showed that students experienced negative impacts of COVID-19 on psychological health and lifestyle behaviors. The most commonly reported changes were lack of motivation, anxiety, stress, isolation, social distancing, education changes, and going out less.

### Chapter 3: Methods

This research is qualitative and descriptive in design. I examined timely specific events associated with COVID-19 and emotional well-being and background information on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of college students. The basis of my research on mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on the impact that the pandemic had on the mental health of college students (Both undergraduate and graduate). This study is on a recently emerging topic spanning from 2019 until this writing. As more information on COVID-19 and the implications on mental health are ongoing, there will likely be more literature on this study. The research design of this study is sourced from scholarly journal articles. This research was acquired through the Purchase College database and Google Scholar. I selected the following question to lead my research:

**RQ:** *How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect and impact the mental health of college students?*

I used specific words to gather information from academic sources. The keywords included: College student's mental health, Mental health of college students, COVID-19 pandemic and mental health, Undergraduate mental health, COVID-19 impact on college students. After acquiring my articles, I organized my literature by saving all of the pieces I found onto my laptop and reading the information from each source. After that, I took notes and wrote down what I felt was important about my research question for this study.

I chose this topic as a research focus because while the physical impacts on one's body are well understood; the emotional effects are still being discovered. I feel as though there isn't a lot of research on mental health concerning the pandemic because it is still ongoing, and I feel as though we need to understand the emotional impact as much as the physical because the emotional impact can be long lasting, not just the biological effects of COVID-19. In my

understanding, after contriving the research for this study, I believe that the emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are just as significant as the physical effects.

The scope of my research was impacted by the lack of sources within the United States on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students. I did not find a lot of information to counter-argue for the opposing side on how students during the pandemic handled their mental health in ways that did not impact their education/ coursework. Despite those limitations, I found enough research to understand that college students were affected and will continue to be affected since the research for this study is ongoing.

## Chapter 4: Results

The topic of research discussed in this paper is how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of college students. COVID-19, according to the CDC, is a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, which was discovered in 2019. The virus spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets, produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. COVID-19 impacted college students with the adjustment of virtual learning, along with feelings of increased anxiety and depression.

The studies evaluated in the previous chapter were contrived from scholarly journal articles. Within the studies researched, I was investigating the effects of the global pandemic, COVID-19 and its impact on the mental health of college students. This study aims to figure out why students struggled when the pandemic occurred, its effect on their mental health, and how it affected their academic success. Data were analyzed by searching for studies that answered my research question. Chapter 4 results contain the results of the topic of this study which was conducted to answer the following research question

**RQ:** How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect/ impact the mental health of college students?

The results of this study, in the peer-reviewed article “College from home during COVID-19: A mixed-methods study of heterogeneous experiences,” Morris et al. have shown that the challenges during the COVID 19 pandemic included academic disengagement, displacement from the supportive environment of the campus, family needs interfering with studying, restrictions to recent independence, and difficulty meeting new people and maintaining recently formed friendships. Participants described a sense of detachment from college, thus attributing to a lack of interactivity with other students and faculty. When working with peers in breakout groups, they would experience fatigue from staring at a screen for long periods. Some

participants in this study mentioned that they felt like part-time students (even when they had a full course load) and that attending classes went from feeling like an obligation to a suggestion. Participants had far fewer opportunities to interact with faculty and other students during this term, thus causing a barrier to academic engagement. Participants described lectures that were pre-recorded as unengaging.

Additionally, pre-recorded lectures made it easier to procrastinate, leaving many to watch lectures right before exams. Participants also complained of disengagement during live classes (held over Zoom video conferencing). They mentioned that it became the norm for students to turn off their cameras which made them prone to distraction and removed a sense of accountability. Disengagement of other students during group exercises lowered participants' motivation. Their peers turned off microphones and cameras during breakout groups and refused to participate. Some described increased engagement when groups had to work towards an assignment rather than simply discuss a topic.

Experiences with group assignments varied, depending partly on participants' family situations and academic motivation. Many participants felt that they were doing work for peers who were not pulling their weight on a project. In some cases, because those peers had opted for satisfactory/not satisfactory grading, numerical grading was made available to all students at this institution during the pandemic. There were also technical barriers to collaboration. The overall experience with online learning depended on the subject matter, with some topics and formats translating to an online form better than others.

Participants had concerns revolving around their mental health. Many shared variants of the general statement "my mental health took a big hit" (Morris, 2021, P19). 16 of the 27 participants described feeling depressed or anxious. Psychosocial challenges were intertwined

with academic challenges, and these dynamics changed over the term. For example, anxiety could motivate one participant, but that motivation decreased as the period progressed. Another participant was more focused at his family's home than at school because fewer distractions were. But as the term went on, feelings of loneliness impaired his focus. Several bi-directional links between psychosocial and academic stress within this article were described. One link was between depressed mood and academic disengagement. One participant with a history of depression said that her mood worsened over the Spring term due to detachment from online learning. Because of her depression, she felt even more detached from her classes.

In contrast, others described a link between academic performance and anxiety. Worrying about grades and long-term goals contributed to one participant feeling so distressed that he didn't leave his bed for weeks. He described his intense worry about his grades with the following remark: "Like helpless. I felt terrible because I did not think I would do what I ended up doing in my classes. I was so worried I was going to fail. I was so worried I wasn't going to be allowed to stay in my [department] because you have to maintain a certain [grade point average], and I was so worried I wasn't going to get my major because of my class grades. ... Um yeah, I was just in a hole for a while. My academic stress was too much at one point for me. I was just at a shallow point. I was just bedridden for like two to three weeks."(Morris, 2021, P19). Distress also interfered with sleep, which may have contributed to academic challenges. Sleep problems came from worries about school, the lack of physical boundaries between a workspace and bed, and shifts in routines resulting from living with family. One participant described insomnia and worries about falling behind:

I mean I'd say my biggest mental health challenge... Just like general insomnia has been pretty hard for me especially because I would spend a lot of time lying in bed, not doing anything when I had a lot of homework to do the next day. So, then I would become stressed about whether I'll be



able to finish that homework or not. And it was just frustrating because I would lose huge chunks of time. (Morris, 2021, p.4).

Results are shown in the article, "Effects of COVID-19 on college students' Mental Health in the United States Interview Survey Study" by Changwon Son et al.; that of the 195 students, 138 (71%) showed increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Multiple stressors contributed to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students. Fear and worry about their health and of their loved ones (91%), difficulty in concentrating (89%), disruptions to sleeping patterns (86%), decreased social interactions due to physical distancing (86%), and increased concerns about academic performance (82%). To cope with stress and anxiety, participants have sought support from others and helped themselves by adopting either negative or positive coping mechanisms.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In the overall research, I found that the common theme among my research question (as presented in the previous chapter) is that COVID-19 has had an impact on the mental health of college students concerning an increase in depression, anxiety, and adapting to virtual learning and everything that comes along with that. As discussed in the previous chapter, many participants (students) explained their hardships regarding their academic careers as college students. They felt disengaged from learning virtually because they were too exhausted from staring at a screen for long periods. Also, if their peers were not fully engaged when doing group work, that contributed to disengagement. Lastly, pre-recorded lectures were also described themselves by students as disengaging and led them to procrastinate even more being remote. Also, when live studies were being presented via zoom, it became the norm for students to clear by turning off their cameras and microphones with the refusal to participate, thus being another critical factor as to why students felt disengaged virtually from learning. When it came down to group assignments, it varied based on the participants' academic motivation and their family situations during the pandemic.

Mental health was a significant issue experienced during the pandemic because many participants (59%) reported feelings of being depressed or anxious during this time. Psychosocial challenges were interlinked with academic challenges. Having a depressed mood was associated with intellectual engagement because it would link to the disengagement of wanting to learn online and doing work for your classes. Another factor was academic performance and anxiety, having this overwhelming pressure to do all the work to pass the course and or classes, plus working on and dealing with external factors and long-term goals outside of academic success. Distress also led to sleep problems. Sleep problems were caused by worries about school and the

lack of physical boundaries of sharing an environment with other people while trying to engage in your education remotely. It was also briefly mentioned in the previous chapter that moderate-severe depression increased significantly among students of specific ethnicity (non-Hispanic blacks) and that SGM (sexual and gender minority) students reported a high prevalence of moderate-severe depression symptoms which increased after the COVID 19 pandemic began.

Since this research is ongoing because COVID is still very much relevant today, there will be more information conducted on this topic because there is not a lot. After all, either it's not being seen as a problem, or enough people don't care about students' mental health or even think about the long-term effects this could have on their lives and future. There is not much out yet on this topic because it is still ongoing. After all, COVID-19 is still around and still affecting all of our lives in different ways, and I think it's important to know how it affects people and in what ways so we can find solutions to the issues at hand.

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