

Emotional Reactions Among College Students Returning to Campus Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

Young adults have had the most confirmed COVID-19 cases (57.4%) compared to any other age group (CDC 2021).

COVID-19 had a significant impact on emotional experiences and mental health of young adults due to the forced and sudden changes in everyday routines, educational settings and employment, but how these changes were experienced among this group is less well studied.

The experiences of young adults returning to campus during a pandemic is important to helping understand willingness to engage in preventative health behaviors to control the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to qualitatively explore the emotional experiences of college students as they returned to campus in the Fall of 2020.

Methods

Participants

N = 25 college students

Age: 18-23 years (M= 20.32, SD = 1.36)

School Year: 3 freshmen, 3 sophomores, 9 juniors, 7 seniors

Gender: 20 women, 5 men

Procedure

Focus groups were held during July and August 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were uploaded in NVivo. Analyses was informed by principles of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006).

Discussion

COVID-19 significantly impacted college students' experiences as they coped with constant uncertainty, loss and required changes in their college experiences.

Many of the negative emotions (e.g., fear, uncertainty, anxiety, loss) may have been experienced because the changes were so abrupt without notice of when things might get better.

Results can be used to better understand and assist college students' transitions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and how to better promote adherence to preventative behaviors like vaccinations and masking.

Results also provide a better understanding of how initially COVID-19 may affect mental health.

Future researchers could explore long-term experiences with COVID-19 and differences in experiences across age groups.

Results

Concern

Emotional responses that describe worry or intense concern or interest about oneself or others. It is often expressed as a reflection of who or what is important to that individual.

"There is that worry that if I do catch it, I might pass it onto my family, and they might pass it on to other people and... Or you know, because I'm not meeting up with friends or anything, the people I'm really interacting with is people in my house, my family, I'm like concerned [about] bringing it to them"

Anxiety/Nervous

Feelings of heightened states of emotions because of something that is considered threatening or has an unknown outcome. Includes both physiological or psychological responses.

"I'm not going to lie, I'm a little nervous about coming back because I'm not the only student that's coming back."

Uncertainty

Worry about possible dangers or challenges as a result of not knowing what is to come. Uncertainty is expressed with less threat than anxiety.

"I am concerned like coming back because how do you maintain that six feet distance with a lot of students in a class?"

"We just don't know what to do. I mean, like we've never gone through something like this before."

Loss

COVID-19 created a loss of multiple experiences. Loss was expressed in areas of Academic, Community, Social, Mental and Physical Health, and Personal Control.

"I think, an experience that is really going to be impacted is the value of like being in a classroom. I mean, [...] I'm proud of our school for offering such a diverse platform for us for the education online but like there is, it's just, it's just the loss of having a classroom experience."

Participants expressed a variety of emotions, many of which indicated feelings of **fear**, **uncertainty** and **anxiety**.

Loss was a common theme, expressing how COVID-19 led to changes in educational, social, and health-related experiences that left participants feeling that much was lost.

Some expressed **understanding and acceptance** of the situation, however a more frequent emotion was that of **stress** and the inability to **cope** with the situation.

Concern for others was one of the most prominent emotion expressed. Most participants found the welfare of others to be important in their decisions to practice COVID-19 recommended behaviors.

Grateful

Expression of thankfulness regarding practices or policies related to COVID 19. Includes behaviors of campus, other students, and the larger Winona Community.

"I would say for Winona at least, I'm very, very thankful that we are one of the towns that has enforced a mask ordinance so, that Winona State is requiring people to wear masks along with the community."

Understanding/Accepting

Expression of clarity or acceptance of the changes required as a result of COVID19. Includes feelings of being safe or comfortable with conditions on campus.

"I would prefer it if I got to go to class, but I know that, just with people's attitudes and how you have to be so many feet apart and stuff, I just don't think it's very possible for that to happen at this point in the pandemic. So I would think it's not that safe. Even though I would really want to. [go to class in-person]."

Stress/Coping

Required behavioral or psychological changes outweigh one's resources to respond to it. Feeling threatened and overwhelmed with clear communication that one's resources to cope are limited.

"It was really hard at first because when everything happened, my school was on spring break. So all of a sudden just like your senior year's over. It was really hard to lose all of that - like my friends and my sports season and stuff. Especially getting ready for school made it I feel like a lot more stressful."

Fear

Expressed feelings of fear because of behaviors of others of consequences related to COVID.

"...I think it's kind of scary to think about all the people that could be on campus at one time. And I know they're talking about like, wearing masks and stuff. But then there's also the possibility of like, the masks not working, or, stuff like that."