

Perspectives

MAY 2021

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One can experience stress but not clinical depression or anxiety, and vice versa. But both stress and clinical mental health diagnoses are on the rise during COVID-19.

- Ethan Kross

As we prepare to launch another semester mostly online, we are facing what may be the most severe mental health crisis in the history of American education.

- Ray Schroeder

Preparing for Post-Pandemic Psychological Stress: The Return to Campus May Be Accompanied by the Lingering Psychological Effects of COVID-19

David Stout, PhD

President/CEO
Brookdale Community College
Lincroft, New Jersey

May is Mental Health Awareness month which presents a perfect opportunity for us to check in on our loved ones, learn a bit about mental health and interventions, and address the stigma that exists around mental illness. If there is a positive byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic, it certainly has made it far more acceptable to talk about our mental health and seek therapeutic help. I say that this is a positive effect because mental health problems are so prevalent within American society. Nearly half of all Americans will experience a mental health problem within their lifetimes; the other half will know, work with, or love someone with a mental illness. Research over the past few years is also suggesting that mental health conditions are becoming even more common (even before the pandemic), with notable increases occurring in anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and substance use. The consequences of leaving these problems unaddressed can include disruptions in multiple domains of daily living, including family relations, work, and for our students, the ability to succeed academically. The consequences can also far more devastating.

Mental health can be very sensitive to environmental factors such as significant changes in living, working, and school conditions. Psychological distress can certainly be elevated by social and familial stressors such as loss of a loved one, social isolation, family discord, toxic relationships, and abuse. The loss of meaningful work and resulting financial insecurities, or the chronic exposure to unsafe living and working conditions, can heighten the chances of experiencing symptoms of mental health disorder. Considering the global exposure to COVID-19-induced environmental stressors, it's clear that our experience with this pandemic presents several risk factors that may affect the mental health of our students and employees. In particular, those who simultaneously experienced many of the aforementioned stressors may be particularly vulnerable to the development of psychiatric conditions.

Infection with the COVID-19 virus appears to have a psychological effect on some individuals. Research has indicated that individuals who have been infected with the COVID-19 virus are at increased risk of being diagnosed with a first episode of a psychiatric disorder after the infection. This impact actually may be explained by the inflammation that occurs when the body's defensive immune system is activated by a virus, rather than the virus itself. Immune system proteins called cytokines facilitate the inflammation response when the body is attacked by a virus, and this inflammation has been

found to be associated with psychiatric conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Interestingly, chronic stress has also been shown to activate this inflammation response.

We're all aware that our healthcare and first responding heroes have experienced enduring stress as they have managed multiple waves of the Coronavirus pandemic. It should, therefore, be no surprise that healthcare workers and first responders have been found to be more likely to experience anxiety, depression, insomnia, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. Spikes in reports of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation have also been reported among the general public, who experienced the chronic stress of unemployment and the resulting financial, food, and housing insecurities.

Another risk factor is related to the experience of loss associated with the pandemic. With more than 500,000 people having passed away from complications of the virus, it is very possible that our students and employees have lost friends, family, or other significant others. For many, the grieving process was complicated by gathering restrictions that didn't allow them to be with their dying loved ones during their final moments or participate in customary funeral services. Counselors are likely to see the lingering effects of unresolved grief for years to come.

I recently had the chance to guest lecture in a Positive Psychology class on the topic of post-traumatic growth. When we spoke about the experience of unexpectedly losing a loved one, the emotions in the room were raw. In this very small sample of students, among those who exposed their personal experiences to the class, the grief was palpable. Others sat silent. Following this one class, I received several emails from the "silent" students who disclosed the losses they experienced this year. Not every faculty member will be comfortable addressing this topic head-on in class, so it's critically important that our institutions put the proper resources in place to support our students, faculty, and staff.

The isolation that we all experienced due to COVID-related gathering restrictions also presents a risk factor to our mental well-being. The loss of normal interpersonal connection has been reported to relate to feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, loss of interest in most activities, irritability, and thoughts of suicide. Our students and employees may have experienced difficulty in concentrating, making decisions, solving problems, and completing projects. These are all symptoms of depression. Conversely, the experience of re-opening may also trigger psychological distress. Some of our students and employees may experience discomfort and

(continued on page 4)

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

Widespread societal changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic represent considerable sources of stress and anxiety at community colleges and may have damaging effects on the mental and physical health of students, faculty, and college staff members going forward. As the pandemic ebbs, community college leadership teams must move to address this issue of mental and emotional health by creating strategies to assist in managing stress. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Michele Albright, MS-CTE

Coordinator of Career and Volunteer Centers
Center for Leadership, Activities
and Career Services
Ferris State University, Big Rapids, MI

My personal experience through the pandemic can be best described as that of an active observer and advocate for improved educational experiences to enable students to flourish. Today, the fundamental needs identified by Maslow's Hierarchy have been compromised due to the pandemic. Students have faced the loss of basic needs (shelter, food, employment) and psychological needs (connection, belonging, social support, and esteem), challenging their ability to conceptualize future aspirations (and their needs for self-fulfillment). It has been suggested that students will return to campuses as the "lost" generation. If this is accurate, then our role is even more valuable, impactful, and necessary.

I recently heard someone refer to our roles in education as "shepherds" come fall. As educators, we must do more than shepherd the lost. Let's be reminded of the reason most educators have remained in higher education: to inspire dreamers, help students to discover their passions and purpose, provide the requisite skills to achieve future success, and inspire students to realize their best selves. So the question is, how do we deliver on this aspiration?

Suggestions to support students' mental and emotional needs include:

- ▲ Meet students where they are and ensure their basic needs are being met. If they aren't, be an advocate, seek help, and connect them with community resources.
- ▲ Provide training for all faculty and staff to identify signs of emotional distress or substance abuse, engage students in conversations, share mental well-being and healthy choices, and initiate appropriate referrals.
- ▲ Support student groups and organizations, especially affinity groups. Such groups create connections and a sense of belonging, since peers influence students.
- ▲ Design processes to improve efficiencies and eliminate wait times for student assistance; listen to student frustrations and concerns.

According to Maslow's theory, every person is capable and desires to move up the hierarchy toward fulfillment. Unfortunately, many get derailed at times, which creates an inability to achieve lower-level goals. Life experiences cause individuals to fluctuate between levels of the hierarchy.

Overall, student emotional and mental health relies on strong personal connections, a sense of belonging, and supportive guidance to help them navigate their academic and career pursuits. Our role in higher education is to provide the tools necessary for students to move their life trajectories toward self-actualization, since the most significant ROI of a college education lies in the ability to improve lives. Now is our opportunity to help all students reach their full potential.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What can community college leaders do to begin to meet this growing stress-related challenge?

Chardin Claybourne, MA

Faculty, Learning Lab and Tutoring Services
Henry Ford College
Dearborn, Michigan

As the pandemic abates, there is an instinctual wish to "return to normal." However, forcing changes towards a pre-pandemic status quo—which might never return—risks overcorrecting,

and exacerbating the traumas wrought by the pandemic. Before enacting sweeping changes, leaders must first help themselves by recognizing the importance of self-care, and then develop a philosophy of listening.

Students—the heart of the campus—are among those hit hardest by the pandemic. Leaders must provide the necessary resources to professionals on the frontlines of student services. Ensuring suitable levels of on-campus access to counseling services, at a scale commensurate to enrollment, is a priority. Leaders, working with counselors, can create messaging to destigmatize the issues of depression and anxiety. For example, by participating in public conversations about their struggles during this time, leaders can model the behavior they want students to emulate.

For many students, the pandemic worsened already-fragile living conditions. Community colleges are a home-away-from-home for students, and institutions can serve in this capacity more purposefully than ever. Food pantries, transportation services, campus health centers, and student emergency funds will predictably have increased student usage. Leaders must prepare for these expanded needs.

Faculty and staff are the lifeblood of the campus. These stalwart educators and service providers heroically kept community colleges afloat and will also require support from leaders. Every institution is different; no solution is applicable to all situations. Again, a philosophy of listening is key—but it must be followed by thoughtful action. Leaders must sincerely understand the needs of their faculty and staff and work with them to problem solve. For instance, how do leaders negotiate the contrasting desires of employees? While some anxiously await a return to campus, others are comfortable working from home indefinitely, and there are likely many faculty and staff members whose opinions lie somewhere in the middle of these extremes. Can leaders, in collaboration with faculty and staff, discuss and develop equitable work-from-home policies that consider these trichotomies? Our new normal will require innovative leadership to solve complex issues.

Leaders bear responsibility for rebuilding and sustaining their colleges' commitment to mental health and wellness for students, faculty, and staff. By listening to the heartbeat of their campuses and rooting their actions in empathy, grace, and equity, leaders need not concern themselves with a "return to normal." In the aftermath of the pandemic, they can steward community colleges to a brighter future, affirming a culture of humanity, having navigated through a time of unprecedented change.



Michele Albright, Cohort 10, serves in the Center for Leadership, Activities and Career Services at Ferris State University. Her role involves supporting student and alumni career development through engagement with industries, community involvement, and employment experiences. She holds a MS-CTE degree and has taught numerous courses and facilitated hundreds of career development workshops during her tenure at FSU. Currently, she is pursuing her doctorate in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



Chardin Claybourne, MA, is tenured Faculty at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, where he directs the Learning Lab and Tutoring Services. He is also a Vice-President for HFCC-FT, AFT Local 1650, the college's union for full-time faculty, and President of the HFC Black Employee Association. He earned his MA from Central Michigan University, and currently he is enrolled in Ferris State University's Doctorate in Community College Leadership (DCCL) program.

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Widespread societal changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic represent considerable sources of stress and anxiety at community colleges and may have damaging effects on the mental and physical health of students, faculty, and college staff members going forward. As the pandemic ebbs, community college leadership teams must move to address this issue of mental and emotional health by creating strategies to assist in managing stress. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Confronting Institutional Stress with Connection, Inclusivity, and Recognition

Lori Gonko, EdD

Vice President of Strategy and Human Resources
Henry Ford College
Dearborn, Michigan

As 2020 ended, various social media sites and news entities asked readers to describe the year in one word or phrase. A scan of the results may not be surprising; almost all of the words that made the respective lists describe the year as one riddled with anguish and angst. The top three words reported to The Washington Post were *exhausted*, *lost*, and *chaotic*. *Stifling*, *nightmare*, and the ever-popular *dumpster fire* also made the cut. The New York Times reminded us that *doomscrolling* became part of the lexicon, while the Oxford English Dictionary broke tradition and refrained from selecting a Word of the Year, instead producing a report entitled Words of an Unprecedented Year that includes terms to describe the stress of the pandemic, political upheaval, and social unrest. These lists are a reminder that the past year depleted our mental and emotional capacities for dealing with life's challenges, and this stress is still keenly felt in the workplace today. As leaders, our emotional intelligence is being tested at a heightened level as our teams look to us for guidance and inspiration.

These lists are a reminder that the past year depleted our mental and emotional capacities for dealing with life's challenges, and this stress is still keenly felt in the workplace today.

It strikes me that if we are to support our employees in meaningful ways moving forward, we need a new lexicon than what we have used throughout the last year. Rather than focus on the disquiet and distress, we must recognize that in every crisis there is also great opportunity. We have attached a negative connotation to "unprecedented," perhaps forgetting that it also affords us the freedom to start with a blank slate. Other key words in this new lexicon include *connection*, *inclusivity*, and *recognition*, with *intentionality* stitching it all together. When we fill our environment with these key traits, we eliminate room for stress, anxiety, and lack of motivation.

It starts with us and the interactions we have with those we lead. Our ability to have impromptu conversations in the hallway may have dwindled, but this does not mean that we have lost those opportunities to connect. We must be intentional about having consistent, planned time to interact with our teams, and these interactions do not have to be long or formal meetings. Pre-COVID we had a variety of interactions with colleagues, both professional and personal, sometimes even sharing a laugh during lunch or after work. While we may be interacting in new formats, we can be creative and reimagine ways to engage. Something as simple as a quick text, a half-hour virtual team lunch, or a how-are-you phone call can go a long way.

Human interaction is more sought after than ever. As we have become separated in our physical environments, we must actively foster inclusivity. Working together in groups towards a common goal and ensuring that everyone feels empowered to contribute are critical. Remote work has made

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it easier for some of our staff to hide or get lost in the shuffle, particularly those who are introverted by nature. As leaders we need to set the stage for collaboration but also find a variety of ways to encourage contribution across the board. Giving every person opportunity to share their skills, their voice, and their ideas is a key element of inclusivity that can easily be lost these days.

In some ways the challenges of the last year made it easy to be complacent. The focus became getting through the day as opposed to striving towards the future, perhaps thinking that maintaining the status quo would be less taxing for our staff. However, it is time to return to fostering a culture of continuous improvement in a more positive way than ever before. As leaders our goal is to consistently work towards a better future for our institutions and students, and we do so often with a critical eye towards problems. Rather than focus on the problems, we can employ recognition and praise as the tools to drive improvement. Be intentional about recognizing people doing great things and shout it from the rooftops! Everyone appreciates accolades and as we deliver more praise and recognition, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that re-instills the behavior. And, this positive engagement can contribute to a sense of safety and well-being for our teams, further decreasing stress and anxiety.

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The global pandemic has unmistakably changed the way we live and work, but it has also provided a unique opportunity for leaders to rewrite the narrative of our environments in ways that support employees' emotional and mental wellbeing. We have the opportunity to rethink even the smallest parts of our daily experiences and create a new reality for our teams. When we are intentional in creating spaces full of connection, inclusivity, and recognition, we can change things for the better even in the toughest of times.

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Lori Gonko, EdD serves as the Vice President of Strategy and Human Resources at Henry Ford College in Dearborn, Michigan, where she provides leadership for institutional research, institutional effectiveness, planning, accreditation, and human resources. Over the past twenty years, she has served in a wide variety of positions within the community college, beginning her career as part-time clerical staff while she was a student at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan. As she progressed into full-time clerical and supervisory roles, she developed a passion for empowering staff institution-wide to contribute to the community college mission. She earned her MA from Oakland University and is a graduate of the second cohort of the DCCL program at Ferris State University. Her dissertation focused on the role of community college support staff in student success initiatives and support staff professional development. She currently co-teaches the DCCL Practicum course.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Managing Stress during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic and Beyond: Reappraisal and Mindset Approaches

by Martin S. Hagger, Jacob J. Keech, and Kyra Hamilton

With a focus on stress management strategies, this article discusses stress related to the pandemic and notes that elevated stress is likely to be prolonged even after the threat of the virus has passed. Further, prolonged exposure to stress arising from the crisis is likely to bring insidious long-term health effects including increased risk of physical (chronic disease risk) and mental (depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder) health problems.

Access this work here:
<https://bit.ly/3nXNjqa>

Mental Health, Higher Education, and COVID-19: Strategies for Leaders to Support Campus Well-Being

by ACE and contributors
 Given that higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic rests largely on its executive leaders, their responses to the crisis will make an imprint on colleges for years to come. Now that the crisis has imposed a new level of anxiety and isolation, responses to mental health are critical. As leadership teams move to address student mental health, high-level considerations for both short- and long-term planning are offered.

Access this work here:
<https://bit.ly/3o06saK>

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Published by the
Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice,
 Ferris State University,
 Doctorate in Community College Leadership
 Big Rapids, Michigan

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Preparing for Post-Pandemic Psychological Stress (continued from page 1)

anxiety as we begin to gather together again, especially with the knowledge that some individuals still don't take safety protocols seriously. Hopefully, the availability of the COVID-19 vaccine will mitigate these feelings of discomfort and anxiety among the vast majority of our students and employees. However, we're likely to see the lingering feelings of discomfort and anxiety for a while.

With this context in mind, it's important to ask how well-prepared our institutions are to manage an increase in mental health conditions among our student and employee populations.

With this context in mind, it's important to ask how well-prepared our institutions are to manage an increase in mental health conditions among our student and employee populations.

At Brookdale Community College, we have implemented several mental health interventions. We employ a small team of full-time licensed professional counselors who are uniquely skilled in managing crisis situations when they arise. Our counselors also work with students in individual appointments, though, within the first three appointments, they try to get the students connected to external professionals for longer-term treatment. Because we have a small staff and demand has been increasing, we have worked hard for the past five years to establish partnerships to supplement our services. Here are a few tips from that experience that you might find helpful:

- ▲ *When your staff and budgets are limited, search for synergistic external relationships.*

At Brookdale, we have developed partnerships with neighboring universities which supply interns from their Master's degree programs in Social Work and Mental Health Counseling. These partnerships work well because the universities need internship sites and we need their expertise. This has even provided an opportunity to staff a crisis hotline with interns who don't need to occupy physical space on our campus.

We also partnered with our County to provide a social worker who is stationed on our main campus several days per week. She helps students and their families gain access to the social services and benefits for which they qualify. Additionally, she promotes our internal counseling and other support services (e.g., disability services, veterans' services, food pantry), as well as our partnership programs with external agencies.

- ▲ *Consider sending a de-stigmatizing message to show your support for students and employees.*

In January 2021, Brookdale's Board of Trustees passed a resolution in partnership with Monmouth County (NJ) to establish Brookdale Community College as a Mental Health Stigma-Free Zone. However, this resolution will do very little without first developing a "culture of care" and an infrastructure to provide support.

Brookdale's culture of care began with the development of our current strategic plan. We secured College-wide buy-in around the idea that student basic needs must be addressed in order for them to be academically successful. While groundwork had already begun in our Student Affairs Division, this College-wide buy-in allowed us to really kickstart the development of wrap-around support services to provide the assistance that students needed.

Our efforts to develop partnerships with local agencies that specialize in mental health, addiction recovery support, and social services yielded positive results prior to the pandemic, but these efforts have accelerated since February 2020.

Having built a strong infrastructure, our passage of a "Stigma Free" resolution was not simply lip service. We posted "Proud to be Stigma Free" signs in high traffic areas around campus and enlisted the support of our Psychology and Human Services Department, as well as their student club of the same name, to develop stigma free co-curricular programs. I must give kudos to two of our Psychology professors who have done a tremendous amount of work to advance this cause, one of whom has become heavily involved in our County's Stigma Free initiative.

- ▲ *Utilize federal stimulus funding to expand appropriate services that are directly linked to the pandemic.*

At Brookdale, we have chosen to implement a mental health app to support our students whenever and wherever they need help. Considering the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, the expansion of such services through technology should be considered an appropriate expenditure of federal stimulus funds. We have also considered supplementing our full-time counseling staff by engaging in a "shared service" arrangement with an agency that will provide access to telehealth appointments with licensed professional counselors. As of the writing of this article, we're still exploring that option as we assess the demand for services.

Higher education institutions across the country are very excited to welcome our students and employees back this fall. But it's vital that we're prepared to assist them with the mental health effects of coping for more than a year with a deadly global pandemic. Many of our constituents experienced significant distress as a result of personal viral infection, the loss of significant others, social isolation, substantially disrupted work and school experiences, unemployment, financial strain, insecurity in access to basic needs, and exposure to a chronically stressful environment. As we celebrate Mental Health Awareness month, let's explore our capacity to help the students who present with mental health needs and act now to develop the high-quality services that they deserve.

David Stout serves as the 7th President of Brookdale Community College in Lincroft, New Jersey. He has worked in various roles at Brookdale over 24 years, including Vice President for Student Success, Dean of the Freehold Campus, Professor and Department Chair of Psychology & Human Services, Counselor, and Tutor. His community service has largely focused on human service-oriented boards including the Monmouth County Mental Health Board, the Monmouth County Human Services Needs Assessment Steering Committee, the New Jersey Family Success Institute Learning Community, the Monmouth Ocean Foundation for Children (MOFFC), the Monmouth County Financial Recovery Initiative, and the YMCA of Greater Monmouth County.



Dr. Stout helped to launch the KEYS Academy Recovery High School where students who are experiencing addiction can complete their high school diploma and he is currently working with MOFFC to establish a program for adults with autism.

Dr. Stout earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology at Stockton University, a Master's degree in Psychological Counseling at Monmouth University, and a PhD in Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine at Northcentral University.