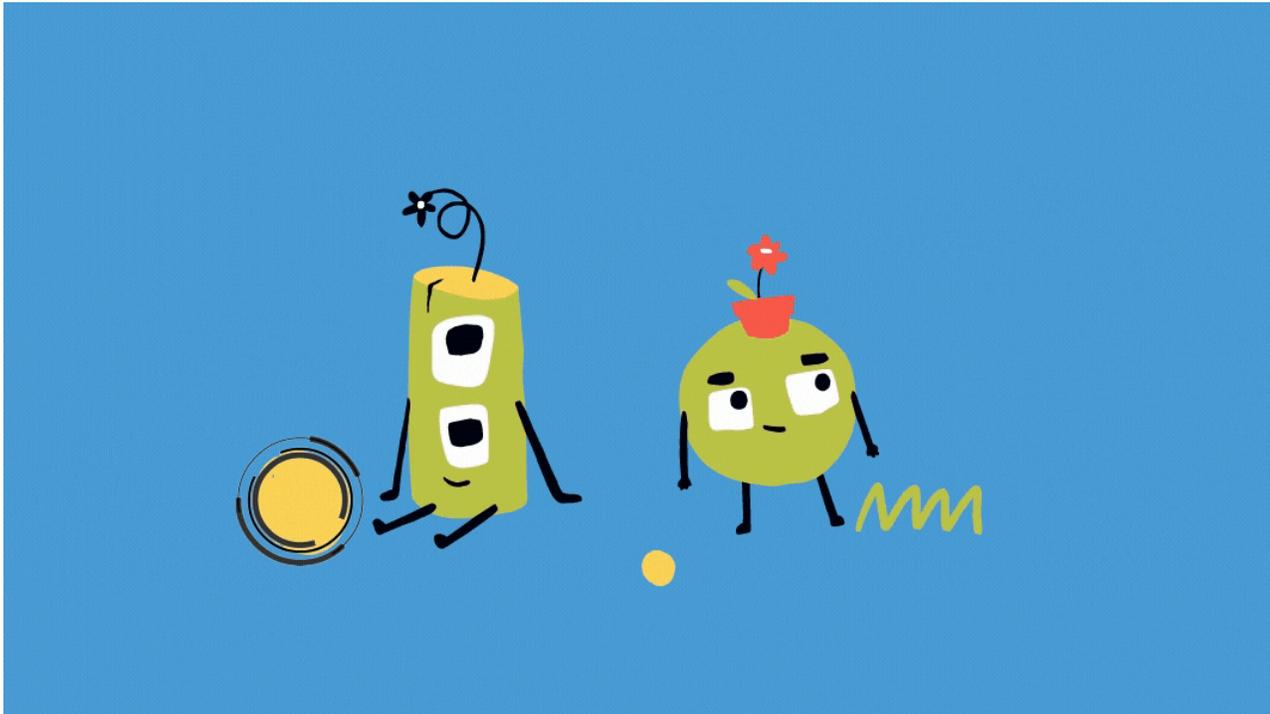


MANAGING STRESS

Research: Why a Covid-19 World Feels Both Tiring and Hopeful for College Students

Ashley Whillans, Laura M. Giurge, Lucia Macchia, Ayse Yemiscigil

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COVID-19 is one of the most transformative and unpredictable pandemics in recorded history. It has fundamentally altered the way we live and work.

It is easy to see why students are exhausted: loved ones are [getting sick](#), virtual classes are energy-[draining](#), and it is hard to focus amidst worries about [repaying loans](#) and [finding a job](#). From virtual graduation parties to postponed internships, students are contemplating career decisions—and [COVID-19](#) is fundamentally altering what we desire from our jobs and lives.

These divergent reactions are driven by the fact that COVID-19 is not only a situation that threatens economics *or* physical health, it is a situation that threatens both. Indeed, COVID-19 is unique because it is a [collective concern](#) that involves money *and* disease.



we surveyed over 1300 college students who were attending college full-time in the US, the UK, and Canada. To capture their lived experiences with coronavirus, we asked students to report on how their health and household finances had been impacted. Students told us about their feelings of loneliness and stress, their career values, and how **uncertain** they felt about choosing their career, **how worried** they felt about their current and future financial situation, and how often they engaged in **existential thinking**—what researchers classify as thinking about one’s life beyond the here and now.

As one student told us, “As more things are cancelled, and there is more uncertainty about the future, I have come to appreciate things I was taking for granted. I am happy that I have money saved and that my career path is practical. Before I felt pressure not to choose jobs based on money and security, but now I see that these factors are important when society is in a tough spot.”

What we found at the end of our research should come as no surprise: 32% knew a close family member or a friend who had been sick with COVID-19 and 60% of students had lost income, and this was leading to higher levels of stress. In contrast to other survey data showing that students’ **mental health has been stable during COVID-19**, students in our study who had experienced health and financial impacts were lonelier and more stressed than students who hadn’t.

The students we surveyed reported high levels of stress and loneliness. Most students reported moderate to high levels of stress—54% reported feeling that they “often” or “always” could not control the important things in their life and 56% felt isolated from others on a regular basis. Moreover, about 15% had worried about their personal safety, food security, or housing in the past week. These students were not only worried about the present, but when asked to think about the future, the students we studied worried that they would not be able to find a job (60%), would struggle to meet living expenses (58%), or would experience significant financial instability upon graduation (50%).

However, there was a silver lining. Many students also demonstrated a heightened concern for helping others and hoped to find work that fulfilled a greater purpose. Specifically, students



unsurprisingly, students' desire to have a purposeful career was followed closely by “having a job that resulted in high income” and “job security.” Perhaps most interesting was the fact that prosocial and economic-based career motivations were stronger in this student sample than opportunities for advancement, job flexibility, and free time: three motivations which typically [dominate career interests](#) among this age group.

The work-relevant motivation to help other people was especially strong for students who reported engaging in existential thinking. Students who spent time during the COVID-19 pandemic reading, thinking about or discussing their beliefs, reflecting on the nature of the universe, or thinking about the meaning of life beyond the “here and now” reported feeling 3 – 5 times more strongly about choosing a career that helped others and served the world than students who did not report spending time engaging in deep thinking and reflection.

These results are consistent with research on [terror management theory](#) showing that reflecting on our own mortality can powerfully shape our values and goals. When people think about their place in the world and reflect on the transient nature of life these thoughts encourage what researchers call “[prosocial motivation](#)” and in turn can inspire generous actions at work and in life, such as volunteering and mentoring. Research suggests that when people are made aware that life is limited, they more readily [experience gratitude](#) and appreciation for what they have in life (instead of focusing on what they do not have), and are more likely to help others as a result. Crisis events like the COVID-19 pandemic are especially likely to trigger awareness about mortality and inspire self-reflection and generosity—[as long as](#) individuals focus on the positive, reach out and find allies when they feel overwhelmed, and make space to actively reflect on their feelings and experiences.

We are all exhausted and stressed. Perhaps more than any other group, students are especially concerned with what the future holds. Yet, we can all learn something from our data and this moment. Using this present as a chance to reflect about life's meaning, and our own desired legacy, can [increase our resilience](#) in facing our unknown challenges. In becoming more resilient and reflective, we will not only [reduce our own personal stress](#), but also become more focused on helping our families, our communities, and our country.



from college and job seeking—it is especially easy to become worn down right now. What we have to remember is that putting our mental health first is not selfish. In fact, it is prosocial. Taking the time to reflect on and digest the current situation will put all of us in a better position to enact our changing goals and help and support those around us.



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Ashley Whillans

Ashley Whillans is an Assistant Professor in the Negotiations, Organizations, and Markets unit at the Harvard Business School. Her research focuses on time, money, and happiness.



Laura M. Giurge

Laura M. Giurge is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at London Business School and the Barnes Research Fellow at the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on time, happiness, and the future of work.



Lucia Macchia

Lucia Macchia is a Ph.D. candidate at City, University of London. Her research focuses on happiness, prosocial behavior, and inequality.



Ayşe Yemiscigil

Ayşe Yemiscigil, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School and an affiliate of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University. Her research is focused on meaning and purpose at work, in education, and in life.

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