

# Better understanding student stress during the pandemic

June 7 2021, by Tessa Venell

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The stress of the past year put unprecedented demands on college students all over the country, and thanks to assistant professor of psychology Hannah Snyder and her lab, we now understand more about that experience.

When the [pandemic](#) started last spring, [Snyder and her lab were studying links](#) between cognitive function, stress and mental health to better understand risk factors for depression and anxiety.

BrandeisNow spoke with Snyder and her Ph.D. student in the CoPE lab, Morgan Taylor, about how they quickly shifted their attention to study how students were responding to the pandemic.

## **How has the pandemic affected your research?**

Snyder: We had to completely pivot. Now we're running online studies, although there are some data that there's simply no way to collect online, for instance, physiological stress response data, so part of the research is still on hold.

## **How does your research relate to the pandemic?**

Snyder: We're very interested in how people perceive stress, how they appraise and interpret stress, and then how they cope with stress in ways that are either more adaptive or less adaptive. Last spring when the pandemic lockdowns started, we quickly went into the field to capture students during that transition period. In the study we conducted last spring, 154 Brandeis undergraduate students were involved, as well as 278 students at the University of Colorado Boulder. Within this study, my graduate students each have independent projects that are building on their own research interests.

We started by investigating how pandemic-related stress, as well as certain styles of responding to that stress, are affecting internalizing symptoms in our [college students](#). Response styles are ways of coping with stressors. We looked at things like engaging in a plan for problem solving, seeking social support, or trying to think about the situation in a

positive way.

## **It seems like your questions were geared towards ways of dealing with the situation positively.**

MT: There's a broad range of coping strategies. We've found that the benefits of engaging in more adaptive types of responses are that they are associated with lower feelings of loss of interest. In my own research, I'm interested in the general topics of rumination and worry. My research pivoted really easily to the COVID-19 pandemic: many more individuals are likely engaging in worry or ruminative thoughts about the pandemic itself. My next paper will be about how intolerance of uncertainty and stress leads to engagement in rumination and worry, particularly during the uncertain pandemic period.

## **What did you find out about the undergraduates in the study?**

MT: For the undergraduate [student](#) sample, we had 39.6% of the respondents reporting moderate to severe depression symptoms and 61.7% reporting moderate to severe anxiety symptoms. At least at the beginning of the pandemic back in April 2020, our students do seem to really be experiencing quite high levels of depression and anxiety. And importantly, we found that maladaptive responses to stress (e.g., ruminating) were associated with high levels of anxiety and depression symptoms, while more adaptive responses to [stress](#) (e.g., problem solving) were associated with lower levels of these symptoms.

An undergraduate Research Assistant in the CoPE Lab, Jenna Sandler '22, is in charge of an upcoming COVID-19 research study for the lab. In the study, Sandler aims to learn more about how students are dealing with the uncertain factors around how campus life will return to normal.

Sandler reports, "We're looking at how students are coping with the uncertainty and how this, along with dispositional factors like optimism and pessimism, affect mental health and wellbeing."

Provided by Brandeis University

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