

# Pandemic job search anxiety is common; how you channel it may make the difference

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Job seeking, even during a good year, can be a stressful experience. Add in a global pandemic and constrained job markets, and anxiety abounds in many job seekers. That anxiety can be tied to both positive and

negative results, according to new research out of the University of Arizona Eller College of Management.

The research, led by Allison Gabriel, McClelland Professor of Management and Organizations and University Distinguished Scholar, is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Gabriel said it makes sense that anyone entering the [job market](#) for the first time would be feeling added [anxiety](#) because of the havoc being wreaked on labor markets by the global pandemic.

"We wanted to understand if there are certain ways that anxiety might actually be helpful for them," said Gabriel, who co-authored the research with management and organizations doctoral students Rebecca MacGowan and Mahira Ganster, and professor of management and organizations Jerel Slaughter. "Are there certain ways they are actually able to channel that anxiety to create a more productive job search process?"

To help answer that question, the researchers collected [survey data](#) from 162 students in their final semester at the University of Arizona each week for up to six weeks of a search for full-time work or internships in fall 2020. They specifically examined two types of thought processes related to anxiety:

- problem-solving pondering, or focusing thoughts on how to improve a job search
- affect-focused rumination, or recurring negative thoughts about a job search.

"Anxiety is a double-edged sword," Gabriel said. "It can help you focus in on your goals and channel your effort effectively, but it can also undermine you."

## Channeling anxiety

Researchers found that job seekers who responded to their anxiety with problem-solving pondering were more likely to exert effort in productive ways, such as focusing on reevaluating and improving their job and internship search-related behaviors. The study found those participants were also more likely to continue the search for what they classified as a dream job, or one that meets their image of an ideal post-graduation position. That, in turn, was related to obtaining more interviews and job offers over the course of the study.

Affect-focused rumination, on the other hand, negatively affected dream job search efforts. Those who reported feeling afraid, upset, scared, distressed or nervous one week were less likely to continue their search for a dream job the following week.

"One thing that we were concerned about for our job seekers was: Do we have students who are abandoning their goals and aspirations because of COVID-19 and because the [labor markets](#) are constrained?" Gabriel said. "We found that students, as long as they were operating through this really productive pathway, were still exerting effort toward their dream [jobs](#)."

## Views on conspiracy theories

People's opinions about the severity of the pandemic can also impact how they respond to job search anxiety, the researchers found.

Study participants were asked whether they believe that "the official version of events given by the authorities very often hides the truth." Gabriel and her colleagues found that those who reported higher levels of what researchers categorized as conspiracy theory beliefs were more

likely to engage in affect-focused rumination in response to feeling anxious about their job search. Gabriel said this could be because job seekers who hold these beliefs may feel less in control over their job search and have lowered expectations for achieving their goals.

## Takeaways

It's important to note, said Gabriel, that job seekers can easily experience both types of reactions to anxiety. When someone is experiencing anxiety, it's important to pay attention to those thoughts and how they are being channeled, she said.

"One clear takeaway is to encourage [job seekers](#) to really focus on why they are feeling anxious about their job search and what they can do to channel that positively," Gabriel said. "So, rather than shutting down and falling into the panic and worry, you can take that cue and say, "OK, something is off. I'm not making the progress I want. What can I do to reevaluate and re-craft my [search](#) in a positive way?""

**More information:** Allison S. Gabriel et al, The influence of COVID-induced job search anxiety and conspiracy beliefs on job search effort: A within-person investigation., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000926](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000926)

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