

Psychological capital may be the antidote for working in a pandemic, study suggests

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Jeffery Houghton, management professor at WVU, led research on how employees coped—whether through adaptive or maladaptive behaviors—at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. He found that those with greater psychological capital coped better. Credit: WVU Illustration/Aira Burkhart

Just like the COVID-19 vaccine protects against contracting the

contagious virus, the collective elements of self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency help inoculate employees from the negative effects of working through a pandemic, according to a new West Virginia University study.

Jeffery Houghton, management professor, had studied how [college students](#) coped with stress through adaptive (i.e. exercise, meditation, [social networking](#)) and maladaptive (i.e. binge drinking, [substance abuse](#), negative thoughts) behaviors before the world was dramatically altered by COVID-19 in early 2020.

It dawned on him to shift that focus to people working through the midst of the pandemic. How were people handling working under the same roof they ate and slept—with some of them also homeschooling and rearing children?

He teamed up with two of his Ph.D. students, Richard Oxarart and Luke Langlais, and Salisbury University researchers to see how "psychological capital"—or PsyCap, a positive state of mind characterized by self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency in the world of psychology—influenced employees.

The findings, published in the *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, aren't a total surprise: Those lagging in PsyCap characteristics drifted to maladaptive behaviors and exhibited a high perception of stress.

"If you're adaptively coping, you're going to have less stress," Houghton said. "If you have a lower PsyCap, you're likely going to engage in maladaptive coping, which leads to even greater stress.

"We wanted to see how these dynamics change if you're working from home. We felt that working at home would increase the effects of

maladaptive coping on stress."

And it did, based on their study.

Workers relying on adaptive coping strategies fared better, though Houghton anticipated their levels of stress would have been much lower.

"You've still got a strong, positive relationship between PsyCap and adaptive coping," he said, "but for the people working at home, that doesn't seem to affect their stress. That's interesting and may be because of additional stressors at home.

"At the end of the day, PsyCap tends to work more by reducing maladaptive coping instead of increasing the adaptive coping."

Houghton and his team surveyed 378 full-time employees during the first week of May 2020, when many individuals still worked remotely. The average age of participants was 35 and 52% of those surveyed were female.

A poll by the American Psychological Association released around that same timeframe found that 70% of employed adults said work was a significant source of [stress](#) in their lives, a substantially higher percentage than reported in prior APA surveys.

A potential upswing

Regardless of where you work, Houghton's team found that many people view work as one of life's stressors.

One possible way to change that is through PsyCap training, Houghton said.

The four components—self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency—can be viewed together as a singular entity, he added.

"Do they really hang together as a single concept? The research suggests that if you look at them as a package, you'll get better outcomes.

"A compelling concept from a practical standpoint is that unlike something like your personality, which is relatively stable—you can't change your personality that easily—PsyCap is something that's considered to be malleable. It can change and be improved."

Houghton said PsyCap is a relatively new concept but recommends organizations to consider offering trainings to keep workers happy and healthy.

"Workshops to help people improve their level of this cognitive resource can in fact make them more adaptive with their coping styles," he said.

More information: Sherry A. Maykrantz et al, Coping with the crisis: the effects of psychological capital and coping behaviors on perceived stress, *International Journal of Workplace Health Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1108/IJWHM-04-2021-0085](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWHM-04-2021-0085)

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