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Policy Brief

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COVID-19 and its Policies' Effect on the Mental Health of UCSD Students

I. Summary

With the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing, many students at the University of California, San Diego who have been abruptly forced to transition to online classes while also being told to stay at home have experienced many different moods relating to how their mental state of mind has adapted to the situation. Including fatigue, sadness, anxiety, anger, and relief, the students have shown negative mental health changes during their time away from in person classes and the freedom to leave their houses.

This research project identifies the changes in mental health the students face during the new restrictions as the world including themselves attempt to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

II. Recommendations

Key Points

1. Reduce class sizes to implement in person classes.
2. Offer locations of meetups with safety measures such as social distancing and free face masks and hand sanitizer across campus.

3. Be more straightforward with the information about the pandemic provided to the students as well as including good news in the fight towards a cure/vaccine in the newsletter emails.
4. Provide flyers about how to cope (in a healthy manner) with what is going on.

III. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm, many of the world institutions were unprepared to combat the disease as this was never seen before in history. Spreading out of Wuhan, China, the disease reached the United States which has now become one of the nations with the highest number of reported cases. Showing up in the United States around January 2020, many were slow to respond to what would become of this disease. Alas, it spread and by the time many people began to notice, there were a few thousand cases. California, on the other hand, was one of the first few states to implement policies to protect the people from catching the disease such as stay-at-home orders and 6 feet apart rules. Within the University of California system, where many of the students were still in class, during the final two weeks of the winter quarter, in person classes were cancelled and finals were to be taken online. The sudden change left many students worried and confused as the transition to online classes disrupted their daily lives.

Especially since the shift and policies created many uncertainties for the students, since they did not know when the pandemic would be over, many of the students were concerned with how their lives would turn out such as with meeting friends or graduating or even keeping their jobs. The general panic that has occurred alongside the transition towards online schooling has affected the students in many ways including the feelings of uncertainty. Being stuck in their

homes for weeks on end due to the stay-at-home order, one comes to wonder how it is the students deal with the repetitions of everyday life and how they have adapted to their setting changes. As online classes continue and the disease persists around them, we wanted to look into how the rules implemented by the school and the nation has affected their mental state of mind because of the abrupt changes and the threats of a disease being outside their door.

IV. Body

1. Background

The recent changes in the education system added to the fears of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many students at the University of California, San Diego. As the stay-at-home order forced many students to stay at home, the inability to freely participate in their life before the pandemic has greatly affected the way in how they work and think about the world. At a time where the world seems to become more dangerous with the pandemic being so widespread, many of the students feel trapped at home as life continues only through the repetition of daily routines that are restricted to the home. Although there are occasional trips to the supermarket or workouts in the open air, the idea of the freedom to do anything is lost since there are fears of contagion. The reason that we chose qualitative research for this project is because it allows for us to better understand what it is the students are feeling especially since feelings cannot be categorized into numbers and charts. The way in which they see the world, the way they cope with everything going on around them, qualitative research serves as a method to better scope the field of what emotions the students are facing when they are forced to stay home with online classes. Since many of the students are forced to social distance, it can be lonely at times where they are unable to meet up with friends. In this case, the feeling of constant loneliness may lead

to other psychological distress that may result in mental health issues for the students stuck in quarantine. As we asked, “How has the general state of panic affected the mental health and awareness of college students due to abrupt changes in their lives added to the fears of the current pandemic?,” we will attempt to look at the current state of mental health many of the students would be willing to share.

2. Methods

Each member of our team as well as the other teams researching the same topic conducted in-depth interviews in order to get a more personal experience with how the students felt about the current situation. We initially started off with creating a field guide with suggestions of extra probing questions so that we can gather more in-depth information from the participants. We then gathered the participants by ourselves with one interview per researcher. This was effective in allowing for a diverse pool of individuals because the participant pool was recruited from an array of different researchers. This was useful because it allowed us to specifically select students from the UCSD community ranging from first to fourth year undergraduate students and analyze how their mental health has changed throughout the pandemic. The interviews that we conducted were with confidentiality to ensure that the participants felt comfortable throughout the entire process.

3. Ethics

Throughout the in-depth interview process, we made sure that the participants were comfortable with opting out of answering the question if they felt uncomfortable. We attempted to build proper rapport with the participants by getting them comfortable with answering basic introductory questions before we began talking about the more heavy, in depth questions. Some

possible ethical concerns that we could have faced includes how we may have phrased the questions because for many of us, this was our first time conducting an interview so there may be some leading questions that were unintentionally asked. Another concern that may have come up includes the fear of being judged by the interviewer. I think that although we made sure the participant was comfortable with not answering any uncomfortable questions, I think that one thing we may have not emphasized enough is the understanding that all of the answers they give will not be judged by the researcher in any way because this may allow for them to answer certain questions that may be contrary to social norms.

4. Results

a. Understanding

Although many of the students were shocked at how abrupt things changed because of the pandemic, many of them understood why these things were happening. All for the safety of themselves and their families, the students realized why the school had to shift to online classes and why the government imposed a stay-at-home order and were ambivalent towards it.

b. Fatigue/Lack of Motivation

The students also displayed signs of fatigue and lack of motivation because of how many of them felt hopeless being stuck in their homes unable to physically interact with friends and attend in person classes. To the students, the repetition of everyday life added to the threats of a disease that may severely affect them, their families, and their friends did much to cause the students to lose hope in society and not want to do anything.

c. Sadness

Sadness was also a major component in the students' mood because of how the students were not able to participate in daily tasks such as meeting up with friends and attending classes. They were in states of despair and hopelessness as the feeling of entrapment with limited freedom of movement created an environment in which took a negative toll on their mental health.

d. Anxiety

The students were met with anxiety and worry because of the fears that the virus may spread and affect them and/or their loved ones. Also since the virus has a higher mortality rate among older individuals, with people living longer than ever, many of these students fear that their parents or grandparents may catch the disease and possibly pass away.

i. Jobs

For some of the students, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their jobs because of the stay-at-home order where they started losing their jobs because of how there is not as much foot traffic and purchases. In this case, many of their employers had to lay them off. With no source of income, many of these students faced not only job insecurities but also housing insecurities because some of them were unable to pay rent for their apartments.

For UCSD seniors, many of them feel insecure about entering the job markets after the pandemic. As the unemployment rate has increased rapidly across the United States, many of these college seniors felt that the job markets would be especially hard for them to enter because of how they would have to compete against millions of other individuals for reduced slots for new jobs.

ii. Family

Many of the Students at UCSD fear that their families may catch the virus. Especially since trips to the grocery store and other necessities require going outside, for some of the students, being stuck away from their family has made it hard for them to keep their parents and siblings and other family members on top of what the recommendations are for keeping safe when exiting their house. This is a source for worry because of the possibility of losing a loved one to the virus.

iii. Personal Health

Some students have also mentioned breaking down because of how real they felt the threat of the virus was. Because they were already in a weakened state of distress because of being forced to stay at home, some of the students mentioned how the news showing the rising number of cases and death made them lose hope and sometimes cry/freak out because of how the disease could be right outside of their doors.

e. Anger/Frustration/Annoyance

Some of the students faced anger and frustration because of the abrupt change in their daily lives including moving home and certain members of the public attempting to reduce the significance of the disease.

i. Public

As certain members of the public has voiced their opinions of how they believe that the virus is nothing much to worry about, many of the UCSD students have experienced frustrations because they see that these people are the ones who are trying to spread misinformation during a time where many are catching the disease and dying to it. Their frustrations of other individuals not

taking the pandemic seriously is important in showing how seriously they are taking the pandemic themselves because they know what is at stake.

ii. Family

Certain students, many of whom lived on campus, were encouraged to go home to protect themselves from the threats of COVID-19. With the unexpected move back home, many of the students' families were unprepared, forcing students to study and do work in less than ideal situations. For some of the students, the chaos of trying to do online classes at home has driven many of them to stress and annoyance because they have no other options to do their work free from distractions such as working at the library because of the pandemic.

f. Coping

Many students have attempted to deal with their different emotions during their time at home. Such as watching Netflix or working out, many of the students say that this is important towards keeping them sane inside their homes.

g. Relief

Students have also said that they were at times relieved because of how many other people were working together towards a common goal. It made them happy because at a time when the world was suffering, many people came together to help protect not only themselves but also one another by staying inside. Other students have also mentioned how they were happy that the time at home has allowed for them to self-reflect, calm down, and relieve stress because things were much slower than when school and jobs were in person.

h. Hopeful

At the end of it all, many of the students were hopeful that we would find a vaccine soon to stop the spread of the disease and return back to school.

5. Analysis



We looked at how the codes related to each other and noticed that in the concept map, although there are different stages, at any point in their situations, the return towards an emotional state of sadness, anxiety, and fatigue was an option because these issues were stemmed in the feeling of insecurity towards the safety of themselves and their loved ones.

V. Policy Implications

- a. It would be optimal for the school to send out weekly letters/emails talking about the good things that have happened during the pandemic such as advances in clinical trials of vaccines or the curve being flattened. To some of the students, the emails from the school were the only news they were getting about the pandemic and to others, with all of the negatives on the news, they wanted a sense of safety, security, and hope during these trying times.
- b. The school should also provide meeting spaces with safety precautions because a large issue that many of the students talked about included the desire to meet up with friends. This would help with their mental health because it has the capability to relieve stress since a part of their normal habits, social interactions, are returned,
- c. Reducing class sizes would also be effective in helping the students because there would not be as many distractions with in person classes than when they are at home. In which, they would not have to be susceptible to other issues such as needing to catch up after falling behind in classes.
- d. Placing flyers across the school is also important because it normalizes the safety measures that the students need to make when interacting with others across campus. Not only will this help the students feel more safe which is a major component of why they were feeling the many emotions but it will also help them cope with the current situation.

VI. Conclusion

As the pandemic continues to produce more cases, the government has implemented a stay-at-home order while the UCSD population has shifted towards online classes. This change has brought many different emotions among the student body population. While all of them

understand why these things are happening, there is an array of emotions that the students faced such as anxiety, sadness, frustration, and relief. It is important for the school community to help address these issues in the upcoming terms because it can severely impact the mental health of the students if left ignored for prolonged periods of time.