



What Now! What Next? Navigating COVID-19 Challenges

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Abstract

The motivation for this article began by observing our graduate-level students as we quickly pivoted to online delivery of their courses when COVID-19 restrictions were first introduced. We periodically used an interactive survey tool, Mentimeter, to capture their thoughts and reactions to different topics. On occasion we asked them how they were feeling. Their responses, identifying a mix of positive and negative emotions, formed the basis for this article. We have framed their responses from a number of theoretical perspectives, including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Framework, Schlossberg's 4S Transition Theory, Lazarus and Folkman's Theory of Stress and Coping, and Neault and Pickerell's Career Engagement Model. We also review research that closely aligns with the oscillating positive and negative emotional responses reported by our students as COVID continued. The article ends with recommendations from students regarding orientations and actions that utilized "COVID logic" to help them respond more resiliently and effectively to the challenges they were facing.

Keywords: career, transitions, stress, coping, engagement, COVID-19

A COVID-19 Story

On Friday, March 13, 2020, the President of the University of British Columbia in Canada sent a message to all faculty, staff, and students indicating that, as of Monday (less than 3 days later), the University would move to remote delivery of all courses. This announcement came 3 weeks before the end of the term that had begun in January of 2020, and required all courses being taught in classrooms to be immediately moved to online delivery. It also put into question the ability of programs to offer courses that were scheduled to begin in

mid-April or early May. This confronted instructors with the need to immediately transition their courses from face-to-face to online formats, and students with the prospect of delaying course and program completion.

As the days and weeks unfolded it became clear that the sense of control that we had over planning our personal and professional lives was no longer available to us, and what we *could* do was largely informed by directives from the Ministry of Health. In essence, "pre-COVID logic" no longer applied.

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In writing this article, we are aware that our perspectives are based in our own cultural context that brings its own set of opportunities, resources, and challenges. Although, across the world, we are all on a COVID journey, we do not have equitable resources available to us in experiencing it or finding our way through ever-changing complexities. This is consistent with what other researchers have recently reported – social injustices and inequities have been exacerbated by the pandemic (Osborn et al., 2021).

Our intention with this article, however, is to provide an overview of our experience as postsecondary educators of counselling psychology with a particular focus on our students' shifting experiences over time. We will also include information resulting from presentations that we offered remotely to conferences and webinars in Canada and other parts of the world, where we asked post-secondary educators and students about how they were feeling, and what they did to try to manage the challenges they faced. Given that we are beginning to experience a "new normal" characterized by continued contextual constraints and uncertainty, we will also consider what adaptations may be needed to our approaches and models to career development as we move forward.

Theoretical Perspectives

COVID-19 has had a wide-reaching impact on wellbeing and career development for many people around the world. To examine this impact, we will examine the interconnectedness of systems and the impact of ongoing transitions through several theoretical perspectives.

The Interconnectedness of Systems

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory Framework can provide a useful model for considering the impact of COVID – 19 on different aspects of our lives. His

model acknowledges multiple levels of interacting systems: individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy.

Individual. At the individual level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), as the pandemic began, it radically shifted routines and levels of life involvement for individuals around the world. People experienced varying degrees of social and physical isolation. Many had no work; others were busier than ever – providing essential front-line products and services or working from home while concurrently caring for children and other family members. Parents in many locations were tasked with the additional responsibility of homeschooling students while schools were closed. At our university, students, staff, and faculty members were challenged to use their knowledge and skills differently.

Interpersonal. Many changes were precipitated by the fact that, at the interpersonal level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), our social networks were disrupted by the need to drastically reduce our social and work contacts for fear of spreading the virus. At our university, this meant that access to campus was severely restricted and all contact with students, staff, and colleagues needed to be remote.

Organizational. At the organizational level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), all the infrastructure supports that we relied upon in our daily personal and work lives were disrupted. We learned to "pivot" and pivot again as we moved all our work online. In our counsellor education program, this meant offering counselling skills and practicum courses online for the first time, raising new ethical and legal considerations that needed to be addressed. For example, in the counselling clinic course where students and instructors worked together onsite, serving clients virtually using Zoom, safety procedures needed to be approved by the university for those onsite; screening was enhanced to ensure client suitability and

safety; students were trained in virtual counselling skills and risk assessment when working remotely with clients; and informed consent procedures, client safety plans, and other client forms were adjusted to reflect the specific risks of online counselling and to facilitate email transmission. All changes needed to be approved by the Dean's office and the President's office at the university as well as by the professional association that accredits the program.

Community. At the community level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this meant renegotiating with community-based practicum sites and supervisors the established practices and norms involved in offering practicum experiences for students. For the first time, online counselling hours were approved as counting toward total practicum hours. We developed a 13-step safety plan that became integrated into the students' contracts with each practicum setting; without such plans, the university's liability insurance would not have covered the students' practicum during the pandemic. These plans included requirements to ensure students' physical safety during the pandemic, and procedures to ensure confidentiality of recorded sessions, client safety, and effective remote supervision. The community settings were extremely cooperative in meeting these new requirements, facilitating our students' successful completion of their practicum hours under highly exceptional circumstances.

Public policy. Parameters surrounding what *could* happen through all of these levels were determined by public policy, driven by governmental attempts to keep people as safe as possible as ways to mitigate the dangers presented by the virus continued to evolve. Prior to the pandemic, public or government policy guided our lives but largely in the background. When COVID-19 was recognized as a global pandemic, these policies became very visible with daily or weekly announcements of rules that influenced all other levels in

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model. These policies dictated how many people could gather together, safety mandates – including travel restrictions and the number of days in isolation if exposed to the virus, and who would be vaccinated and when. At our university, policies resulted in almost all staff, faculty, and students working remotely for over 1 year, with the exception of a few clinical courses such as the counselling clinic previously described.

The Impact of Ongoing Transitions

As time went on and COVID-19 cases increased and decreased over several “waves,” it became increasingly clear that there were a range of opinions regarding the most effective way to reduce the numbers of people getting sick. In other words, the direction forward was unclear, and the future outcome remained uncertain – with no clear indication of what a more stable “new normal” might look like or when it might come. That is a textbook definition of a situation that induces stress.

In terms of career development, people were thrown into an unexpected transition that affected all aspects of their lives (Osborn et al., 2021; Woodbridge et al., 2021). They were challenged to move through successive stressful transitions as they re-negotiated work, school, childcare, personal activities, and social relationships to achieve a new sense of balance that would promote their resilience and sustainability as the pandemic continued. Similarly, a wellbeing survey of over 1,000 Canadian postsecondary students, commissioned by Studiosity (2021), found that 74% of the postsecondary student respondents indicated that COVID-19 had negatively impacted their college/university experience. This was, in part, due to moving their courses online (79%), having less face-to-face contact with instructors (77%), and experiencing challenges meeting new people and making friends (69%).

Throughout the pandemic, we checked in with our own students using a web-based

interactive survey tool called Mentimeter. Figure 1 provides an example of word clouds generated by four different groups of students, mid-pandemic. Each word cloud in Figure 1 represents a group of 15 to 20 counselling psychology students at the beginning of one of the required courses in their master's program; the samples represented mostly female students, generally in their late 20s to early 40s, who were juggling work, school, and other life roles. The September 2020 sample is from the beginning of the second term offered online (and, in some cases, the first course that students were taking in the programs). The January 2021 sample coincided with the beginning of the third online term; some of these students had completed all their courses up to this point in the program online.

As shown in Figure 1, their feelings varied; responses to other Mentimeter questions also revealed differences in their living situations (e.g., living alone or with family), as well as their access to work (i.e., some had become immediately unemployed; others worked from home; still others, declared to be "essential workers" continued to report to work throughout the lockdown). Travel restrictions and public health orders to reduced contact beyond immediate households. Many students and faculty members lost access to core elements of the individual and interpersonal levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, including such social supports as visits with family, friends, and colleagues; community activities; shared meals; childcare; and even exercising in group settings indoors. Finally, due to the uniqueness of the pandemic, many coping strategies that had worked in the past were no longer applicable or accessible. Each individual's lived experience of the pandemic was unique. However, as time went on, "tired" began to join "excited" and "anxious" as the biggest (i.e., most frequent) words on the word cloud – the pandemic was taking its toll. By May 2021, when we facilitated an online

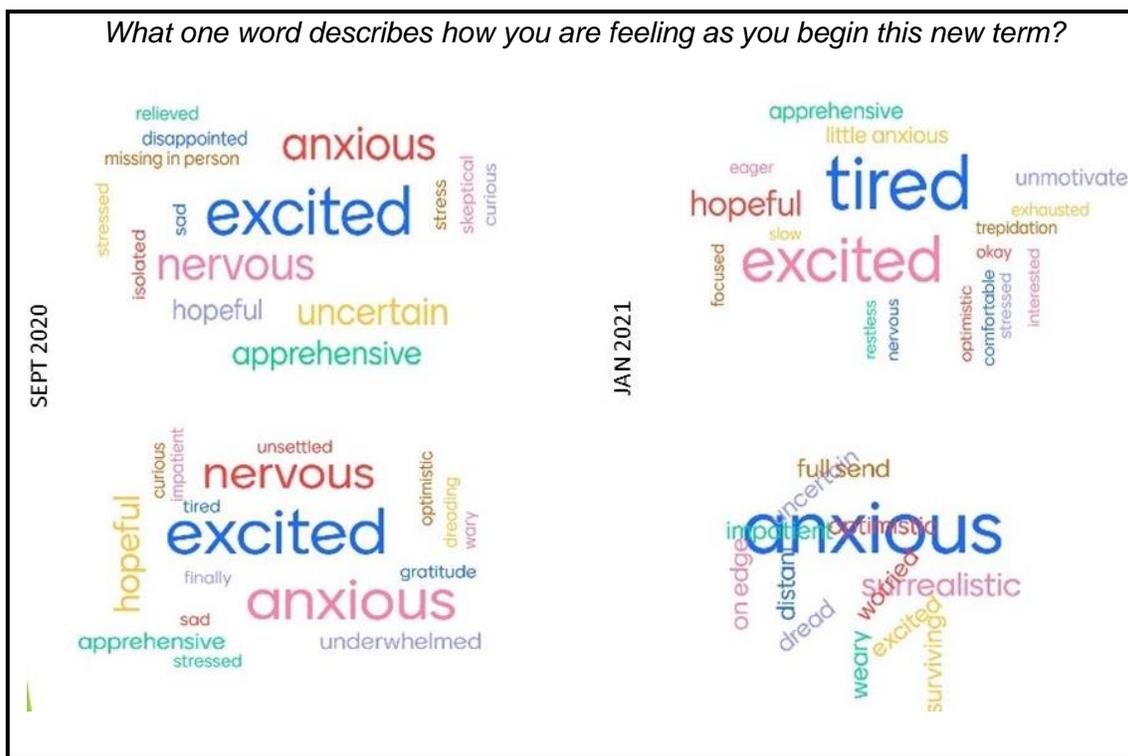
presentation on the changes and transitions related to the COVID-19 pandemic to a group of post-secondary educators and their students in an Eastern European country, the most frequent word for that group was "exhausted," followed by a mix of words reflecting both negative and positive emotions. Also noteworthy was that a range of positive and negative emotions were typically expressed by individual respondents – the experience of the pandemic seemed to be neither positive or negative but, rather, both concurrently – and this was replicated in both Canada and Eastern Europe.

Several researchers have offered theories and models related to transitions, stress and coping, resilience, and engagement that can potentially help examine student reports of their pandemic experience. These frameworks may offer guidance on effectively moving forward. A few of these will be introduced in the next sections and applied to our COVID-19 case example.

Schlossberg's 4S model. Anderson et al. (2011) described several types of transitions, including those that are anticipated, unanticipated, or anticipated but failed to happen, calling the latter "non-events." During the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals experienced multiple transitions – plans for travel and most in-person events were postponed or cancelled in many parts of the world and, as the pandemic continued, many people became increasingly reluctant to make any plans at all. Weddings were cancelled, memorial services were postponed, graduation ceremonies were held online, and at work and home people learned to connect virtually as Zoom and other similar online meetings became the norm.

Although the reach of the pandemic was global, it became increasingly clear that the experience of it was far from uniform. Schlossberg's (2011) 4S model helps to highlight some of the individual differences

Figure 1. Student Responses to Mentimeter Survey



that resulted in vastly different impacts and lived experiences. The 4S model comprises the “self” (one’s personal characteristics and psychological resources), the “situation” (including what triggered it, the timing and duration, the resultant changes, previous experiences, and concurrent stressors), “support” (including social supports and other resources), and “strategies” which include coping resources and taking or inhibiting action.

Applying Schlossberg’s (2011) 4S model to our students, we heard wildly varying stories of their transition experiences. Some spoke of non-events – they had given up work, housing, and social connections to relocate to Vancouver, one of the most expensive Canadian cities to live in, specifically to attend university in person; then all classes went online for the next 4 trimesters (16 months in all), making the relocation unnecessary and the in-person university experience unattainable. Others

had practicum experiences carefully planned that were cancelled; still others had their graduation plans cancelled or delayed. The individual students and faculty themselves brought diverse characteristics to the pandemic experience; some welcomed the opportunity to work from home while others found it incredibly isolating. Some of their homes were spacious with good technologies and Internet access; others were relying solely on their Smart phones for attending classes via Zoom and even writing their assignments. Some were optimistic and resilient; others were discouraged and anxious. The students reported a wide range of coping strategies, with some staying connected to loved ones via Zoom and Facetime, while others relocated to live with parents, close family members, or friends. Some added more courses to each term, taking advantage of time off work or the flexibility of working from home; others took fewer courses, extending the duration of their program to mitigate the impact of “Zoom

fatigue” from taking classes and engaging in work-related meetings solely online.

Oscillating emotions. Carver (1998) proposed a model that suggested possible responses to an adverse event that include thriving, resilience (recovery), survival with impairment, and succumbing. He found that people respond differently to adverse events, depending on a range of personality variables (e.g., optimism), contextual variables (e.g., social support), and situational variables (e.g., the coping strategies available to them). This oscillation of positive and negative emotions was also reported by Chonody (2021) in her study of graduate school experiences of 16 social work students during the COVID-19 lockdown in the fall term of 2020; all the students in this study were women in their 20s or early 30s.

Similarly, Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) model of stress and coping revealed that responses to a stressful situation are predicted by how individuals appraise that situation in terms of its level of threat to them. In the context of COVID, a broad range of appraisals are evident, from seeing it as a dangerous threat to the health of individuals and to the capacity of our healthcare systems, to viewing it as a less serious medical condition, to seeing it as a hoax. Depending on the appraisal of the situation, according to Lazarus and Folkman, people may respond in one or more of three ways: problem-focused coping, which involves acting on the source of the stress such as getting vaccinated or wearing a mask; emotion-focused coping, which involves responding emotionally to the stress; and avoidance-focused coping, which involves passively avoiding dealing with the underlying source of the stress. In the case of COVID-19, all of these responses are understandable given the intermittent success countries are having as they address the challenges of the continuing pandemic. Therefore, reducing or eliminating

the source of our stress seems to be out of our individual control.

The high level of emotional turmoil experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic is not new. Osborn and her colleagues (2021), in their introduction to a special issue on the impact of COVID-19 on career development, reported that “COVID-19 just amplified this reality on a much more intense and rapid scale” (p. 281). William Borgen’s research with various colleagues over the past four decades identified a roller coaster model of positive and negative emotions amongst the unemployed (Borgen & Amundson, 1987; Borgen & Edwards, 2019). While on the emotional roller coaster, individuals tended to experience rapid oscillations of emotions - feeling optimistic about a scheduled job search or interview and then, when not getting the job, feeling sad, frustrated, and hopeless. These rapid changes in emotions were characterized as an emotional yo-yo, which seemed to take on a life of its own as the job search process repeated, with the positive emotions diminishing and the negative feelings intensifying over time.

A similar oscillation between positive and negative responses was apparent in W. Borgen, Butterfield, and Amundson’s (2010) study into the experience of workers who self-identified as doing well with changes that affected their work. What was surprising in that study was the range of negative emotions that were expressed by participants who had identified as “doing well.” The “doing well” group when feeling down, worked to bounce back up again. As time went on, although resilient, these workers recognized the excessive energy that they needed to maintain a positive view of their situations and, when it was possible, changed employers. This is an example of problem-focussed coping as described by Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

However, in our current COVID situation, there is no alternate context

available – nowhere to escape the pandemic. Interpreting this through the lens of Carver's (1998) model, individuals have a reduced range of coping strategies to employ. For some people, this may induce a response similar to experimental neurosis – a condition in which someone is placed in a problem-solving or decision-making situation that is essentially unsolvable. In such situations, responses can range from fear to frustration to anger – all of which we have seen demonstrated in many communities throughout the pandemic. Lipman-Blumen (1975) framed this type of oscillation of responses to repeated transitions as being on a continuum from “pervasiveness” to “boundedness.” Finding a way to contain the pandemic experience rather than allowing it to permeate all aspects of our lives is an ongoing challenge for those overcome by the pandemic and those who are trying to assist them, as revealed in Chonody's (2021) article title: “I'm going to need a lot of therapy for this someday.”

Sustaining engagement. The Career Engagement Model (Neault & Pickerell, 2019; Borgen & Pickerell, 2020) offers a framework for considering the intersection of individual and contextual factors during the types of career transitions experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Optimal career engagement requires an ongoing realignment of challenge and capacity and can be useful in mitigating the emotional oscillation previously described. Challenge comprises both motivating work and meaningful opportunities – clearly, for many individuals, there were changes to both components during the pandemic; in some cases, the challenge was higher and in other cases, lower, as access to work and opportunities in other life roles shifted. Capacity, on the other hand, comprises a mix of individual and organizational/contextual factors that include resources, relationships, workload, wellbeing, and fit (R. Borgen & Pickerell, 2020). During various phases of the pandemic, each of these aspects of capacity was impacted differently depending

on individual situations and context; lockdowns, supply-chain disruptions, isolation, working with limited access to childcare, colleagues, or needed equipment, and a general increase in anxiety and decrease in wellbeing took its toll. Woodbridge et al. (2021), for example, reported on the mediating effect of social support in their study of 475 women, 19 to 72 years old, who were employed as staff within a midwestern American university and affiliated healthcare system and were juggling careers and caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic. In this study, Woodbridge and her colleagues used the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to assess the extent to which individuals felt supported by their family, friends, and others. Perhaps the most damaging impact of the pandemic, across many contexts, has been the isolation from social supports that resulted from lockdowns, travel restrictions, working from home, and being forced to make difficult choices about which supportive relationships could remain inside one's social “bubble.”

Moving Forward: Career Development in the “New Normal”

As seen in the Mentimeter results previously displayed in Figure 1, a range of emotions surfaced in response to the pandemic. Over time, it became more exhausting and overwhelming to continue navigating the ongoing transitions with new mandates, responsibilities, and disappointments. However, the career engagement framework offers many potential intervention points (Neault & Pickerell, 2019). Too much challenge for available capacity results in a feeling of being overwhelmed; too little, on the other hand leaves one feeling underutilized. Leaving problems unaddressed in either direction, such as with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) previously described avoidance-focused coping, can result in disengagement. Therefore, as with many career development approaches, early intervention is imperative.

Sometimes taking on a new challenge or gamifying challenges that might otherwise be considered frustrating (Rochat & W. Borgen, 2021) can help to move an individual more closely towards optimal engagement. Other times, however, especially when the individual has become overwhelmed by the situation at work or in other life roles, reducing the level of challenge can be helpful. Examples during the pandemic included offering students extensions for assignments, reducing their overall workload to mitigate “Zoom fatigue,” postponing their practicum placements, or stretching out their program of studies over an additional semester or two. The capacity components also offer a variety of intervention points – for overwhelmed students, exploring where capacity could be added was crucial. Interventions included offering technical support; providing opportunities for social connections, even if only online; and discussing the intersection of work and school with their other life roles, looking for synergies or opportunities to delegate.

At the end of one practicum course (the final course in the master’s of counselling psychology program), students were asked to share what helped and hindered their successful completion of that final component of their program. They identified skills, strengths, and supports that have relevance for others in similar career/life transitions. Included in their statements were the following pieces of advice for others:

- Trust that you know more than you think you do.
- Don't be too hard on yourself if you're having a tough day. Be patient.
- Don't expect to feel in the groove right away; it takes a while. Keep a sustainable pace and be willing to change your timeline goal. You won't be any good to anyone (including yourself) if you go full speed all the way through. Be open to trying new things and be gentle with yourself if something doesn't work.

- Forgive yourself for taking time to finish your degree. You are training for a career. Being a counsellor is not a place you ever “arrive” at. It’s a forever journey. Don’t rush.
- Self-care! Have confidence in yourself; it’s amazing how much you learn and how much you will improve.
- Keep an appointment with yourself to exercise and stretch your body each day (or most days)! Your mind will thank you.
- Protect your home and family life.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help!
- Utilize your peers and supervisor for feedback.
- Ask for DIRECT guidance on how to counsel online.

These statements seem to reflect an understanding that “COVID logic” that recognizes the contextual limits set by the pandemic needs to be acknowledged in taking an even-tempered approach to living with and addressing the career, social, economic, and personal issues and challenges that are been experienced. It follows that professionals offering career development services will need to adopt a broad view of the personal, social, economic, and career issues that they may need to address. This may include the use of counselling orientations and processes that create a strong and authentic relationship with clients despite connecting solely online, hearing about all aspects of their clients’ situations, helping to normalize their reactions to their situations, focusing on their assets and strengths, connecting them with needed resources, and collaborating with them in developing doable and flexible actions plans (Borgen, 1997; Irving et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on mental health, overall wellbeing, relationships, career development, and ongoing engagement in studying and work. Acknowledging the

interconnectedness of all of the systems that impact our life and work roles is more important than ever before. Conceptualizing diverse pandemic experiences through theoretical perspectives that consider emotional responses to transitions and

recognize the co-existence of both positive and negative reactions can help to mitigate anxiety and exhaustion and to foster resilience and engagement as together we work to establish a new normal.

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