



COPING WITH CHANGE:

Promoting resilience in post-secondary students

Purpose

- This tip sheet provides information on how life changes impact post-secondary students.
- We examine research on resilience and mental health promotion for young people experiencing changes or disruptions to their normal routines, with a focus on those attending university.
- Research findings within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are included.
- We offer some suggestions for encouraging resilience in young people.

Introduction

Most post-secondary students — those who pursue a level of education beyond high school — are young people between 18 and 25 years old. This is a developmental period identified as “emerging adulthood” and typically involves changes in social lives and responsibilities; shifts in opinions, perspectives or world views; the start of a career; and other major life changes.¹ Students in this age group also experience the stress of transitioning to college or university.²

More recently, these young adults have also had to cope with COVID-19 and its associated impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic is referred to as a multisystem disaster because it negatively affects a variety of systems, including:

Examples

- family systems — inaccessibility of childcare services³
- financial systems³ and career impacts — reduced job prospects⁴
- social systems — experiences of loneliness or isolation^{3, 5}
- educational systems — increased barriers to post-secondary education⁶

Coping strategies

Coping is defined as actions or efforts made to manage stressful situations or events.⁷ Coping can be adaptive or maladaptive⁷ and there are three main categories.⁸

- Problem-focused coping involves trying to think through possible actions and solutions.⁸
- Social support involves seeking out others, such as peers, for support.^{8,9}
- Meaning-focused coping involves trying to change the cognitive understanding or framing of situations rather than changing the situation itself.⁸



In a 2017 study, Giamos and colleagues examined the coping strategies of post-secondary students at five Canadian universities, looking at how students were coping with mental health challenges.¹⁰ Overall, students with mental health concerns displayed positive and adaptive coping strategies, including:

- accessing campus resources when coping with stressors and challenges
- using practical strategies, such as list-making and other approaches, to keep up with academic demands
- taking breaks or watching TV
- connecting with others (females are more likely to use social and emotional aspects of coping)⁸
- engaging in physical activity and relaxation practices (running, meditation)



Building resilience

Resilience is the ability to adapt to challenging situations or circumstances.¹¹ Resilience is viewed in three separate ways: an outcome in overcoming adversity; a characteristic or trait that individuals possess; or a process used when faced with challenges.¹²

With the COVID-19 pandemic bringing impacts on a global scale, leading researchers have updated the conceptualization of resilience to describe it in the face of multisystem disasters.¹² Specifically:

- Resilience is not just an individual trait, but also exists in communities and wider systems.
- Resilience can be transmitted environmentally and is not a fixed concept (a community may have a “resilient” response in one area, but not in another).
- Promoting resilience can involve various systems, such as the individual system (ensuring young adults’ perceptions of self)⁹ and the community system (universities working to increase their engagement with students).¹⁴

Different factors contribute to levels of resilience and coping in young adults. These can include psychosocial characteristics³; impacts of COVID-19⁶; social support and social consequences of COVID-19⁹; resilience interventions;¹² and actions by institutions.¹⁴



Psychosocial characteristics

Psychosocial characteristics — the influences of social factors on an individual's mental health and behaviour — can affect resilience in children and young adults.³ The presence of these characteristics helps build resilience, while their absence negatively influences resilience.

- At the individual level, characteristics such as the quality of relationships and caregiving (trust, belonging), problem-solving skills and positive self-perception contribute to resilience.³
- Routines, cohesion and problem-solving are among the characteristics that contribute to resilience at the family, school and community levels.³
- Improving young adults' perception of self reduces the mental health impacts of COVID-19.⁹

Special impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on some post-secondary students than others, and the support offered to these populations should be tailored to their needs⁶ to effectively promote resilience and coping.

- Females are generally more likely to experience negative impacts than males.¹⁵
- Post-secondary students with children and other caregiving responsibilities experience more disruption to their educational career compared with those students with no caregiving responsibilities.⁶
 - Post-secondary students with caregiving duties are more likely to be low-income or Black, Indigenous or people of colour compared to students with no caregiving responsibilities.⁶
- Individuals express higher levels of distress if they experienced:
 - distress prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (for example, social isolation)
 - feelings of hopelessness
 - negative impacts that emerged from the pandemic¹⁶

Social support and COVID-19

Social and peer support are important elements in promoting resilience in young adults.⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic has limited our opportunities to connect with others, and post-secondary students have reported increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.^{5, 14} However, young adults differ in their experiences based on the timing of the onset of their mental health concerns.



- Young adults with mental health concerns prior to the onset of the pandemic are more likely to experience loneliness (which is linked to poorer mental health outcomes) than those without mental health challenges.⁹
- Young adults with mental health concerns that emerged during the pandemic:⁹
 - are less likely to have in-person interactions with friends or family
 - are less likely to leverage virtual communication
 - are more likely to experience isolation

Resilience interventions

Formal resilience interventions are used to promote the health and well-being of post-secondary students.¹² Resilience interventions have been specifically useful when attempting to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on diverse students and communities.

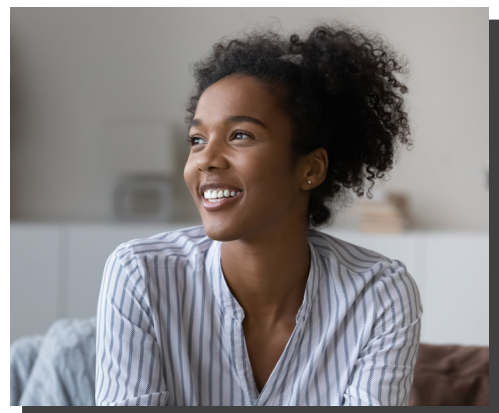
To meet the needs of diverse students, post-secondary resilience programs should:

- be designed with the culture of individuals, and the type of stressors they experience, in mind
- be peer- and community-led
- use outcome measures that are culturally informed and reflect the values of individuals
- leverage students' strengths to promote change and build resilience
- consider that strength and resilience look different from person to person

Support from institutions

Support and resources offered by educational institutions play a key role in promoting the resilience of young people struggling with the impacts of COVID-19. Recent evidence suggests that universities should:

- increase their engagement efforts with students¹⁴
- consider how virtual mental health services may improve accessibility for some students¹⁴
- encourage students to increase help-seeking behaviours¹⁴
- address the isolation and loneliness that students experience with COVID-19^{5, 14}
- use resilience interventions that promote the well-being of diverse students and communities¹²





Tips for supporting young people

Taking a personalized approach to fostering resilience in children and young adults is paramount.^{3, 6, 9, 12} When assessing their experiences, consider asking these questions.

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted them? Are there any unique considerations for addressing their individual or community needs (for example, caregiving or financial needs)?⁶
- Are they experiencing loneliness or isolation?⁹ Are there ways they could connect with social support in person or online?
- Are there ways for them to reach out to their peers or other social supports to talk about challenges or how to cope?
- Do they have examples of times they have solved a problem well? Can this be applied to the current situation?

When working to provide young adults with resources or supports, consider the following questions.

- Are there resilience or coping interventions available in the community?¹² Are these interventions appropriate for the individual (for example, are they culturally appropriate)?
- Are post-secondary institutions providing services such as virtual mental health services or other supports?¹⁴



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