

COLLEGE OF POPULATION HEALTH

Mental Health and Wellbeing of First Year Jefferson University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Photo-Elicitation Study

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Student Mental Health: Background

Background

Students' mental health and wellbeing is being devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic

- 71% of students in the US reported increased stress and anxiety due to COVID-19¹
- 1 in 4 people aged 18-24 seriously considered suicide in June 2020²
- Jefferson University students are experiencing social isolation, loneliness and burnout³

Background

Mental health problems are heightened among first year students in higher education⁴

- 1 in 3 college freshman struggle with a mental health illness
- The two most common disorders found were major depression (affecting 21 percent of the students) and generalized anxiety disorder (19 percent)
- Little is known about how this vulnerable population is experiencing COVID-19

Research Question

How do first year Thomas Jefferson University students perceive their mental health and wellbeing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

Timeline and Participants

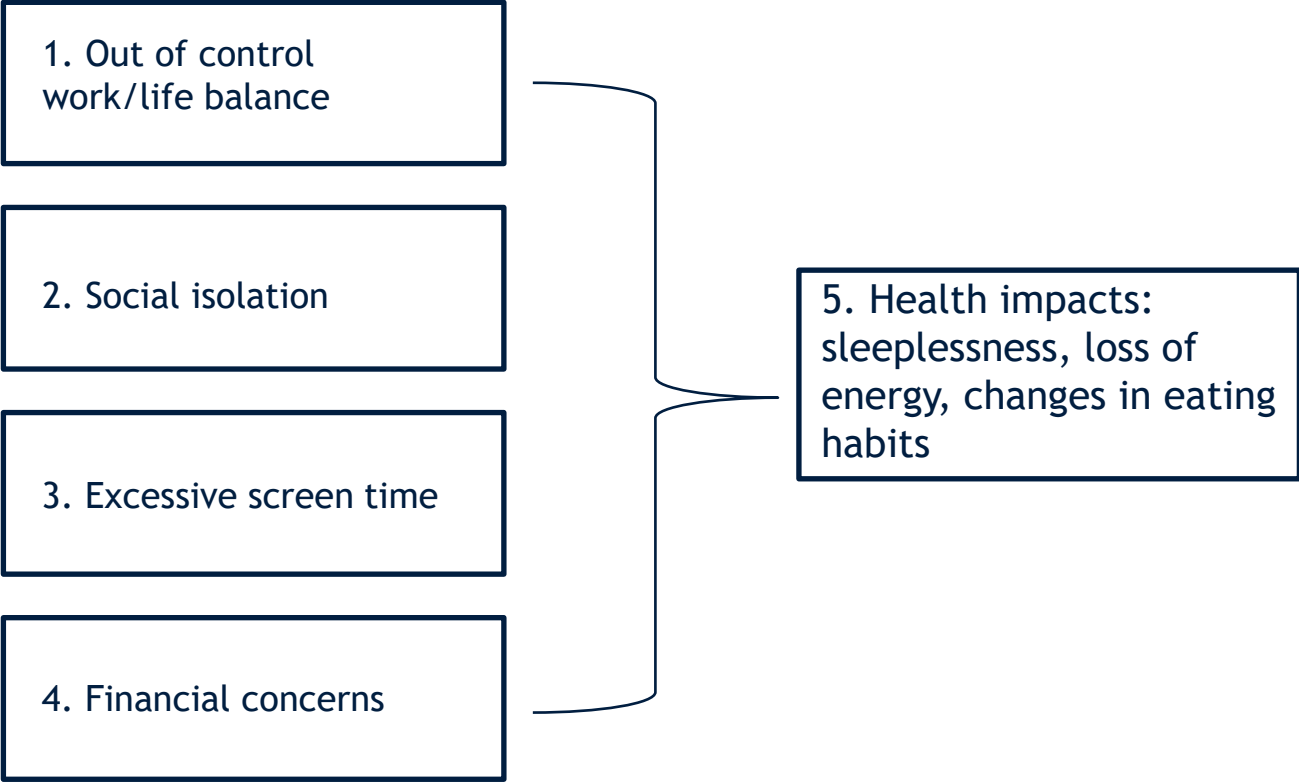
- Student researchers began conducting qualitative interviews October 2020
- We have conducted 9 interviews to date
- Inclusion criteria:
 - First year student in any program at Jefferson University
 - Have not participated in the previous photo elicitation study

Study Procedures

- Interviews were guided by photo elicitation
- Participants were instructed to take 5-10 photos over a week
- Preliminary analyses included identifying photos and quotes that best captured students' mental health, grouping together categories of similar concepts, and looking for patterns among categories to develop themes
- All photos in this presentation were taken by participants, who consented to us using photos in presentations

Results

An Overview of First Year Students' Mental Health and Wellbeing During COVID-19



Theme 1: Out of Control Work/Life Balance



“[It] feels like nothing’s ever done, um, because it’s like...it all exists in the same place. Work, school’s never done. Like I’m always at school and I’m always at home cause it’s the same place.”

Theme 1: Out of Control Work/Life Balance

“I think I would’ve viewed my room more as just a relaxing, ‘this is where I’ll sleep and unwind’ spot, but now I think I’m kinda mingling it - with my work and my sleep and my relaxing, **it’s just all here, in this room.**”

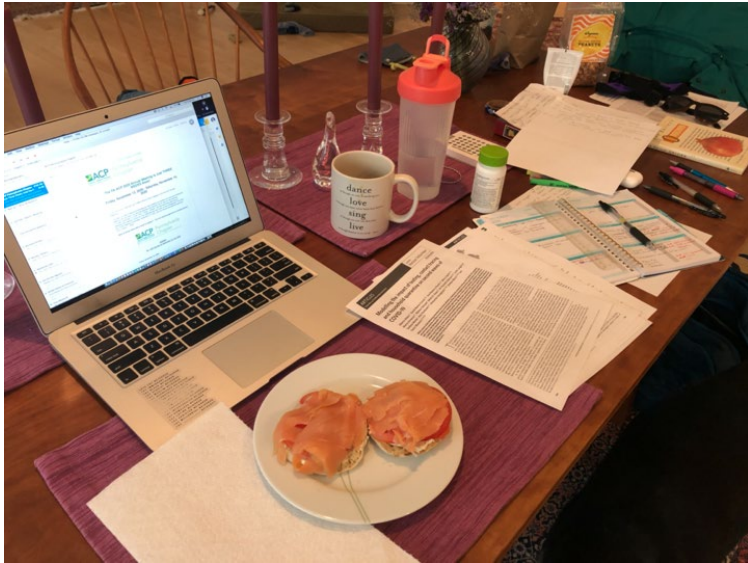


Theme 1: Out of Control Work/Life Balance



“[I] have this like **internal guilt** because you're like ‘Oh my gosh, I should be studying’ because that's all we've had, 'cause it's all you can do. Like if you're not studying, what are you doing?”

Theme 1: Out of control work/life balance



“Now I don’t have that physical delineation between like ‘I’m at home, I need to get ready, I need to have my food...and then go to work.’... I tend to forget about eating sometimes, especially if the work is right in front of me.”

Theme 2: Social Isolation

1. Close relationships
2. Classmates
3. Strangers

Interviewer: “And what does it feel like to try to connect with other people...?”

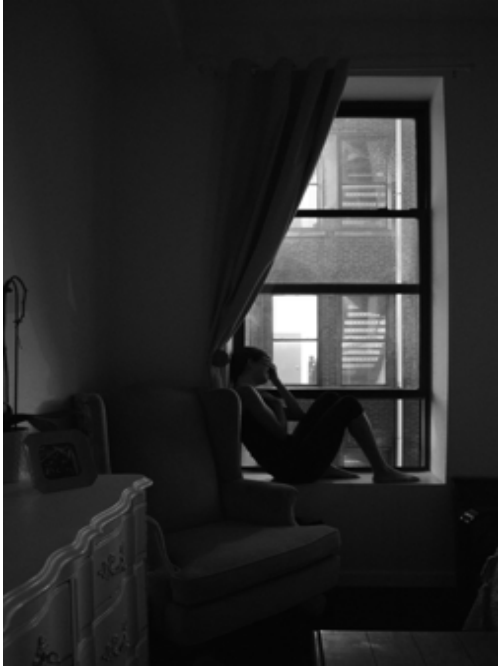
Participant: “**Lacking.** Um...yeah. **Lacking.** Cuz it’s like you’re not...it’s not complete. It’s partially there but it’s not complete.”

Theme 2: Social Isolation--Close Relationships



“ I think I was crying in this picture... because...my mom never called me to say happy birthday. She texted me but like nobody called and sang happy birthday to me and that was like really hard for me - feeling so alone...”

Theme 2: Social Isolation--Classmates



“I think there’s...this really huge disconnect in our class because we don’t know anyone. I know 10 people, and that’s it...there’s just this like emptiness, there’s this void, **there’s this disconnect**, and it’s just, it’s so, it’s just weird.”

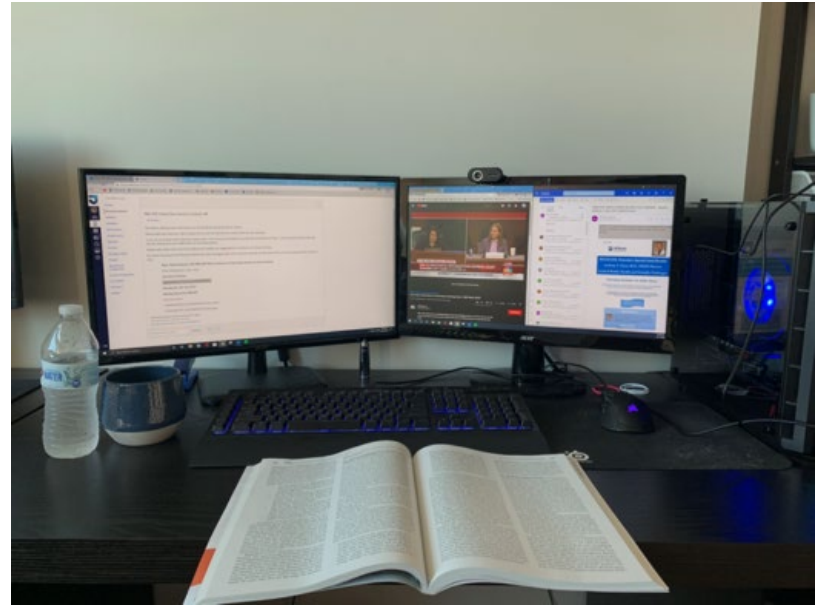
Theme 2: Social Isolation--Strangers



“...It’s just like kinda reinforcing the weird separation of people right now...outside people don’t exist, cuz like everyone’s in their own little world. Like, they’re in their world and you’re in your world...it’s just, like, so separated. Like...you exist and nobody else does.”

Theme 3: Excessive Screen Time

“So there's just always something that I feel like I need to be monitoring or paying attention to and just all of it combined... it's kind of the political climate going on combined with like the local news going on and like local events happening...”



Theme 3: Excessive Screen Time

“ [T]his is literally my view 20 hours of the day, unfortunately. I wake up and that’s my view, I go back to sleep and that’s the last thing I see.”



Theme 4: Financial Concerns

“[We] had to spend like \$500...which was **totally not in the budget**, on noise cancelling headphones because uh there's jack-hammering like 24/7 and um it makes it really hard, especially during the first couple weeks. [The] library wasn't open and...you were trying to get work done and you have exams or quizzes every week...”

Theme 4: Financial Concerns

“I’m supposed to be on scholarship right now, and I’m assuming because of COVID that bureaucracy has gotten all messed up, so...**for right now my sister’s paying my rent.**”

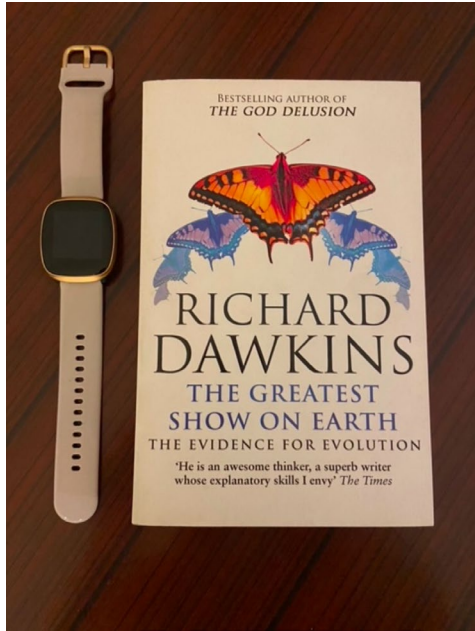
Theme 4: Financial Concerns

“[T]he accounting office has been completely over... email and I’m in India. It’s been very hard to transfer funds...and they don’t have a phone...that they are picking up so I have to solely communicate via email and its not been helpful at all...I keep getting reminder emails and I’m just like, ‘You guys are not responding the way I want you like I need proper information.’ [It’s] almost the end of the semester [and] I’ve been in touch with them since...before the start of my course.”

Theme 5: Health Impact--Sleeplessness

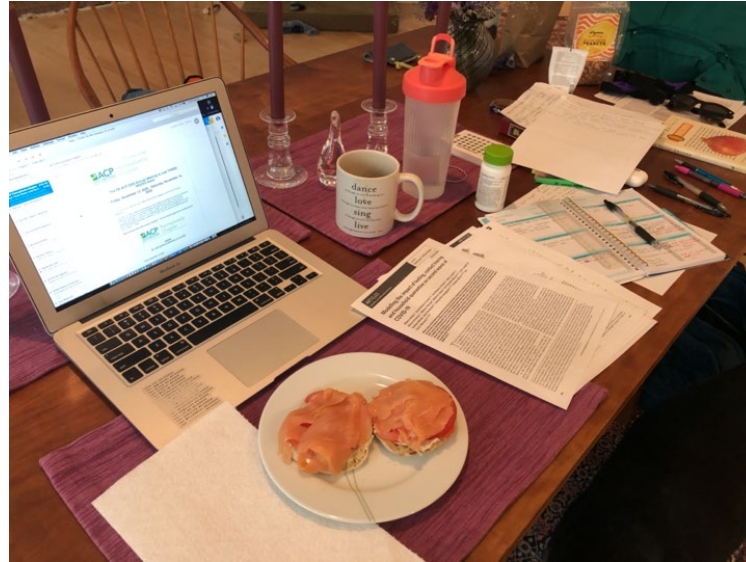
“[A]ll my existence pretty much is this apartment, so there’s no barrier between like wakefulness and being asleep so **I’ve been sleeping absolutely terribly ...** I’ve never been a good sleeper, but it’s definitely worse, um, than it was, like, pre-COVID. I’ll wake up like 10-15 times a night.”

Theme 5: Health Impact—Lack of Energy



“[T]he smart watch ... looks dead because it probably is because I haven’t been using it as much. ... [Y]ou would think it would encourage me to move more but ... **I just don’t see the point** because if you’re out and about you wear it, you count your steps and everything but now that I’m sitting in one position I just don’t have a use of it.”

Theme 5—Changes in Eating Habits



Takeaways

- Students are exhibiting a few early indications of depression-- sleeplessness, loss of energy, changes in eating habits
- For most students, screen time is both overwhelming and not an adequate replacement for social support
- Students have little time to relax and decompress, especially when work and leisure now occur in the same space

Students need help figuring out how to prioritize tasks, maintain a routine, and take breaks!

Student Suggestions

Suggestion 1: Make mental health resources more accessible

“[There’s] just been so much emails that I’ve been getting. **But I do not know the extent of mental health resources available at Jefferson.** [I know about the] library, writing center and stuff like that but I don’t remember anyone mentioning [mental health resources]...Yeah, making it more clear. Because again the emails that you get from Jefferson...I cannot go through all of that so if you can just like send particular emails saying oh you know some de-stressing activity were going to be doing this week, that would be nice...[and] definitely putting it in the subject line.”

Suggestion 2: Help students practice self-care

“[It’s] just really hard when you’re in school to make time to make a doctor’s appointment, or, you know, a dentist appointment, or a haircut, er my hair’s not been cut in three months...because they’re not open when I’m open...[and] I don’t have a car...I could get my haircut in the city but it’s expensive...So I’d be so much more willing to like get my parents to pick me up and drive me an hour home so I only have to pay \$30 for a haircut instead of \$65. That’s wild to me.”

Suggestion 3: We need to encourage students to take breaks, not limit them

“[The] undergrads don’t get a spring break next year. And I cannot put into words how unhealthy I think that is...I would honestly be willing to sign like a travel waiver. ...there is so much to be said for a one-week break from school, from college, from grad programs. Everything is so overwhelming...**People need a refresher, they need a recharge**, or they need that mid-semester like [sigh noise]. I mean you take that away from people, I’m sure that’s going to be super challenging for people’s mental health.”

Acknowledgements

- Our wonderful research participants
- Jefferson staff and faculty who gave feedback along the way



References

1. Son C, Hegde S, Smith A, Wang X, Sasangohar F. Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study. *J Med Internet Res*. 2020;22(9):e21279. Published 2020 Sep 3. doi:10.2196/21279
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