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The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Resilient Mindset and Wellbeing

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Resilient Mindset and Wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 continues to impact all Utahns' daily lives. Nationally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics,¹ Pew Research Center,² the Federal Reserve Bank,³ and sources such as the Wall Street Journal⁴ continue to report that women's employment and careers have been disproportionately impacted during this time. Utah has seen similar negative impacts on working women. For example, the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah reported that from 2019 to 2020, jobs held by women declined at a rate more than double that of men, and unemployment rose more for females than males.⁵

Over the last several months, [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) researchers have investigated many aspects related to the impact of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic on Utah women and work. An extensive, in-depth survey was opened January 2021 to all Utah women aged 20 or older who were either currently employed or who were unemployed due to the pandemic. The aim was to understand the experiences of Utah women in the labor force during the pandemic. The study collected data on a wide variety of topics and included both quantitative and open-ended questions to capture participants' perceptions and experiences. This research and policy brief is the fifth in a series of related reports.

This brief highlights the results of the survey related to the following aspects:

- 1) The connection between a resilient mindset and reported wellbeing levels,
- 2) The associations among spousal support, resilient mindset, and wellbeing,
- 3) The links between workplace support, resiliency, and wellbeing, and
- 4) The key positive foci of Utah women workers during the pandemic.

Study Background

An online survey instrument was administered to a non-probability sample of Utah women representing different settings, backgrounds, and situations (i.e., age, education, race/ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic, county/region, job type, sector/industry, hours worked per week, employment status, and workplace situation). A call for participants was announced through the UWLP monthly newsletter, social media platforms, and website. In addition, research team members worked closely with nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, government agencies, municipalities and counties, women's networks and associations, multicultural groups, businesses, universities, churches, and volunteers who all assisted in disseminating the survey to their employees

and contacts. Additionally, targeted recruitment efforts were made throughout the state to improve representation from women of different demographics and geography, including providing the survey in both English and Spanish (see additional design information in the endnotes).⁶

Overall, 3,542 Utah women completed the survey. The demographics for survey respondents are summarized in a previous brief: [The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Changes, Burnout, & Hope](#). It is important to note that this was an opt-in sample and might not be representative of the state in several respects. For example, when compared to overall state demographics, this study under sampled women of color, women with less formal education, women in lower income ranges, and women from certain industries. It is possible that opt-in respondents might share views as a group that differ from those who did not opt in.

Setting the Stage

Other reports analyzing these survey findings have demonstrated several of the negative impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on working women. This report takes a different focus, examining associations between having a resilient mindset during the pandemic and reported wellbeing levels. Resilience is defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties or “the psychological quality that allows some people to be knocked down by the adversities of life and come back at least as strong as before.”⁷ Research has found that resilient individuals more often use positive emotions to bounce back from stressful and other negative emotional experiences more quickly and effectively.⁸ In fact, creating resilient mindsets in children and adolescents is a popular area of research in the educational and clinical realms.⁹

Other research has found a connection between resilience and a growth mindset,¹⁰ which is an attitude and belief that people can cultivate and improve talents, abilities, and intelligence through efforts, strategies, and learning.¹¹ Growth-minded individuals believe that success comes from working through challenges, and they thrive when challenging themselves. On the opposite end of the continuum is the fixed mindset, which is the belief that people's basic qualities, such as intelligence and talent, are fixed traits that cannot be changed or developed. Research does suggest that a growth mindset can help individuals better overcome and even capitalize on challenges, and in some cases, structural barriers.¹² COVID-19-era research suggests a growth mindset may help individuals be better equipped to navigate pandemic challenges specifically.¹³

Overall, the resilient and growth mindsets are important angles to explore, considering the struggles and challenges

women faced during the pandemic. Although this brief focuses specifically on a resilient mindset, concepts from both the resilient and growth mindsets can help individuals, organizational leaders, and other decision makers consider two areas: 1) the importance of potential initiatives to strengthen resilience in employees, and 2) the critical nature of ensuring that organizational processes, systems, and structures are shifted to support these efforts more equitably.

The Resilient Mindset

In an attempt to explore the connections, if any, between survey participants’ perceptions of wellbeing and those who appeared to lean toward having a resilient mindset, we focused on the following question: “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.” (Respondents always indicated their agreement levels as 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neutral, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree). This question was one of a number of items included in this study originally from “The Adult State Hope Scale,” which was published in 1991.¹⁴

Before proceeding, however, we want to highlight some potential limitations of this report. First, we realize this is not a complete representation of a resilient mindset, but this question does at least partially capture elements of resilience (and hope) in that it focuses on individuals’ beliefs that they can deal with challenges they may face. Second, the data for this analysis were collected during the worst outbreak of the 2020 pandemic year to date. Earlier reports in this series have already highlighted that many respondents were experiencing burnout, lack of support, worsening mental health, and feelings of being overwhelmed. Their situation at the time may have made it difficult to fathom concepts such as hope, resiliency, or ways out of a “jam,” considering the hardship they may have just faced. Third, respondents were not aware they were answering a set of questions attempting to determine hope, abilities, or resiliency. If primed another way, they may have considered instances within a broader timeframe of their lives, but most likely assumed a pandemic angle given the purpose of the survey. In short, there is the possibility that resilience views during the pandemic might be different from resilience during “normal” times. And, finally, because the sample included more women with higher incomes and education, future research should examine if they may have had more options and “ways out of a jam” available to them.

Even with these limitations, we hope to add to a body of literature that suggests potential links between developing resilience and overall wellbeing. Importantly, examining resiliency does not negate the lack of support some women experienced during the pandemic, but offers research around the benefit of a resilient mindset that views challenges as opportunities to learn and grow. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, developing and/or strengthening resiliency could help Utah women and families be better able to rebound and thrive.

In terms of the findings, there is a wide range of views from study participants on this question, as shown in Figure 1.

Resiliency and Wellbeing During the Pandemic

Figure 1. Resilient Mindset Views (Number of Respondents)

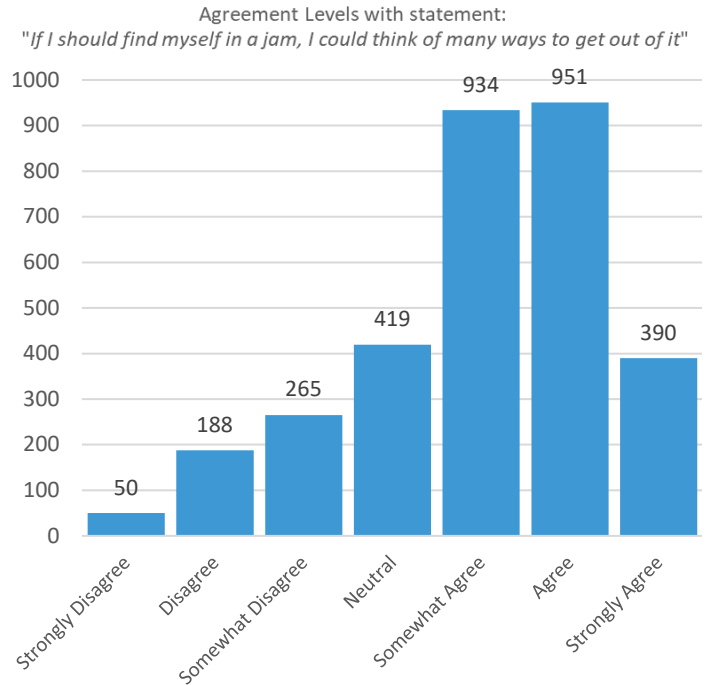


Figure 1 compares participants who maintained a resilient mindset (e.g., indicating “agree” or “strongly agree”) about being able to think of ways to overcome potential problems versus those who leaned toward a less-resilient mindset (e.g., selecting “disagree” or “strongly disagree”). As reported in previous briefs in this series, we measured perceptions of physical health, mental health, burnout, and worry about the health of loved ones, through the related survey questions highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Effect of Resilient vs. Less-Resilient Mindset on Wellbeing During Pandemic (seven-point scale)

Survey Question (Average Score)	Resilient Mindset Group	Less-Resilient Mindset Group
I feel like my physical health has declined this past year.	3.88	5.27
I feel like my mental health has declined this past year.	4.66	6.12
I feel more burned out than before the pandemic.	5.05	6.23
I worry more now about the mental and physical health of my loved ones.	5.55	6.22

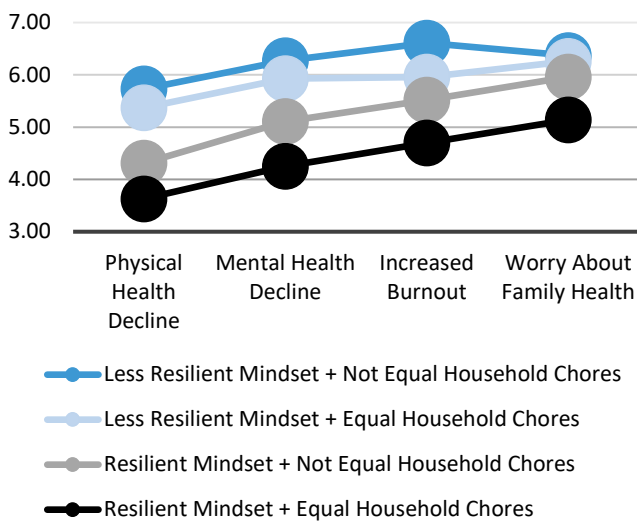
The scores in the table above are averages for reported physical health decline, mental health decline, increased burnout, and worry about loved ones. Comparing the averages, those who maintained a more resilient mindset, meaning that they could think of ways to overcome potential problems, appear to have experienced less physical health decline, less mental health decline, less additional burnout, and less worry, on average, than those who did not maintain this perspective.

Importantly, the resilient mindset question was focused on “if” they should find themselves in a jam—thus relating to respondents’ general growth mindsets.

Spousal Support, Resilient Mindset, & Wellbeing

A previous brief in this series, The Impact of COVID-19 on Utah Women and Work: Childcare and Homeschooling, examined the main effect of spousal support on wellbeing.¹⁵ That study found that working women who indicated they received equitable sharing of household chores experienced less negative impact on physical and mental wellbeing. Next, to provide deeper understanding of the potential importance of individuals keeping a resilient mindset, we compared groups of those who “strongly agree” with those who “strongly disagree” on the statement “I share household chores in my home equitably with my spouse/partner.” We evaluated the four groups (resilient vs. less-resilient mindset by equitable vs. not equitable household chores; see Figure 2). The data indicate a clear association between those who viewed less equitable sharing of household chores, decreased perceptions of physical and mental health, and increased levels of burnout and worry about family members’ health.

Figure 2. Growth Mindset by Chore Sharing on Wellbeing



Note: Lines between data points were added to help visualize close data points, rather than denote a continuous trend.

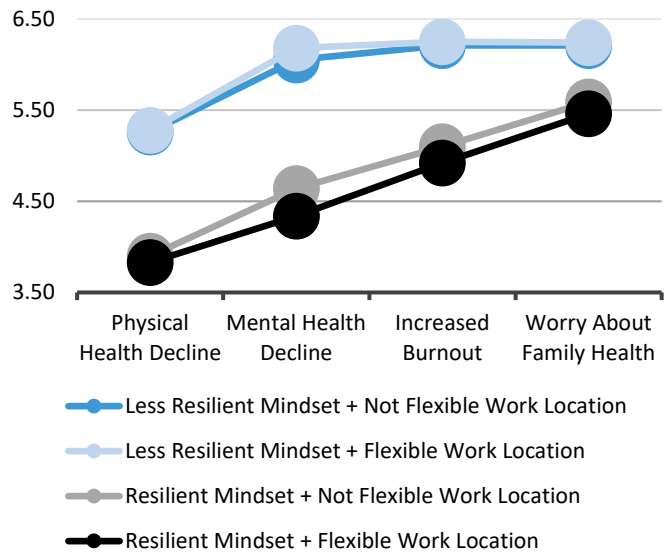
Interestingly, the resilient mindset effect appears to be even stronger than the perceived equitable chore sharing effect.

That is, working women who had a strong resilient mindset and did *not* experience equitable sharing of household chores (gray group in Figure 2) scored better (e.g., lower) on all four negative wellbeing metrics versus women who had a less-resilient mindset and who *did* experience equitable sharing of household chores (light blue group in Figure 2). Of course, the greatest difference is consistently between the group shown in blue (less-resilient mindset and not equitable household chores) and the group shown in black (resilient mindset and equitable household chores). Indeed, the resilient mindset plus equitable household chores group indicated less *agreement* regarding mental health decline, physical health decline, increased burnout, and worry about family health. These findings suggest that a resilient mindset results in better wellbeing compared with a less-resilient mindset, even given less support at home.

Workplace Support, Resiliency, & Wellbeing

An earlier study in this series—Caregiver Experiences—provided initial examination of the potential effects of workplace support and wellbeing.¹⁶ The study found that workplace support regarding flexible work location and work hours can be an important help to working women. In this section, we examine the different combinations of potential workplace accommodation and the worker’s resilient vs. less-resilient mindset in relation to aspects of wellbeing. Interpreting the data of the four groups of respondents shown in Figure 3, there is strong overlap among those with a similar level of resilient mindset, regardless of whether there was a flexible work location. Thus, the resilient mindset of the workers appears to be even more valuable than workplace location accommodation.

Figure 3. Mindset by Work Location Flexibility on Wellbeing



Note: Lines between data points were added to help visualize close data points, rather than denote a continuous trend.

This should not be taken as an excuse for organizations *not* to provide flexible work accommodation where possible, but rather as a caution that organizational systems that foster employee resilience may be an important factor in how well employees utilize such flexibility. Flexible work locations were related to low amounts of health decline, burnout, and family worries, but only for those with a resilient mindset. For those with a less resilient mindset, this flexibility was associated with high amounts of health decline, burnout, and family worries. Therefore, cultivating a resilient mindset in employees is an important step to ensuring that flexible work accommodations create benefits for both the employees and the organization.

Key Positive Foci of Utah Women

Understanding the driving motivations of those who were able to remain hopeful and resilient could provide insights for organizational leaders in terms of how to strengthen workplace cultures and practices. To do this, we focused on qualitative data from the hundreds of women employees who had more agreement with question, “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.” For this group, we examined their responses to the two open-ended questions: 1) “How has the pandemic impacted your work experience?” and 2) “What benefits, if any, have you experienced (or anticipate experiencing) in your job/career because of the COVID-19 pandemic?” The hundreds of responses from this group fit into approximately three dozen pandemic-related benefits that are organized into three main categories below:

Individual-Focused Positive Benefits

- Decreased travel time
- Enhanced cleanliness at work, school, and home
- Expanded focus on building relationships
- Fewer cars on the road
- Heightened focus and time for school
- Improved family connections
- Improved focus on what could be controlled
- Increased down time/simplified schedules and activities
- Increased efficiency and productivity
- Increased funding for college
- Increased use/learning related to online technologies
- More time for self-care
- Received stimulus money to pay off debts
- Received the vaccine
- Saved more vacation days
- Strengthened feelings of gratitude
- Strengthened time management skills

Workplace Culture Positive Benefits

- Decreased busyness at work
- Enhanced communication

- Expanded positive environment
- Felt closer/more supported in work teams
- Felt more appreciated at work
- Had the chance to demonstrate strengths
- Increased collaboration with coworkers
- Increased recognition of the importance of connections
- Increased understanding/compassionate bosses

Company-Based Positive Actions

- Created new jobs, opportunities, and demand for work
- Hired more people
- Improved performance evaluations processes and practices
- Improved work schedule flexibility
- Increased the organization’s focus on equity
- Increased work location flexibility
- Received additional pay from overtime or extra responsibilities

Recommendations

Although there were numerous caveats for the data presented in this report, some important points surfaced in terms of the importance of developing a resilient mindset, which is linked to strong perceptions of wellbeing. However, it is important to note that this study cannot claim causation. For example, it could be that resilient people feel higher levels of wellbeing or it could be that those who perceive higher wellbeing are more resilient. Importantly, however, extensive research does support the link between resilience and wellbeing.¹⁷

There are many resources available for individuals desiring to strengthen their resilient and growth mindsets. Reading *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, is a good start. In addition, there are many reputable sources with resiliency materials online, including the Mayo Clinic,¹⁸ that address how to build resilience skills that will help people endure hardships. Many companies also provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) for their employees that include counseling related to resiliency and wellbeing.

Organizational decision makers can help enable and encourage more women (and men) to develop resilience and a growth mindset. This research aligns with extensive global research finding that this type of mindset is linked to many benefits for individuals, teams, and organizations. Organizational leaders can set an example and teach a growth and resilience mindset to their employees. This can be done in the way they

- convey what the organization values (learning and perseverance vs. ready-made genius or talent),
- focus on deepening understanding as the goal of learning,
- give feedback that promotes learning and future success,
- praise employees, while conveying the processes that lead to learning,

- present skills as learnable,
- present supervisors, managers, and leaders to employees as resources for learning, and
- treat setbacks as opportunities for learning.

Overall, employers and policy makers should focus on identifying and putting into place systems and activities that help individuals develop and strengthen resilience and develop a growth mindset.

Summary

There are many factors that previous research briefs have found can impact the wellbeing of women in the workplace during the pandemic. This research brief has investigated the impact of maintaining a resilient mindset, which links to having the ability to better overcome difficulties that a person might possibly face. In doing so, we hope to share proven tools that could help Utahns cope and rebound stronger. As Utah leaders and residents do more to understand the challenges that Utah women (and men) faced related to COVID-19, a more equitable recovery can be crafted. This will, in turn, strengthen our businesses, families, communities, and the state as a whole.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021, June). *COVID-19 ends longest employment recovery and expansion in U.S. history, causing unprecedented job losses in 2020*. Monthly Labor Review.

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2021/article/covid-19-ends-longest-employment-expansion-in-ces-history.htm>

² Kochhar, R., & Bennett, J. (2021, April 14). *U.S. labor market inches back from the COVID-19 shock, but recovery is far from complete*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/14/u-s-labor-market-inches-back-from-the-covid-19-shock-but-recovery-is-far-from-complete/>

³ Boesch, T., Grunewald, R., Nunn, R., & Palmer, V. (2021, February 2). *Pandemic pushes mothers of young children out of the labor force*. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2021/pandemic-pushes-mothers-of-young-children-out-of-the-labor-force#_ftn1

⁴ Riley, K., & Stamm, S. (2021, April 27). *Nearly 1.5 million mothers are still missing from the workforce*. The Wall Street Journal. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nearly-1-5-million-mothers-are-still-missing-from-the-workforce-11619472229>

⁵ Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2021, March). *COVID-19 impacts by gender*. <https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/C19Impacts-FS-Mar2021.pdf>

⁶ While this sampling design was a combination of nonprobability sampling techniques (i.e., convenience sampling, snowball sampling, expert judgmental sampling, targeted quota sampling) and did not use a statistical probability sampling frame (through randomized contact or stratified or cluster sampling), the volume of responses and the large variety of survey-taker demographics permit many observations and provide strong support for comparing different groups of responses.

⁷ Psychology Today. (n.d.). *Resilience*.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/resilience>

⁸ Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320>

⁹ For example: Brooks, R., & Brooks, S. (2014). Creating resilient mindsets in children and adolescents: A strength-based approach for

clinical and nonclinical populations. In S. Princie-Embury, & D. Saklofaske (eds.), *Resilience interventions for youth in diverse populations* (pp. 59–82). Springer.

¹⁰ Seabrook, A. L. (2017). Fixed and growth mindset in undergraduate students: Impacts on academic achievement and resilient behaviors [Honors thesis, University of Mississippi], eGrove.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/73

¹¹ Dweck, C. S. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.

¹² Claro, S., Paunesku, D., & Dweck, C. S. (2016). Growth mindset tempers the effects of poverty on academic achievement. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(31), 8664–8668.

¹³ Anderson, R. C., Bousset, T., Katz-Buoincontro, J., & Todd, J. (2020). Generating buoyancy in a sea of uncertainty: Teachers creativity and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.614774>; Mosanya, M.

(2021). Buffering academic stress during the COVID-19 pandemic related social isolation: Grit and growth mindset as protective factors against the impact of loneliness. *International Journal of Applied Positive Psychology*, 6(2), 159–174. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41042-020-00043-7>

¹⁴ Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., Yoshinobu, L., Gibb, J., Langelle, C., & Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570–585. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.60.4.570>

¹⁵ Hartwell, C., Hansen, J., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, June 2). *The impact of COVID-19 on Utah women and work: Childcare and homeschooling*. Utah Women & Leadership Project.

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/33-covid-19-childcare-homeschooling.pdf>

¹⁶ Christensen, M., & Madsen, S. R. (2021, July 14). *The impact of COVID-19 on Utah women and work: Caregiver experiences*. Utah Women & Leadership Project.

<https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/35-covid-19-caregiver-experiences.pdf>

¹⁷ Kleiman, E. M., Chiara, A. M., Liu, R. T., Jager-Hyman, S. G., Choi, J. Y., & Alloy, L. B. (2017). Optimism and well-being: A prospective multi-method and multi-dimensional examination of optimism as a resilience factor following the occurrence of stressful life events. *Cognition & Emotion*, 31(2), 269–283. <https://doi.org/dist.lib.usu.edu/10.1080/02699931.2015.1108284>

¹⁸ Mayo Clinic. (n.d.). *Resilience: Build skills to ensure hardship*. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>

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