

Considering Student Well-Being During Covid-19: An adaptable syllabus insert **Prepared by Sarah Gavin, BSc Psychology**

Goals

The goal of this document is to provide an understanding of how students may be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the upcoming academic year, as well as to share strategies that may be incorporated in the design of one's course(s), or in the classroom, to create a supportive learning environment for students during these stressful times. At the end of this document you will find a template for a syllabus insert that acknowledges up front the challenges COVID-19 presents and outlines some of the ways that you, as a course instructor, can design your course(s) to minimize additional stress for students. The text of the syllabus insert can be adapted to fit your personal teaching style.

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the way many aspects of our society function and has affected people across the world. In Canada alone, 6.6 million students were impacted by school closures, 1.6 million of those being post-secondary students (UNESCO, 2020). In this document, course instructors are encouraged to think about how COVID-19 has negatively impacted students and how this will cause some students to struggle in their academic life. Within the document, there are also suggestions for simple changes instructors can implement in their courses to reduce unnecessary pressure and stress on students this school year. Finally, included in the document is an adaptable syllabus insert that can be used to communicate to students that you recognize the changes this pandemic has brought into their lives and that you are willing to work with them to help them succeed in your course.

Impact of COVID-19 on Post-Secondary Students

A Picture of Student Mental Health Before Covid-19:

How was the mental health of post-secondary students before Covid-19? The National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey was used in the spring of 2019 to survey 55,000 Canadian post-secondary students from various universities. Using this data, we can get a picture of the mental state of students in what could be considered a typical semester. The NCHA found that 33% of students reported to have been diagnosed with, or treated for, at least one psychiatric condition, with 23.7% having Anxiety, 19.1% having Depression, and 12.1% having panic attacks. Diagnosed disorders were not the only troubles faced by students, with over half of the students reporting stress levels 'higher than average' to 'tremendous'. In a 12-month span, 4 out of 5 students reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do, almost $\frac{2}{3}$ felt hopeless, $\frac{1}{2}$ felt so depressed it was difficult to function, and $\frac{2}{3}$ felt overwhelming anxiety (American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment, 2019). These numbers illustrate that most students had felt overwhelmed and/or helpless in the last 12 months. Students also reported that their academic performance was negatively affected by stress (41.9%), anxiety (34.6%), depression (24.2%), concern for a troubled friend or family member (15.8%), and finances (11.3%; American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment, 2019). Thus, it is important to understand that even before the pandemic hit, many students were struggling, for a variety of different reasons, and they felt it impacted their academic work.

A Picture of Student Mental Health During Covid-19:

Although we don't yet have data specific to post-secondary student mental health since the onset of the pandemic, new information about the mental health of Canadians suggest people are feeling the effects of the pandemic in a variety of ways. Statistics Canada, for example, released findings based on data collected between April 24th and May 11th of this year; the survey of 46,000 Canadians aged 15 and over revealed that 24% reported their mental health as 'fair' or 'poor', and 52% reported a worsening of their mental health overall (Statistics Canada, 2020). Among respondents aged 15-24, 64% reported a negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health. Mental Health Research Canada found similar results in their survey of 1,803 Canadians over the age of 18 taken between April 22nd and 28th of this year. Since the emergence of COVID-19, self-reported anxiety levels have quadrupled while self-reported depression levels have doubled (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020). Survey respondents reported that they are worried about their loved ones, their own health, the economy and their jobs, and how to pay their bills during this time (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020).

Teaching During a Pandemic:

Communication and Trust

A few small changes in the structure of a course can ease the burden that COVID-19 brought to the academic world. In a May 20th, 2020 article from Inside Higher Ed written by Doug Lederman, Eric Loepp of the University of Wisconsin described the results of a survey that he conducted with over 100 students to identify factors that helped them to succeed when courses shifted from face-to-face to online at the onset of the pandemic. The first factor was a high level of communication. The students found it helpful knowing that they could reach out to their instructor and would consistently get a response. Students also appreciated if their instructor proactively reached out to check in with them (Lederman, 2020). Creating this two-way communication between you and your students can help build trust. Another way to build trust is to take the time to explain the purpose of assignments or lessons or ensure that students see the connection to the course content, which gives students a reason to invest in their learning.

Structure and Flexibility

Loepp's survey indicated that students appreciated a balance of both structure and flexibility (Lederman, 2020). In terms of structure, students reported that they valued a sense of regularity and clear guidelines. Providing consistent due dates and a clear sense of what is expected in each assignment can create this sense of structure. Students also valued flexibility. COVID-19 has brought a lot of unexpected, fast-paced changes to life and will continue to do so. Being understanding about the uncontrollable circumstances in a student's life that might make it difficult for them to meet a deadline can be reassuring for students. Building flexibility into the course, such as allowing extensions, creates a safety net for students.

Talking About COVID-19 In The Classroom

Talking about how the pandemic has changed lives around the world and acknowledging that each person will face individual challenges is a good way to validate the different reactions students may be having, but it can also be a double-edged sword. MHRC

reported that approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of Canadians are seeing negative impacts due to consuming daily news about the pandemic (Mental Health Research Canada, 2020). If you choose to talk about COVID-19 in the classroom, consider giving students advanced notice and avoid making participation in the discussion required.

Choice

Allowing students to have some choice in their learning experience can provide a sense of control or empowerment at a time when they may be missing that sense of control in other areas of their lives (e.g., finances, jobs, health; Davidson, 2017). This can be achieved in a number of possible ways: offering a choice between a paper or a final exam; offering choice in assignments so that students can select a topic that fits with their interests. There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to adding choice to your classroom material. Try to maintain a clear course structure even when offering choice.

Scope of Practice

As an instructor, there are ways you can aid your students during this time, but at the end of the day you must remember that you are not a mental health professional and must support students within your scope of practice. Making sure that students are aware of all of the supports available to them is important. One way to do this is to share resources from your university and local area within your course syllabus. For your convenience, some of these resources are listed at the end of this document.

Take Care of Yourself

In order to look out for students' mental health and well-being, it is also key that you recognize your own struggles and prioritize your mental health too! To take care of your mental health, School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) suggests physically taking care of your body with proper nutrition, drinking water, and getting sleep and exercise. They state that as little as 30 minutes of exercise per day can boost your mood, energy levels, and your immune system. Exercise can be as structured as going to the gym or an exercise class, or as unstructured as dancing at home to your favorite music. If you struggle with getting to sleep at night try sticking to a routine and avoid taking in news before bed. Other suggested tips for taking care of your mental health are to be mindful of your thoughts and emotions, and to reflect on them. It is also important to take time to do the things you enjoy, or even just to relax and disconnect from work for a time. Finally, SMHO recommends staying connected, even if it has to be socially distanced. Whether this means connecting with friends, family, or your peers, have someone to reach out to. Taking care of yourself and recognizing the extra stresses COVID-19 has brought to your life means you can bring your best self to your classroom (School Mental Health Ontario, 2020).

References

American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment. (2019, May 10). *ACHA-NCHA-II Reference Group Data Report - Spring 2019 Canadian Consortium*. <https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA->

[II_SPRING_2019_CANADIAN_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf](#)

Davidson, S. (2017, August). *Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide* [PDF]. Education Northwest.

<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/trauma-informed-practices-postsecondary-508.pdf>

Lederman, D. (2020, May 20). *How College Students Viewed This Spring's Remote Learning*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/05/20/student-view-springs-shift-remote-learning>

Mental Health Research Canada. (2020, May 19). *Mental Health During COVID-19 Outbreak Wave 1* [PDF]. <https://www.mhrc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Full-Report-of-Findings-of-Survey-FINAL.pdf>

School Mental Health Ontario. (2020, April). *Personal Resiliency Tips During the COVID-19 Pandemic* [PDF].

<https://smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/TipSheet-Personal-Resiliency-During-Covid19-ENG.pdf>

Statistics Canada. (2020, May 27). *Canadians' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200527/dq200527b-eng.htm>

UNESCO. (2020, June 15). *Education: From disruption to recovery*.

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

Links to Recommended Readings

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma>

<https://traumainformedteaching.blog/author/janicecarello>

Suggested Syllabus Insert (editable)

I believe it is important to acknowledge that we are living in uncertain and stressful times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I recognize that this can have an impact on students' academic experiences. In response to this, I aim to offer the following:

1. Clear Communication

I will clearly communicate necessary deadlines and criteria for succeeding in this course. I will provide the information digitally (e.g., through email and/or our course management system) so it may be accessed at any time. I will do my best to avoid making changes to the course syllabus but promise that if any changes need to be made, they will be communicated with as much notice as possible. I will also reach out periodically to each student throughout the semester to check in. Additionally, I will try to respond to all email correspondence within 24 hours on weekdays. To encourage communication, I have put in place the following:

[As a course instructor, a number of ideas for building communication into your course are listed below. Feel free to select any that will work for your course]:

- In place of taking attendance, at the beginning of each class you will complete a check-in card. This can be used to bring up questions or ask about concepts you don't fully understand.
- You will be assigned a random discussion group. Each week, you will need to post at least once within your discussion group.
- I will provide a forum on our course management system to submit questions. This will be checked at the end of each week and I will answer your questions in class.

2. Structure and Flexibility

I recognize that COVID-19 has brought unexpected changes to our lives and that this can pose difficulties for meeting all course deadlines. Deadlines for coursework will be clearly identified in advance. I have built flexibility into the course in the following ways to help you meet deadlines:

[As a course instructor, a number of ideas for building flexibility into your course are listed below. Feel free to select any that will work for your course]:

- If something happens that you cannot meet a deadline, please reach out 24 hours before the due date and we will work to find a solution.
- Each student will be granted [XX] free (no explanation required) late days in the course that can be used towards any course assignment. You will not need to provide an explanation as to why your assignment is late; you just need to send me an email to say that you will be using some or all of your late days.
- In this course we have [XX] weekly assignments. You are required to do [X of X] of the assignments. If you choose to do all of the

assignments, I can calculate your grade based on the best [XX] out of [XX].

3. Choice

To empower you to take control of your own learning, I will:

[As a course instructor, a number of ideas for building choice into your course are listed below. Feel free to select any that will work for your course]:

- Ask for input on which topics are important to you to learn about this semester, and I will do my best to incorporate them all.
- Allow you to choose the topic for your assignment
- Provide you some choice in your exam questions

4. Well-being

While I care about your well-being, there is only so much support that I can provide as your instructor. If you need help beyond what I can provide, please reach out to one of the resources below:

Institution-specific resources:

St.F.X

- St.F.X. Health and Counselling Centre
 - Location: 305 Bloomfield Centre
 - Phone: (902-867-2263)
 - Website: <https://www2.mystfx.ca/health-and-counselling/>
- Margie McKinnon, Director of Health, Counselling and Accessible Learning
 - Email: mmckinno@stfx.ca
- Heather Blackburn, Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Advocate
 - Location: 313D Bloomfield Centre
 - Phone: (902-867-5601)
 - Email: hblackbu@stfx.ca
- Flourish @ X
 - Website: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Health---Wellness-Website/Flourish-at-X-2031554250297237/>
- Nova Scotia Crisis Line
 - Phone: (1-888-429-8167)
- Good2Talk Nova Scotia
 - Phone: (1-833-292-3698)
- Crisis Text Line
 - Text "GOOD2TALKNS" to 686868
- Mindwell U
 - Website: <https://app.mindwellu.com/novascotia>
- ICAN (Conquer Anxiety and Nervousness) – Anxiety Program
 - Website: <https://login.strongestfamilies.com/folder/1963/>
- HealthyMindsNS
 - Website: <https://healthymindsns.ca/stfx>

Acadia

- Acadia Student Health Centre
 - Location: Dennis House - West side entrance
 - Phone: (902-585-1238)
 - Email: studenthealth@acadiu.ca
 - Website: <https://www2.acadiu.ca/student-life/health-wellness/clinic.html>
- Acadia Counselling Centre
 - Location: old SUB lower level
 - Phone: (902-585-1246)
 - Email: counselling@acadiu.ca
 - Website: <https://www2.acadiu.ca/student-life/health-wellness/mental-health.html>
- Acadia Safety & Security
 - Phone: (902-585-1103)
- HealthyMindsNS
 - Website: <https://healthymindsns.ca/schools/acadia/>
- Nova Scotia Crisis Line
 - Phone: (1-888-429-8167)
- Good2Talk Nova Scotia
 - Phone: (1-833-292-3698)
- Crisis Text Line
 - Text "GOOD2TALKNS" to 686868

Mount Allison

- Mount Allison Wellness Centre
 - Location: Wallace McCain Student Centre - lower level
 - Email: health@mta.ca
 - Website: <https://www.mta.ca/healthservices/>
- Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and Education Service SHARE
 - Location: Wellness Centre
 - Phone or Text: (506-540-7427)
 - Email: share@mta.ca
 - Website: <https://www.mta.ca/share/>
- Mount Allison Counselling Services
 - Phone: (506-364-2163)
 - Email: counsellor@mta.ca
- Chimo Help-Line
 - Phone: (1-800-667-5005)

Bishop's

- Bishop's Health Services
 - Location: John H. Price Sports & Recreation Centre - local 2091
 - To book appointment with a doctor: call (819-822-9696) or email jill.johnson@ubishops.ca
 - To book appointment with a nurse: email jfleury@ubishops.ca or kbrock@ubishops.ca

- Website: <https://www.ubishops.ca/future-current-students/student-campus-life/student-services/health-wellness/health-services/>
- Dominique Pelletier, Sexual Aggression Response Coordinator
 - Location: DON 255
 - Phone: (819-822-9600) ext. 2695
 - Email: dominique.pelletier@ubishops.ca
- Dre Jackie Bailey, Psychologist
 - Location: 104 1-b rue Queen, Sherbrooke
 - Phone: (819-238-3280)
- Family Planning Clinic
 - Location: 1095 rue Belvédère Sud, Sherbrooke
 - Phone: (819-565-0767)
- Association québécoise de prévention du suicide
 - Phone: (1-866-277-3553)

Additional external resources:

- Canadian Mental Health Association
 - Phone: (1-833-456-4566)
- Kids Help Phone - Youth up to 20
 - Phone: (1-800-668-6868)
 - Text: 686868
 - Website: <https://kidshelpphone.ca/>
- Hope for Wellness - First Nations and Inuit
 - Phone: (1-855-242-3310)
 - Website: <https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/>
- Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction
 - Phone: (1-833-235-4048)
- The Trevor Project - LGBTQ youth under 25
 - Phone: (1-866-488-7386)
 - Website: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- Jack.org
 - Website: <https://jack.org/Home>