

# Undergraduate College Students' Stress Levels and Coping Abilities in Relation to the Forced Switch to Online Learning & COVID-19

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**PURPOSE:** The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and the forced switch to online learning has had on the stress level of undergraduate college students needs to be examined. The global pandemic has introduced two potential stressors to college students. Two examples are the pandemic itself and the forced switch to online learning. This study looks at how both these stressors affect stress levels and coping habits of college students. Occupational therapy research will benefit from the findings of this study. First, it will provide the foundation for future stress-based intervention programs on college campuses during challenging times. Second, it will help occupational therapists work with college administrators in order to increase the use of coping strategies among the college student population. Finally, it will begin research into finding new assessment tools to examine problematic areas in college students. Research Question 1: Are college students more stressed about the COVID-19 pandemic or the forced switch to online learning the pandemic created? Research Question 2: Are college students coping better with the COVID-19 pandemic or the forced switch to online learning?

**DESIGN:** For this descriptive quantitative study, researchers used convenience sampling and recruited all undergraduate students at Dominican College of Blauvelt (DC) to participate. Participants were sent a 15-question online survey containing the Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS-10) with an addition of modified questions from The Coping Inventory of Stressful Situations (CISS) survey. When examining the initial online survey data, researchers used a nonparametric, two-tailed Spearman Rho to determine whether there was a correlation between the students' stress levels and the forced switch to online learning and/or COVID-19. Researchers used a two-tailed Mann-Whitney *U* *t*-test to determine the difference between coping abilities for the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online learning. The *t*-test was also used to determine the difference between stress levels of college students due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online learning.

**RESULTS:** Researchers found that the stress impact of COVID-19 ( $\rho = .381$ ) was greater than the stress related to the switch to online learning ( $\rho = -.313$ ) ( $p < .001$ ). Stress responses were shown to be statistically higher in COVID-19 than online learning ( $p = .000$ ). Females reported more levels of stress than males ( $p = .031$ ). The researchers found that there is no statistical significance between coping and COVID-19 (mean = 2.2710) and/or online learning (mean = 2.2516) ( $p = .879$ ). Researchers rejected the alternative hypothesis and accepted the null hypothesis: 'The forced switch to online learning did not have a greater impact on students' stress level and their ability to cope than the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic'.

**CONCLUSION:** COVID-19 is more stressful for college students than remote learning. Students' ability to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic was no different than their ability to cope with the transition to on-line learning. Female participants reported a higher stress level than male participants in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. This study provides Occupational Therapists and college administration with a better understanding of the stressors that impact college students during pandemics.

## References

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