

Mental Health Matters! - A Pedagogical Essay About The Practice of Compassion for Online University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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From an online instructor perspective, this paper examines and explains lessons professionally absorbed during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These many lessons specifically include the practice of compassion, which remains applicable to many higher education practitioners in any situation, including but not limited to times of crisis. This pedagogical reflection addresses the importance of mental health among college students during the pandemic in a virtual class format. The text mentions commentary on the sudden transition to online learning from in-person classes when colleges closed across the world. Statistics, relevant facts, and prevalent research demonstrate the negative impact on students and their mental health, often experienced in isolation. With an applied explanation, the concept of compassion is discussed as it relates to students in remote learning environments and mental health concerns. While not only applicable to university students, faculty members were also affected in many of the same-mentioned scenarios and hardships. These instructors virtually experienced a shared trauma with colleagues, students, and other staff. A call to action mentions future applications that faculty members and universities could implement to better manage future public health crisis events, including a summary of best practices personally learned by the author.

Keywords: mental health, pedagogy, college students, compassion, virtual learning

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For close to twelve years now, I have taught college courses in Communication in an online format. During this time, I have heard many personal and professional excuses that students give in requests to make up missing work, including why their assignments were late. On one occasion, a student emailed me that the family dog had eaten her homework. I then replied, “How does a dog eat a digital file submission?” The student then responded in another message with photos of a damaged laptop attached, which appeared to have multiple teeth marks from an animal engrained into the machine. The dog was a puppy and enjoyed chewing on everything in the house. While I felt sorry for the student, I could not help but smile.

In addition to catching COVID-19, mental health challenges appeared frequent among college students and faculty, especially for individuals in long-term isolation periods. While the media focused on the physical impact of the virus itself, those same news outlets often overlooked other adverse effects for the individuals who caught COVID-19, such as mental health concerns and lack of community (Su et al., 2021). Rather than college students taking part in usual spring activities and enjoying collegiate sports, most higher education institutions quickly shifted to online learning formats, some in just a matter of a few weeks. College campuses became ghost towns as students moved out of dorms and other major buildings closed permanently. At the time, the spread of the coronavirus was rampant, and information about COVID-19 and how to contain it remained limited. Even now, many traditional universities continue to conduct many of their courses through an online platform. Terms like “social distancing,” “quarantine,” and “self-isolation” have become part of everyday conversations. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the practice of compassion in a virtual learning environment during times of crisis. To address compassion in this context, relevant research and narratives illustrate the definition of compassion, a shared trauma between those involved, and examples of how kindness was extended during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of professional application with the overall content of this essay, the text closes with personal reflective suggestions and best practices on how to utilize compassion in the online classroom.

In addition to the present circumstances with COVID-19, I have personally experienced several crisis events with online learners, including a student with a terminal illness, the loss of loved ones, hurricanes, mental disorders, and even domestic violence. During the peak of the pandemic and even in some cases now, college students encountered lost employment, financial instability, college campus closures, transitioning to remote work locations, long isolation periods, and children staying home during the day (daycares and schools closed). This list only mentions a few of the many complications the pandemic created (Panchel et al., 2021). Concerning first-year university students, in the transition to virtual learning after expecting a traditional in-person college experience in the spring semester of 2020, Fruehwirth et al. (2021) state that the "rates of moderate-severe anxiety increased 39.8 percent and rates of moderate-severe depression increased 47.9 percent from before to mid-pandemic" (p. 11). While learning primarily in online formats, loneliness, mixed feelings of future uncertainties, apprehension about academic performance, and a sense of hopelessness were among many of the factors that influenced reported depression with undergraduate students (Son et al., 2020). During the pandemic, young adults who experienced depressive feelings and severe anxiety reported percentages as high as 56%. When measured up to the general adult population, young adults were already more likely to experience situations of concern with substance abuse (25% compared to 13%) and suicidal thoughts (26% compared to 11%) (Panchel et al., 2021).

The tipping point of acute anxiety, clinical depression, suicidal ideation, and other mental health considerations escalated when most college campuses across the country closed (Lee et al, 2021). The underlying factors that affected all university online learners, including those in transition from traditional campuses and those who started in a virtual environment, remain vast and complicated beyond simple variables. While only a few mental health figures and details listed here demonstrate the dramatic effect that COVID-19 has had on college students and their mental health in these unprecedented times, the active presence and practice of compassion in the online classroom offer one of the best solutions on how to manage a virtual learning environment amidst a crisis event.

Understanding Compassion in Times of Crisis

Many research publications comment on the idea and notion of compassion in both a traditional classroom and online environment. Jazaieri (2017) elaborates with the most comprehensive definition and the context of compassion in college instruction:

First, compassion involves an awareness of suffering (cognitive component). Second, compassion involves a sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering (affective component). Third, compassion includes a wish to see the relief of that suffering (intentional component). Finally, compassion includes a responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component) (p. 23).

In this description, compassion becomes the active intention of a faculty member to recognize, assess, and alleviate the hardship and anguish of a college student, especially in an emergency shift to online learning. The noticeable observation of suffering for another individual elicits a response of care that acts on a motivated need. Rather than just needlessly being aware that suffering occurs, a specific action becomes the follow-up and agent for change to help another person. Misfortune did not just occur through physical illness with COVID-19. Instructors and university leadership recognized the suffering of college students, especially with mental health hardships. These same psychological struggles impacted all university stakeholders, not just students, but also faculty and staff. Compassion was therefore extended for both physical and mental ailments on campus and in remote settings.

Amidst an abrupt transition from a campus classroom setting to an online platform, both college faculty and students felt relationally distanced from each other, without the ability to communicate in person. However, as learned by all higher education professionals and students during the COVID-19 pandemic, an approach of compassion and caring for others does not necessarily need to be experienced

face-to-face with live interactions (Christopher et al., 2020). In other words, compassion can be expressed and experienced in several different ways in many various distinct situations, including a remote learning environment.

Student Mental Health Considerations in An Online Setting

Relating to the mental well-being of university students, Huckins et al. (2020) confirmed that sedentary times increased among students, lacking physical activity like exercise, thus negatively impacting symptoms of depression and anxiety. Typically, during long breaks away from college, students partake in exercise and other aerobic activities, therefore combatting depressive elements. Instead, students utilized their phones more frequently and traveled to fewer places while remaining sedentary. Kecojevic et al. (2020) proposed that academic challenges, including declining grades and being strategic about studying habits in isolation, were linked to higher measures of emotional stress, anxiety, and even clinical depression. The loss of employment and lower wages associated with increased levels of depression and other forms of emotional distress. Kecojevic et al. state that "Struggling academically with online courses may further exacerbate mental health distress among students" (p. 12). Virtual learning requires students to sit in front of computers for prolonged periods in solitude, cut off from the rest of a campus community. If alone in isolation, without the ability to leave the occupied grounds or take breaks from sitting in a small space for any reason, the mental health of an individual potentially dwindles. Abnormal levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental illness concerns are bound to occur in these described scenarios, especially with college students.

In another study concerning the academic performance and the mental stability of university students, Awadalla et al. (2020) suggested that severe depression potentially caused negative effects on grades and the lack of genuine interest for students to learn relevant class materials. Increasing health awareness potentially reduces these described scenarios with students who might seek needed mental healthcare services. Wyatt et al. (2017) further elaborate on how stress, anxiety, and depression also cause adverse outcomes on academic achievement and the ability to focus, especially with students past the first year of their undergraduate studies. This analysis demonstrated that upperclassmen struggle more with depression, anxiety, high stress, and self-injury than first-year students. Perhaps later years in college with upperclassmen entail a more rigorous curriculum in higher-level major classes. The first-year experience provides a unique opportunity to educate and reach college students in terms of health literacy and initiatives for mental health services available to them, especially through faculty relationships. After interviewing college students diagnosed with clinical depression, Martin and Atkinson (2020) mentioned that these individuals slowly became disengaged before experiencing severe depression. Physical health challenges also soon resulted from the influence of depression on these students. Many of the students felt disappointed and stranded from the systems in place at the academic institutions where they resided. Social inclusion through community encouraged depressed students in relationships with people who supported their well-being. In fact, isolation only worsened the depression for the emotions of some students, causing more volatility for potential nervous breakdowns.

Concerning another study on mental health in remote learning, Elmer et al. (2020) reported that the students struggled with severe stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and other negative measures of similar psychological feelings. These cognitive misfortunes were worse during and after the pandemic began as opposed to before. These burdened emotions evolved from concerns about health, social relationships, family well-being, and potential future successes, like graduation possibilities and job availability. When remote learning transforms into the most common form of delivery for college instruction during times of crisis, mental health struggles become more commonplace for university students in isolation, separated from community, close-knit relationships, and memorable in-person experiences. In these despondent situations, compassion then serves as the best response to assist college students, faculty, and staff in their joint ability to persevere through turbulent times.

A Shared Trauma with College Faculty and Student Experiences

Along with the students, the same adversities previously detailed were also shared by university faculty and staff, where many individuals were virtually working from home. During the pandemic, instructors and students experienced a shared trauma, also known as a shared traumatic reality. This concept is defined as circumstances simultaneously lived by these individuals together in unison, sometimes in moments of distress (Tosone, 2016). This common exposure to these events became a linking partnership in empathy, extended between all parties in an online instructional environment. While extensions of kindness often concerned the mental health of students, self-care becomes just as important for faculty to practice with themselves, such as positive self-talk, adequately resting, and regularly exercising (Crosby et al., 2020). Instructors must remain intentional in separating employment and personal responsibilities, such as spending time with family and enjoying hobbies outside of work (Wells & Davis, 2021). Inspiring narratives of student perseverance, including kind gestures received from their professors, also spurred faculty members to assist other instructors within the same department or college, including those with severe mental health downturns (Garcia, 2021). For example, when campuses closed, the sudden overnight transition to remote learning troubled many faculty unfamiliar with online learning management systems and programs. Students were specifically requested to be patient with each other and their professors when technical difficulties emerged. The joint traumatic experience involved learning together so that all parties could make the most of daunting circumstances, including empathy shown to one another from all directions.

Lessons on Practicing Mental Health Compassion in Online University Classrooms

How a practitioner utilizes compassion in a virtual learning setting varies among professional personalities. Even personal belief systems influence how one teaches effectively when you cannot always see the faces of students in person. When meeting college students face-to-face, an instructor can read nonverbal communication cues, such as facial expressions and other body gestures. Therefore, one can often gauge an individual student's mental health struggles as a result if present. These observations especially become more ambiguous through online formats. As the COVID-19 pandemic heightened, students approached me as their instructor with a myriad of tragic circumstances, such as the death of loved ones, sick children, lost jobs, financial challenges, lack of in-person communication, and of course, severe mental health struggles. Students appeared saddened, frustrated, disappointed, and perhaps even angry with their initial lockdown situations. Firsthand, I learned what it truly meant to actively listen to student narratives and affirm their feelings through statements of support and affirmation. While I cannot always assist a student in delayed timelines, I can certainly lend an open ear to hardships. Therefore, I made extra efforts and attempts to be available for students whenever serious situations seemed tense and grievous. If a student requested a one-on-one session, I would make appointments to address their concerns via the phone or a Zoom session, and sometimes these students just wanted someone to listen to their narratives. When the course calendar allowed for extensions in severe circumstances, I would give students an additional seven to ten extra days to complete major assignments.

Secondly, in the transition of continual change (sometimes almost daily), I learned to become adaptable in the face of unpredictable adversities, even within my own life. This sense of adaptability further developed as a professional skill when I witnessed the tragic experiences of students I deeply cared about, which included expressed concerns about their mental well-being and successful learning outcomes. Without previous experience with certain technologies and computer programs, I became a quick learner of new virtual communication delivery methods, realizing the need to adapt and pick up fresh skills quickly so that students could learn in the most effective means possible. In one online class specifically, at the peak of the pandemic, I allowed every student to submit all the class assignments up to the very last day of class without late penalties; therefore, relevant complications were eased if emergencies happened unexpectedly. Focusing on the safety and wellness of one's family could then take precedence over everything else.

Thirdly, I learned that adaptability also necessitates an attitude of positivity in a media world often most focused on negativity, fear, doom, and gloom in constant depictions of calamity and misfortune. Even though often depressed and saddened by the loss of precious blessings, my students needed a voice of positivity to rejuvenate their desires to learn and accomplish the goal of receiving a quality education and eventually earning a college diploma. For instance, in some live lectures, we would have “dance-it-out-sessions” on Zoom as I played edited 90’s hip hop music blaring in the background of my home office. Students were welcome to turn their computer cameras off or on, however they often laughed hysterically at my visible, silly dance moves. The positive experience served as a welcome distraction, taking the students’ attention off tragedies from the pandemic. And, just so you know, I did not record these segments because I am not all that great of a dancer, hence why these incidents were funny.

Fourth, in unparalleled times never encountered by my generation, I promptly realized those constantly changing circumstances required flexibility to succeed in any higher education learning environment with a time of crisis, such as COVID-19. For the mental health of my students with all the universities I worked for and represented, in terms of extended acts of compassion, we granted more incompletes for classes than what would be considered normal. The time for unconventional flexibility suitable for a pandemic made virtual learning doable for almost every college student, including adult learners, such as single parents with children at home because of closed daycares or public schools who switched to a completely online platform. As mentioned before, these working parents with children at home, without other caretakers, were given incompletes with an additional two weeks to finish the class after it officially ended. In more serious cases, if documented through university services, several students with diagnosed mental illnesses were given up to an extra semester to finish classwork with an official incomplete, possibly even taking a break from school to rest and recuperate. I sought to give students the time needed to spend with family and manage unforeseen predicted pandemic adversities outside of their university studies. Flexibility through compassion became my new norm, rather than sternness to teach students about real-world deadlines and business communication practices. I found that the quality of the students' work was just the same as a normal semester with these flexible deadlines and, in many cases, even improved in comparison to assignments previously completed.

Moving Forward into The Future

On a final note, please keep in mind that faculty members were also very much affected in many of the same ways as college students. Kindness goes both ways in a teacher-student relationship. While compassion was and is certainly extended to students, it also needs to be received from students for faculty as well. The shared trauma in the crisis created a closeness collectively among students (peer-to-peer) and faculty-student relationships (faculty to student and student to faculty). All these lessons provided me with the ability to become more compassionate for the students I mentored and whose lives I changed simply by caring for them as both students and people. One could describe chaotic events of this nature as a wake-up call to treat others as we, too, also hope to be treated. Suddenly, through awareness of priorities, human connection and community become paramount in the support they provide.

Student and faculty support services, including counseling and other forms of mental health assistance, should take priority in terms of accessibility and what these outlets offer to these parties (Lederer et al., 2021). Rather than making the transition from in-person formats to complete online learning tedious, lengthy, and difficult, colleges can implement necessary infrastructures sooner rather than later. In case a national emergency of this magnitude happens again, these future plans would instantly apply the necessary resources, including but not limited to mental health programming, computer networks, technology training, and virtual support staff (Mudiwa et al., 2021).

From my own experiences, moving into the future, faculty members (and students in some cases) can practice the following: actively listen to each other, remain adaptable to changing circumstances, maintain a positive outlook, and employ flexibility in these crisis moments. It is not a matter of if another pandemic will occur moving forward. It is simply a matter of when. As the world stands now, amidst

personal, professional, and societal turmoil, many individuals could benefit from acts of compassion and kindness, especially with mental health hardships. These actions in higher education will make future worldwide emergencies manageable and maybe even still hopeful, especially in an online college instruction environment.

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