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STUDENTS

Covid-19 Has Worsened the Student Mental-Health Crisis. Can Resilience Training Fix It?

By Sarah Brown and Alexander C. Kafka | MAY 11, 2020

Jacqueline Ricciardi for The Chronicle

Ai Bui, an architecture student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: “Thankfully, and apparently, I seem to be pretty indestructible.”

There were six years of anorexia, two of bulimia, and 10 of depression and anxiety, plus a recent stress disorder from “repeated sexual assaults by a trusted authority.” Ai Bui, a third-year architecture student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, knows what trauma is.

“I’ve fought myself to nothing but vomit, blood, skin, and bones, and all these years I’ve just wanted to vanish and become air,” Bui told an audience at Lesley University in October during a performance series called *This Is My Brave.* “But thankfully, and apparently, I seem to be pretty indestructible.”

The pandemic is putting that notion to the test.

With no in-person support system to fall back on, Bui grieved the death of a family friend and faced a looming deadline for a big class project. It "really took a toll on me," Bui said in a late-April phone interview. One night, "I felt so stressed out that I broke down for a solid hour sobbing really badly."

"It might appear that someone is less resilient when in fact they're just trying to navigate things that other students don't have to."

But maybe teary is what tough looks like in this era. As Bui's friend texted: "You don't think it takes resilience to go through this? And then to wake up tomorrow? And the next day and the next day and the next day?"

In recent years, "resilience" and its companion concept, "grit," have become buzzwords in higher education. Colleges have introduced wellness programs, campus campaigns, even full-blown courses that incorporate meditation, yoga, reflective writing and sketching, and stress-management techniques like deep breathing.

Gritty and resilient students, the thinking goes, know how to persevere through life's inevitable stressors. They know how to halt the negative thoughts that can spiral into a crisis. They're more likely to stay on track, academically and psychologically.

Grit and resilience have become especially salient ideas as colleges try to respond to students' mental-health troubles, which were already skyrocketing before the pandemic. In some ways, the Covid-19 era seems like exactly the right time to educate students on how to manage the intense sadness, isolation, and anxiety they are feeling.

But during the horrible natural experiment called coronavirus, is that the right message to send to students — to push through hardship, bounce back from failure, and come out stronger? Or should it be about empathy, compassion, and getting through this time in one piece?

Grieving Lost Experiences

In a blizzard of bad news, this generation of ostensibly delicate students is already proving pretty strong, mental-health experts say. In the past two months, some have lost family members, their only safe living environment, or the jobs that paid their bills.

According to an April survey by Active Minds, a national mental-health advocacy group, 80 percent of college students say the Covid-19 crisis has negatively affected their mental health. One-fifth say it has significantly worsened.

Covid-19's Effects on College Students

In an April 2020 survey of 2,086 college students, the vast majority indicated that Covid-19 had negatively affected their mental health.

Effect	Percent
Stress or anxiety	91%
Disappointment or sadness	81%
Loneliness or isolation	80%
Financial setbacks	48%
Relocation	56%

Source: Active Minds Spring 2020 Student Survey • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

For many students, uncertainty is at the root of their pandemic-related distress. “The thing I hear from students is a lot of the ‘but’ sentences,” said Kelly Crace, associate vice president for health and wellness at the College of William & Mary. Sentences like: “I can finish the semester remotely. But if this goes into July, I can’t handle it.”

They’ve lost their usual coping mechanisms. Students can text or call their college friends, but it’s not the same as getting together for a movie night. Classes can feel like an uninspiring imitation of the real thing.

“It’s the most social time of your life,” said Michael R. Lovell, president of Marquette University. “You’re constantly surrounded by your friends.” To have that taken away so suddenly is a shock. For students, as for faculty members, there’s no substitute for being in a room bouncing ideas off one another. “You can’t quite get the same energy in a remote-learning environment.”

Emma Brauer, a senior at Marquette majoring in anthropology, misses “those ordinary moments,” the everyday contact with classmates and professors — “the physical aspect of being in a classroom” and “just passing them in the hallway.”

She tries to structure her day, go for walks, limit screen time, and stay in e-touch with friends. But the bottom line, she said, is that she’s “heartbroken.”

“I joke with my family that I feel fine in the morning, but who knows what the afternoon will bring, if I’m going to break down in tears or whatever.”

Students' Self-Care Challenges

Covid-19 forced most students into distance learning, upending their lifestyles and routines. As a result, an April survey found, some are struggling with these aspects of self-care:

Maintaining a routine	76%
Getting enough physical activity	73%
Staying connected with others	63%

Source: Active Minds Spring 2020 Student Survey • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Campus leaders are worried about the pandemic's psychological fallout. In a survey by the American Council on Education, 41 percent of college presidents said the mental health of students was among their most pressing pandemic-related concerns. Thirty-five percent of the presidents said they plan to invest more in mental-health services.

But they won't be able to rely solely on campus counseling centers, many of which are already overwhelmed by increasing demand. Meanwhile, financial uncertainty could make it difficult to hire more counselors and therapists.

What's more, teletherapy isn't always an option for students now scattered across the country; licensing laws often don't allow treatment across state lines. An American College Health Association survey in early April found that less than half of the 356 colleges that responded were able to virtually treat students regardless of where they were living.

So colleges will have to help students help themselves through this new wave of psychological distress — and they'll have to be careful about the messages they send, mental-health experts say. They'll need a nuanced approach, offering resilience strategies while recognizing students' grief.

Grit vs. Grieving

For Ally Beard, a junior at Harvard University, “the grief came first, and it wasn’t until we had finished grieving that we were able to be resilient.” Being sent home “was just so heartbreaking. Within 24 hours, the world exploded,” she remembered in a phone call from Nantucket, where she is staying with her boyfriend and his family.

Managing her depression and anxiety disorder for years has proved to be helpful training, she said. “I’m better at flexibility and going with the flow than I was just two weeks ago.”

That, said Angela Duckworth, is how it’s supposed to work. Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, stamped a buzzword on education with her 2016 best seller, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.

She is far from being a Pollyanna about the pandemic, particularly on the heels of her father’s death from Covid-19. While she sees grit and grieving as “in some ways in tension,” like most tensions, it can be resolved, she said.

The first week off campus, more of her students failed to turn in work than they ever had. She reached out to them, said that she wanted to make sure they were OK, and told them that if they weren’t they should text or call her for help. But if they were all right, she wrote them, “I really look forward to getting your assignments.”

“Sure enough,” she said, “all of my students turned in their work. They wrote me apologies. They explained.”

Resilience “is not the exception to the rule, it is the rule,” Duckworth said. There are real worries for this generation of college students — health, housing and food insecurity, career prospects battered by the economic plunge. But while post-traumatic stress is one possible outcome, she said, “there’s also the possibility of post-traumatic growth.”

"This is not going to be a footnote. This is going to be a chapter in the history books," she said. And by finding purpose in one's actions and meaning in one's relationships, "one day you'll be telling your children and grandchildren about how you lived through history, and I want you to be proud of how you reacted to it, that you demonstrated character."

The Resilience Rubric

As Covid-19 upended Jacqueline Thornton's life, she immersed herself in a course called "Changing Minds, Changing Lives." It's a student-resilience curriculum developed a dozen years ago by Genevieve Chandler, a professor of nursing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The course, which involves eight to 10 sessions over several weeks, is focused on mindfulness techniques, yoga postures, and reflective writing exercises.

"We teach adaptive resilience," Chandler said. In other words: "Bend and come back."

Thornton, a UMass senior, has struggled with her mental health for years. She tried therapy, but it was hard to fit into her busy schedule. Then, as a junior, she discovered "Changing Minds, Changing Lives." She loved the course so much that she took it again this semester.

As part of the course, Thornton and her classmates completed an assessment of their strengths. One of hers is being an "activator." She's good at making plans.

Back in March, when classes went online, Thornton had decided to spend the rest of her final semester with her family in Boston, instead of with her friends in her off-campus apartment. Quickly, she started feeling left out. She was plagued by negative thoughts: They don't like me anymore. They don't miss me.

That's the kind of thinking the resilience course taught Thornton to recognize and reject. She remembered that she was an "activator." So she planned virtual hangouts with her friends — and made sure they actually happened.

One recent day, feeling overwhelmed, Thornton cried for an hour. But the resilience course taught her that's OK. "Through resiliency, you can figure out a way to do the crying and do the anger and be really emotional," she said, "but not get down on yourself for feeling that way."

Research backs up the course's effectiveness. Student athletes who've taken it are less stressed and more capable of regulating their emotions.

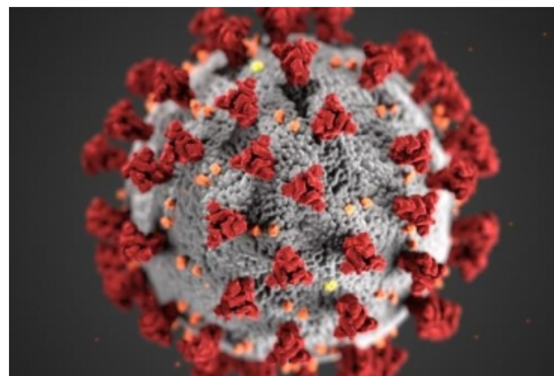
At Florida State University, students can turn to the Student Resilience Project website for resources on breathing, responding to a panic attack, and "grounding," which encourages focusing on today instead of worrying about tomorrow. University leaders have regularly promoted the resilience project in their messages to the campus community.

There's also a campus organization reaching out to far-flung students. If online learning continues this fall, the Resilient Noles — as the group is called

— hope to ask professors if they can pop into virtual classes and briefly talk about resilience.

"You can help yourself," said Rima Patel, a Florida State junior and president of Resilient Noles. Using the counseling center remotely isn't an option for her, she said, because she feels less comfortable talking about mental health at home. Instead, she watches the resilience project's videos on tolerating frustration, and how physical space affects well-being.

Patel was on track to get all A's this semester before the pandemic. She struggled with the transition to online learning. But she has adopted a resilient mind-set: "Do not be upset about the things you can't change."



Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle*'s key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall
- How the Coronavirus Will Change Faculty Life Forever ✔ PREMIUM
- Public Regional Colleges Were Already Struggling. Covid-19 May Push Some to the Brink. ✔ PREMIUM

The resilience project doesn't just point students to sophisticated mindfulness routines. It emphasizes basic survival mechanisms, said Karen Oehme, director of Florida State's Institute for Family Violence Studies. Did you drink enough water today? Did you get fresh air? Did you get enough sleep?

At William & Mary, there's been more interest than usual in resilience-focused programs since the pandemic began, Crace said. More than 13,000 people have participated in virtual offerings that range from a two-minute meditation to an art-therapy video. Students have told Crace that they finally have time for resilience training now — and that they need it more than ever.

Grit and resilience are not personality traits, Crace said. They are developed with practice. "People who flourish are not less afraid, worried, or upset about what's going on around them," he said. "They have just worked at holding these emotions and thoughts in a healthy manner."

Grit and resilience are worthy goals, but are they realistic ones right now? Not only do college students have to absorb the shock of displacement from their campus lives, but they have to turn it into a saga of triumph and growth? That expectation seems a bit much to Laura Horne, chief program officer for Active Minds.

"If any of us are having trouble getting out of bed one day, or have several bad days, that just means we're responding appropriately to the crisis," she said.

The grit-and-resilience narrative can unfairly suggest some character flaw among today's students, Horne said.

Mark Patishnock, director of counseling and psychiatric services at Michigan State University, said it often builds in assumptions — about financial resources, family culture, and other privileges. "We risk alienating a lot of the students we want to help," he said.

Patishnock pointed to the racial disparities in those affected by Covid-19 in Michigan. African Americans make up 14 percent of the state's population, but they account for one-third of the cases and 41 percent of the deaths as of May 11. That is having a disproportionate impact on Michigan State's students of color, he said.

"It might appear that someone is less resilient when in fact they're just trying to navigate things that other students don't have to," he said.

Psychic Scars?

George Bonanno, a professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College, believes some counselors and therapists have a distortedly pessimistic view of how students will emerge from the Covid-19 era. "If you see pain all the time, you think pain is the norm."

For 30 years, said Bonanno, who runs Columbia's Loss, Trauma, and Emotion Lab, his research has shown that "human beings are very resilient through traumatic events, stressor events, natural disasters, medical emergencies. … I think the same thing is very much true for this Covid epidemic."

"We aren't going to see massive psychological breakdowns over this," he said.

What might be toughest for most students, he and other experts said, is uncertainty and needless confusion. Regular, no-nonsense communication — even if it's just to say, "Things are still up in the air, but here are the factors we're monitoring" — is the most constructive approach college leaders can take, Bonanno said.

Officials must be thoughtful about the mental-health messages they send their students, said Sarah Ketchen Lipson, an assistant professor of health law, policy, and management at Boston University and co-principal investigator of the Healthy Minds Study, which assesses students' mental health.

It's important to create a space for students to grieve, Lipson said, "before we start talking about 'this is going to make you stronger and this is going to make you a more resilient person.'"

Betsy Cracco, executive director of well-being, access, and prevention at UMass, agrees. But stress hurts students' ability to learn, she said, and colleges can respond by helping students understand their strengths and tap into them when they feel overwhelmed. Many resilience programs, like UMass's course, are evidence-based, she added. "It's like medication," she said: Why withhold helpful treatment?

Some resilience practices are easy to incorporate, Cracco said. Start classes with three minutes of breathing or a two-minute wellness infomercial. In the middle of a lecture, get up and twist around. Create buddy systems and small groups in which students can help one another through their stressors.

Colleges can also remind students about available resources that are a text, an email, or a phone call away. "More than half of students," the April Active Minds survey reported, "say that they would not know where to go if they or someone they knew needed professional mental-health services right away."

When a traumatized population starts returning to campus, colleges will need to vet students' mental health as diligently as they do their physical health, Lipson said. "Assessment is hugely important," she said.

Moreover, students might learn a thing or two from classmates who have struggled with their mental health for years.

Their grit takes many different forms, like MIT's Ai Bui, the self-taught ukulele player who sat on the edge of a university stage in October, singing away years of trauma, depression, and eating disorders in an original song called "Darling Me."

"What I went through before — I often say this to my therapist — I've been to the bottom of the bottom," Bui told *The Chronicle*, "so whatever happens, I know I can get through it and get out of it and keep moving on."

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