

Students' Experiences with a Mental Health-Promoting Daily Life During COVID-19: Balancing Predictability and Joy

SAGE Open
July-September 2023: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2023
DOI: 10.1177/21582440231200309
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo


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Abstract

In March 2020, higher education institutions experienced a lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have shown the negative impact of the lockdown on students' mental health. The lockdown situation was unprecedented and describing the variety of experiences is therefore important. This study aims to describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic. Twelve students from a Norwegian university were interviewed online. Phenomenological analysis was used. The essence of their experiences can be described as a balance between predictability and joy based on two themes: *making sense in isolation* and *me related to the outside world*. This balance was achieved through the students' own effort to create appropriate routines in their everyday lives and facilitate the achievement of their goals, allowing them to take initiative, feel included and disrupt the often monotonous COVID-19 lockdown. Universities need to offer as many in-person meeting points, spaces where small groups of students can meet, and interactive lectures as possible.

Keywords

COVID-19, mental health, students, university

Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This resulted in a societal shutdown that deeply affected students worldwide (Odriozola-González et al., 2020; Savage et al., 2020). In many countries, including Norway, campus facilities closed to control the virus. Lectures were conducted digitally, leisure activities were stopped, and opportunities to socialize with other students were limited. Small student accommodations and digital lectures made many students feel isolated and lonely (FHI, 2021).

In a survey of American college and university presidents, 41% of the respondents deemed the mental health of students to be the most pressing issue during the pandemic (Turk et al., 2020). Many students were isolated during various stages of the lockdown and spent time alone in small student rooms for long periods with a high degree of

unpredictability. Lectures were cancelled on short notice, meeting points at the university were suddenly restricted, and it was uncertain how long and how comprehensive the lockdown would be, resulting in a high burden for young people during an important time of personal development. Numerous studies have proven a high increase in mental health problems among students worldwide during the pandemic (Chang et al., 2021; Deng et al., 2021; Liyanage et al., 2021). These studies reveal mental health problems such as symptoms of anxiety, stress, depression, and sleep disturbance. The Norwegian student health and welfare

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study included an additional COVID-19 study in 2021 (FHI, 2021). It showed a dramatic deterioration in students' mental health status during the pandemic and a substantial increase in reported mental health issues. Almost half of the student respondents reported mental health problems such as insomnia, suicidal thoughts, loneliness, depression, and anxiety, and 37% of students felt isolated (often or very often). More female than male students reported mental health problems. In general, the students' perceptions of their own health and quality of life tended to be negative. However, this also suggests that approximately half of the students were content and that several factors in their lives improved during the pandemic: their finances were better; they drank less, and 80% exercised more than two to three times per week (FHI, 2021).

Poor mental health is an immediate problem for affected students. However, the consequences of this problem may be complex. In addition to the acute feeling of poor mental health, students' problems may affect their academic performance, increase their chances of dropping out of university, and affect their adult lives and future roles in communities, workplaces, and society (Cawood et al., 2010; Newton et al., 2016). According to Dooris (2001), universities have an important role in stimulating students' social and personal development, and students' mental health is therefore of great importance from both short- and long-term perspectives.

Wellbeing has been defined in several ways and with varying content (Dodge et al., 2012). Quality of life, life satisfaction, positive affect, and positive psychological functioning have been emphasized as features of wellbeing. Dodge et al. (2012) proposed a definition of wellbeing that centers on a state of equilibrium with a fluctuating balance point between the challenges one faces and the resources available. Wellbeing has also been described by the Foresight mental capital and wellbeing project as the ability to fulfil goals (Government Office for Science, 2008).

The everyday life of students is of great importance in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. Within social psychology, everyday activities are seen as practices that form the basis of social identities (Gallagher et al., 2015). This may be especially important for young people at transitional points in life, such as early adulthood, when they develop independence and learn life skills, mature in their personal development and prepare for their future roles in adult life (Newton et al., 2016). A health-promoting everyday life is therefore crucial.

The research community has made great efforts to increase knowledge of the effect of the pandemic on students' mental health. A search in OVID Medline for the keywords "students," "mental health," "universities," and "COVID" in June 2021, approximately 16 months

after the start of the pandemic, yielded more than 200 articles. The same search conducted in January 2023 yielded more than 550 articles. Several studies have found that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown had an overall negative impact on students' mental health, with increased depression symptoms, worsened sleep quality, worries about contracting COVID-19, and negative impacts on social connectedness, studies, and stress level (Evans et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2020; Tavolacci et al., 2021; Villani et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Consequently, most research focuses on the negative consequences for students' mental health. There has been limited investigation of the factors that promote mental health and wellbeing, although most students have remained mentally healthy during the pandemic (FHI, 2021). Only two articles were found that seemed to address a health-promoting perspective; however, one was in French and therefore inaccessible to the authors (Pougnnet & Pougnnet, 2021). The second study was a recent scoping review focusing on the coping approaches adapted by the higher education institutions to help students cope with the mental health challenges posed by the pandemic. To summarize, very little is currently known about why some students have coped well. This indicates a need to understand the sources, efforts, and measures that promote mental health in this situation. To be prepared for similar situations of isolation or lockdown, it is crucial to investigate students' own experiences of factors that promoted their health and wellbeing in everyday life during this difficult time.

A review of Scandinavian students' mental health and quality of life conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic concluded that there is a need for qualitative research to provide better insight into the complex factors that affect students' mental health (Mordal, 2021). The review also showed a need for studies of universities' role in promoting students' mental health beyond the role of specific professions such as psychologists and therapists. Other researchers have also called for further research on the impact of COVID on students' mental health (Grubic et al., 2020, 2021).

This study aims to describe students' lived experiences of how student life promoted mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, descriptive research design with a phenomenological approach (Colaizzi, 1978). Phenomenology aims to describe the essence of how a phenomenon is experienced. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of the phenomenon

under investigation, and the first-person perspective of the phenomenon and the individual's lived experiences are essential. Husserl is considered the founder of phenomenology and stated that the meaning of lived experiences stems from one-to-one transactions between the research participant and the researcher (Husserl, 1995). The ideal, according to Husserl, is what he calls bracketing, for the researcher to abandon his or her own lived reality and describe the phenomenon under investigation in its purest sense (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Colaizzi offers a rigorous and systematic approach and is considered to be highly accessible (Morrow et al., 2015).

A descriptive approach is suitable when the phenomenon has been incompletely or not conceptualized in earlier research (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is students' lived experiences and the factors that promoted their mental health and wellbeing in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic.

Participants and Recruitment

Data were collected from three male and nine female students at a Norwegian university. They were aged 19 to 24 years, and the length of their study program was 5 to 6 years. The participants had been studying for 1 to 5 years. The inclusion criterion was that they had moved to the university city to study. The first author shared a post on Facebook with information about the study. Facebook contacts were asked to share the post on their pages. Ten students who were interested contacted the first author and received an email with more information about the study and a letter of consent to sign electronically. None of the participants were related to the author in any way but were part of the authors' friends' network. In addition, five students who had volunteered to participate in a previous study by the same authors but were not admitted were contacted via email and asked if they wanted to participate in this study. Two students accepted. The ten students recruited from Facebook network and the two students recruited from a previous recruitment process all met the inclusion criteria's and were selected to participate. Variation was ensured by recruiting students from various programs, lengths of time as a student, ages, and genders. The participants were studying pedagogy, engineering, or medicine.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted from 19th of January to 2nd of February 2021. The participants were interviewed individually (mean time: 35 minutes) on Microsoft Teams by the first author. Only sound from the interviews was

recorded, and no video footage was taken. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The initial question was as follows: "Can you describe what you think has been good for your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?" The initial question was followed by additional questions to obtain a deeper understanding. The follow-up questions included the following: "Can you please describe what a good day looks like for you?" and "Can you describe what you would recommend to other students in a similar situation?"

Analysis

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological descriptive method.

The Colaizzi method of analysis consists of seven steps. The first six steps were applied in the analysis: (a) the researchers read the subjects' descriptions, termed protocols, thoroughly to familiarize themselves with the content; (b) significant statements were marked and extracted, and each interview was numbered to separate the quotes used in the findings section; (c) meanings were formulated based on significant statements, which were categorized into various meanings; (d) the meanings were compared to the data to determine whether they represented the data and were clustered into two themes reflecting the overall descriptions of the phenomenon based on reflections and discussion; (e) an exhaustive description of the students' perceptions of mental health-promoting aspects of student life was developed to integrate the clustered themes; (f) the exhaustive descriptions were condensed into a short statement that captured the essence of the participants' perception of the phenomenon to produce a fundamental structure; (g) Colaizzi's step of seeking verification of the fundamental structure by returning the result to the participants to ensure that it captures their experience was not used. Verification was ensured by reviewing the data to compare the description with the original data.

During the analysis of the data, the research question was kept in mind to ensure that the search for meaning in the material involved searching for relevant information. Presuppositions were controlled to focus on the phenomenon as it was experienced by the participants.

NVivo was used as a tool to facilitate the analysis. The analysis process was performed by the first author in cooperation with the other authors.

Ethics

The study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 2013) and the Committee on Publication

Table 1. Description of Results.

Essence: A balance of predictability and joy in everyday life					
Making sense in isolation		Me related to the outside world			
Creating routines	Achieving goals	Variety	Meeting someone	Being included	Taking initiative

Ethics' International Standards for Authors (Wager & Kleinert, 2014). The participants were emailed an information letter about the project that provided information on the first author's background and previous research, data storage, anonymity, contact information in case of questions and that they were free to withdraw at any time. This information was repeated orally before the interviews started. The participants signed a letter of consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would be deleted. Consent was voluntary, explicit, and informed. The data collection was approved by the Data Protection Officer (NSD reference 873991). The interviews were taped, coded, and stored in accordance with research ethics regulations.

Findings

The present study was designed to describe students' lived experiences that promoted mental health and well-being in everyday life under various degrees of lockdown during the pandemic.

The results indicate that *a balance of predictability and joy in everyday life* is essential to this phenomenon. The essence is grounded in two themes. The theme *making sense in isolation* consists of two meanings: creating routines and achieving goals. The theme *me related to the outside world* consists of four meanings: variety, meeting someone, being included, and taking initiative (Table 1).

A Balance of Predictability and Joy in Everyday Life

The varying degrees of lockdown created new demands for the students that involved a balance between predictability and joy. From a normal student life with largely imposed routines, they now had to direct their own daily lives in a new sense and find a new balance point in their everyday lives.

There was a need for new strategies to create predictability due to few meeting points with both academic staff and friends; digital lectures where they were not seen by anyone; leisure activities that were cancelled, often on short notice; and strict limitations to their unorganized social lives, such as informal meetings with friends. Additionally, from a "normal" life in which social interaction was provided to some extent, they were now solely responsible for their own interactions and

had to take a more active approach to meeting their need for joy and creating satisfying leisure time. These challenges had to be met, and with no prior knowledge of their needs or requirements, the students had to determine their own path and handle situations with no external demands for routines and no social demands from others. It was necessary to create a balance in everyday life that promoted mental health and wellbeing.

Theme: Making Sense in Isolation

To make sense of their daily lives in partial isolation, the students described the need to structure their lives by themselves or with help from others, including peers, university staff, and student societies. The students described their everyday lives as having few demands and few boundaries. Some lectures were mandatory, but compared to normal student life, there were few meeting points and demands from academic activities. The respondents differed in how they regarded mandatory attendance: some found it helpful to structure their days, while others wanted the flexibility of being able to view lectures online when it suited them. However, isolation required them to structure the day in ways different from a normal situation.

Creating Routines. Being partly isolated required the participants to see everyday life in a new way. The interviews revealed that the participants regarded creating daily routines as important. How these routines were expressed was not of great importance but having routines that could provide a sense of normality and something to hold on to in their everyday lives was important.

I would say that finding a structure for the day that works for you. Find a structure and stick to it. Plan your day, work all day, but take breaks. That's important (8)

Making routines was connected to the illusion of a normal daily life. Although many circumstances were not normal, creating routines and activities that mimicked those of a normal daily life, including getting up in the morning, going somewhere to read, dressing properly, and following lectures online, were regarded as balancing factors.

It is important to have a structure so that everything is as normal as possible...[so] that you have a reason to get up in the

morning. I need that structure if I want to get through the curriculum. (8)

Physical activity was mentioned as an important routine. The theme was the importance of routine itself rather than the content of the routine, even though a good work/study schedule was highlighted.

Knowing oneself was also part of the meaning of creating routines. It was expressed as an important measure in the search for creating a routine, as routines can vary greatly. It was important to find a routine that worked personally as long as it offered predictability and stability in an unpredictable time. To do this, it was important for students to meet their own needs and organize their own studies.

You kind of get to know yourself in ways you have not thought about before. You kind of just have to deal with things, be alone and get up and have total responsibility for what you will learn (2).

Achieving Goals. Achieving goals was another meaning that involved the satisfying feeling of achieving the goals one set for oneself, whether large or small. This was connected to the creation of routines and the dimension of planning for the day and achieving the day's goals.

When I've reached the goals I have set for myself...studywise [and] I have done the things I planned to do...that's a very good feeling (8).

The constantly varying degree of lockdown was regarded as challenging and required a fair amount of hope. Lectures were planned and called off, and exams were scheduled to be completed in person, changed to digital exams, and then cancelled. This made everyday life unpredictable, and the students often had to deal with it partly in isolation. The extent to which the participants could meet friends also varied and was unpredictable due to restraining orders and physical distancing, which contributed to a sense of hopelessness that had to be managed.

The student choir...you could participate on zoom; it worked quite well...but then, when we ended up in quarantine, it was cancelled a few times. In addition, we had some "real life meetings" again, and then we rehearsed with another choir and realized...this is not going to work. Therefore, we stopped rehearsing too (4).

While coping in everyday life involved focusing on routines and structure, having something to look forward to and experiencing variation in monotonous everyday life was considered important.

Theme: Me Related to the Outside World

Instead of an active social life, most students described a need to find an alternative way to relate to the outside world as the normal way of relating was altered. New demands and a new structure in relationships with others required more initiative and the need for constant awareness of how contact with others, both academically and socially, could be appropriately organized. Awareness of the outside world was crucial, and the need for others and relationships to others were suddenly more apparent.

Variety. Creating a break from monotonous everyday life was a recurrent theme. This phenomenon could take a variety of expressions but centered on the same theme related to the world around the individual.

*You have to make some appointments...just anything. It could be a big or small activity, just something happening (1).
I am planning to meet someone this weekend. And that helps...to make everyday life more meaningful...that you have something to look forward to (11).*

The variation or break did not need to be extraordinary but merely a break in the everyday routine. These breaks could be as small as a trip to the supermarket or more comprehensive activities such as a weekend trip to a cabin or hiking. While students in a normal situation experience variation in their daily lives due to ordinary demands from study programs, family and friends, these variations had to be created individually during lockdown.

One aspect of creating variety involved "calling my mother." When there was no variation in sight, students called their mothers as a strategy just to get a break and experience something other than the everyday routine.

I think the first person I call is my mother...she understands right away when I want to talk just to talk. And it is really nice to be able to do that, talk to her while I do something, or just have her on the phone (2).

"Calling my mother" would normally be an expression of support, and it still was; however, the dimension of needing a break, which may not be as urgent in a normal day as a student, was closely attached to the lockdown situation. Calling one's mother was expressed as different from other kinds of support and involved support, care, and relief from boredom.

Meeting Someone. Meeting someone was another meaning that emerged from the data. The participants expressed the importance of arranging to see someone else, ideally every day. The meeting could be virtual,

purely social or lectures organized as dialogues, although “real life meetings” were preferred. One meeting a week was regarded as better than no meetings. However, although this was important to all participants, the challenge due to the lack of social interaction varied.

I think I am lucky right now to be someone who enjoys my own company as much as I do. If I was a more social type, I wouldn't be working as much alone as I do...but the most important thing is to get as much social contact as you can...you quickly realize how important the social thing is when you are in a situation like this (8).

Creating small groups was also a dimension of this meaning. A small group in the lockdown situation could serve as a cohort and contribute to more stringent working habits and help structure the day. It also contributed by being a social arena.

Maybe it's crazy to say that a programme is one of the most important arenas, but it is so hard to meet people, but I have been told that the studying years are all about building networks and meeting new people...and then...being isolated in a small student room is not very nice. It's a complete reversal (3).

Due to restrictions on how many people could gather, small groups could serve as important networks both socially and academically and contributed to a feeling of community and belonging in a time of partial isolation.

We have had cohort groups both at the lab and the problem-based learning groups when it was possible. And that has been very, very important...to have that contact once a week or every other week has been important. To be able to meet at the university (2).

Being Included. The way the students related to the university and their lecturers was regarded as important. Feeling that the lecturer understood the situation and that it could be difficult to feel motivated was crucial to some students.

One of the lecturers was like...he was very understanding. And just that he understands that motivation can be difficult...that was helpful. Well...it might not help the motivation, but it is helpful to know that someone understands you. He was like, just send me an email. And even if I did not do it, it was a really nice offer, just to write that to us (11).

The importance of the study program organization was a recurrent theme in the interviews. A study program that provided the opportunity to meet other students from other programs or that was organized into small classes that facilitated closer acquaintances between the students was highlighted as promoting mental health.

We are just a small class, so we have gotten to know each other quite well, and then you have someone to read with...I think that a central part of it, that I have a base of friends or acquaintances that I can relate to and meet and...what can I say, lighten up the day a little (1).

The kind of programmes where you have to meet people you normally don't socialize with is nice. It's a nice way to...even if it's completely different from going to a party or something...you are kind of forced to be acquainted (3).

Disappointment in the negative publicity of the students, especially during sponsorship week, provoked some of the participants. They regarded themselves as very careful and considerate, avoided contributing to the spread of the virus and felt that the media used them as scapegoats.

Taking Initiative. Meeting others was also related to the importance of taking initiative. Isolation and limited social life made it necessary to create a sense of participation and belonging that may be easier to attain in normal circumstances. To achieve a sense of being included, taking initiative to participate was seen as important.

I think I would encourage other students to take even more initiative than usual to socialize and go for a walk and things like that (3).

When there were only online lectures and little or no physical attendance at the university, the students needed to be active in creating an everyday life that was satisfying. Taking initiative could be related to creating variety or creating routines and was regarded as fundamental. Regardless of how the university organized instruction, initiative from the students was still required to adapt appropriately to the situation.

I just want to say...just dive into it...pursue your interest. Because...you have all kinds of student societies and stuff. So, if you like football, try football (10).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to describe students' lived experiences of how everyday life promoted mental health and wellbeing under various degrees of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings suggest that a balance between a predictable everyday life and joyful variation was necessary to promote mental health. This concept consists of themes that are related to how the participants made sense in isolation and their relation to the outside world. Because the COVID-19 situation had not been experienced previously and students did not have previous experience in lockdown, earlier research for comparison is scarce.

Creating Manageable Everyday Routines

The descriptions in this study show that daily structure is important for students to maintain a student life that promotes mental health and wellbeing during various degrees of lockdown. Their everyday lives were turned upside-down, and the students had to find a new way of living given the constantly changing circumstances. Hasselkus (2006) describes everyday life as the rhythm of our daily lives and claims it is nourishment for our existence. She further states that it is the truth and the primary reality for people. Subsequently, an irregular rhythm of everyday life affected the students' existence and their reality due to various degrees of lockdown and restrictions in this period.

In this study, students' need for mental health promotion in everyday life was shown to be different from their needs before COVID 19. Previous research shows that a need to belong and support are paramount when creating a mental health-promoting environment for students (Skoglund et al., 2021). Additionally, targeted intervention programs and efforts from both student welfare organizations and universities are useful for promoting mental health in normal times (Bang et al., 2017; Fernandez et al., 2016; Viskovich & Pakenham, 2020). Some of these efforts may have also been relevant during lockdown but were partly replaced by other, more profound needs. A sense of belonging and a sense of support remained fundamental when creating cohorts that could serve as a network, but during lockdown, this may have been achieved through other measures.

The results of our study are supported by Antonovsky's sense of coherence theory (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1987). During the early phase of the pandemic, a high level of concern was significantly associated with low wellbeing and a low sense of coherence as well as a low sense of meaningfulness, manageability, and comprehensibility (Dadaczynski et al., 2021). A high sense of coherence and the health resources it provides can therefore be an important coping capacity in a demanding time such as during lockdown to improve and retain wellbeing.

The meanings in the theme *making sense in isolation* can be regarded as creating meaningfulness, as described by Antonovsky (1987). The difficulties the participants faced were manageable, and they described how they could make them meaningful by creating predictable routines and striving to achieve their goals. According to Antonovsky (1987), meaningfulness is the extent to which one feels that different stimuli in life are meaningful. Related to our findings, the challenges of the pandemic had to feel manageable in the sense that the resources available, such as initiative, a social network, and the ability to create both appropriate routines and variation in everyday life, had to be sufficient.

The theme *me related to the outside world* involves motivational content and areas in everyday life that enlighten and break up the monotony of everyday routines. Having something to look forward to and meeting someone were related to the emotional content of students' lives. This can also be related to Antonovsky's (1987) sense of coherence: the dimension of comprehensibility points to a motivational direction, areas in life that have emotional meaning, and the extent to which one feels that life has emotional content.

In our study, physical activity was perceived to be an important part of creating a daily routine during lockdown. In accordance with our findings, previous studies have demonstrated that physical activity had a positive impact on students' mental health during lockdown (Amatori et al., 2020; Coakley et al., 2021; Jacobs et al., 2021). In contrast to the findings of both other research and our study, Wilson et al. (2021) found that physical activity did not protect against deterioration in mental health. However, from the overall knowledge of physical activity and its effects on mental health (WHO, 2018), it can be assumed that physical activity in general also has a positive effect during lockdown.

Variation in Everyday Life

Our findings suggest that seeking help from close acquaintances is an expression of a need for variety in monotonous daily life. According to Chaturvedi et al. (2021), seeking help from close acquaintances is adopted as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety. This can be interpreted and explained in the context of the pandemic. When social interactions are restricted, there is a need to find alternative ways to interact and seek help from close acquaintances. Our findings show that measures such as digital meetings, hiking, and phone conversations could provide help from others and variety during lockdown and promote mental health.

According to our findings, a mentally healthy student life is dependent upon both personal qualities and societal factors, and these factors are intertwined when students seek a healthy balance. The sociologist Mills (2000) notes that there is a need to distinguish between personal issues and social issues; however, issues that are challenging individually, such as loneliness, can also be social problems, and the roots of such problems may be found in social structures. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown proved this point. Solutions to some of the individual mental health problems that increased during the pandemic may be found in the social structures in which students live. Research has shown that a holistic approach to students' mental health needs is necessary and that policies need to be implemented within three domains: personal, university, and home

(Usher, 2020). This is consistent with our findings. The needs expressed by the participants in our study were centered on personal factors such as making sense of daily life, measures taken by the university, and the participants' relationships with their families, such as calling their mothers. This implies that the approach to promoting students' mental health may not be different during a lockdown, but actual needs are expressed in different ways than in normal times.

Positive views on how the pandemic may change our ways of seeing have also been advocated. Baybutt and Dooris (2021) argue that the pandemic has shown us the importance of health promotion and that an integrated and holistic approach to health issues is needed. For the participants in this study, similar to many others, the past year and a half forced them to search for new ways of acting and coping due to the decreased structure of daily life because of the lockdown. In a time characterized by a high degree of participation in social activities, new friendships, and new networks, the pandemic heightened the need to find new ways of creating networks or to find a life that is perceived to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Universities' Contributions to Promoting Mental Health

As shown in our study, universities and program design play an important role in promoting mental health among students. Achieving goals, meeting others and having something to look forward to can be enabled by the university, such as by facilitating small groups that create a low threshold for creating networks, making study spaces accessible for small cohorts and organizing lectures in a way that enhances dialogue between lecturers and students and among students. For online teaching, there is a prerequisite that students perceive this teaching to be useful. A feeling of usefulness influences the perception of satisfaction, and satisfaction is the factor that has the greatest effect on learning stickiness (Li et al., 2021).

According to the university mental health charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019), effort must be centered on several areas of student life: proactive interventions, a mentally healthy environment, residential accommodations, social integration and belonging, and the physical environment. These are all areas that may provide an environment for creating a healthy balance between predictability and joy. The themes and essence found in our study can be implemented in all these areas and may promote mentally healthy student lives both in normal student life and during a pandemic situation, as we have seen with COVID-19.

An outcome of the international conference on health-promoting universities and colleges, the

Okanagan charter, concludes with two calls for action: health needs to be embedded in all aspects of campus culture, and higher education institutions must lead action and collaboration on health promotion both locally and globally (University of British Columbia, 2015). This applies to our findings on the university's contribution to facilitating mental health-promoting structures and activities.

On the one hand, creating routines is considered important. On the other hand, creating variation in these routines is equally important. A balance between the routines of everyday life and leisure activities seems to be a relevant strategy for promoting mental health and wellbeing during a lockdown situation or when possibilities for social movement and contact are limited. Supported by Elmer et al. (2020), our study showed the importance of social networks for mental health during the pandemic. Social networks can provide support as a way of making sense in isolation and offer variety during lockdown.

Strengths and Limitations

In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through open discussions and critical reflections among the authors of the study, and the data, meanings, themes, and essence were discussed and modified according to the results of the discussion. Confirmability was ensured by a thorough description of the research process and the extended use of quotes in reporting the results.

Regarding dependability, the last step in Collaizzi's (1978) method, seeking verification of the fundamental structure, involves returning the result to the participants to ensure that the fundamental structure captures their experience, but it is controversial (Morrow et al., 2015). According to Morrow, one can expect participants to be able to recognize their own experiences in the fundamental structure of the study (Morrow et al., 2015). However, among others, Giorgi (2006) claims that the researcher and the participant have different perspectives and that participants are not in a position to judge whether the analysis is correct.

Regarding credibility, none of the participants in this study were familiar with the author. All participants were enrolled in study programs that required devotion and hard work. This may affect the results as students in these programs need to be independent and comfortable with taking initiative and have good self-confidence. However, this does not mean that their mental health needs differ from those of other students, and the results may therefore be transferable to all student groups.

The description of experiences is relevant to elucidate the topic of students' mental health during COVID-19. In a small sample size, volunteer bias may be a concern.

However, all students who volunteered were admitted, and there were no refusals or withdrawals from the study. Additionally, the article provides thorough descriptions of the research process. This allows the reader to consider whether the results are transferable to other settings.

Because the interviews were performed online, making small talk before and after the interview was less natural and was more focused than during face-to-face interviews. Thus, the interviews were shortened, but it is possible that small talk could have potentially contributed to the data as it often makes the atmosphere less formal and more relaxed. However, it is our opinion that the interviews were not more superficial because of this.

Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, we have argued that the description of students' lived experiences is centered on the *balance between predictability and joy in everyday life*. Thus, a new way of living daily student life must be constructed that consists of the factors that are important during non-COVID life but are more visible during COVID.

The creation of *a balance of predictability and joy in everyday life* involves important measures to contribute to a student life that promotes mental health and wellbeing during various degrees of lockdown. Creating a mental health-promoting student life is a shared responsibility. The university is required to keep open space for social interaction as much as possible. This could involve creating small cohorts to ensure that all students have a place to belong and providing study spaces where cohorts can meet. Students are recommended to maintain a normal daily routine and separate their normal daily routine from the breaks during everyday life in non-COVID times. This means that the responsibility is on both the institution and the students themselves. Because a marginalized student life was a reality for most students during the pandemic, these descriptions may also reveal the factors that contribute to mental health and wellbeing in normal student life.

Further research should be undertaken to investigate what measures could be relevant for supporting students in a similar situation. Additionally, more gender-balanced research or specific research on male students' experiences with COVID-19 and mental health should be conducted. Although the pandemic and its consequences have been devastating for many, they have created an opportunity to increase the understanding of student needs regarding mental health and wellbeing, which may contribute to a better understanding of the mental-health promoting needs of the student population in general.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding


The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Ethical Approval


The study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (The World Medical Association, 2013). The data collection was approved by the Data Protection Officer (NSD reference 873991). The interviews were taped, coded, and stored in accordance with research ethics regulations.

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