



> A Snapshot of Student Voices Related to Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

In the following document we take a focused look at findings from the Voices of Wisconsin Students Project that are relevant to returning to students' stress, anxiety, and depression. We highlight findings from the high school student focus groups. However, many of these same themes are reflective of the findings of the middle school reports and are relevant to middle school students as well. For more information and copies of the project reports, see <http://www.wipps.org/voices>

High (and Increasing) Levels of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Many focus group participants reported that they and their friends and peers are experiencing high (and increasing) levels of stress, anxiety, and in some cases, depression during the pandemic. For some students, COVID-19 has exacerbated their existing mental health challenges.

When asked about levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, a pervasive theme across the focus groups was that the students felt high levels of stress and anxiety, and in some cases depression, as a result COVID-19 and its impact on school and their lives in general this year. For many, these feelings have increased during COVID-19. Several students indicated they had a personal history of stress, anxiety and/or depression and that COVID-19 had made it worse. Some students expressed feelings of isolation, or noticed others isolating themselves due to concerns about COVID-19. Students acknowledged that experiences with stress, anxiety, and depression during COVID-19 were unique to each individual, but offered generalizations based on their own perspectives or when thinking about their friends. The students' responses captured a full spectrum of perspectives, the most prominent being that many students were struggling. Many students an-

swered that they and/or their friends were experiencing "very high stress" or "very high anxiety" or that "depression is at a high." One student noted, "Well, honestly, it's been one of the worst years of my life. I've, I struggled a lot at the beginning because I already felt alone, I guess. And then when I couldn't see my friends, I felt more alone. And I was also further isolated from them..." Some students acknowledged they had experienced anxiety or depression prior to COVID-19 and that the current situation has made it worse.

Students' reasons for reporting increases in stress, anxiety, and/or depression reflect the convergence of multiple factors including significant challenges with virtual school and learning; keeping up with homework, concerns about grades, and a loss of study skills; concerns about their futures; lack of connections with teachers, school, and peers; diminished social opportunities and time with friends; and isolation. One student noted, "Lots of kids are pushing themselves, are not sleeping well, and are anxious about their schoolwork." One student who shared that they had anxiety and depression commented that, "By the end of the week, I am completely destroyed. I just crash. Everyone is stressed or they've given up." This student also noted, "It's hard to 'process' when you don't know how to do something, and being virtual makes it even harder!"

They worry they are not learning as much; missing out on labs and in-class demonstrations and experiments; and developing bad study habits, in some cases, resorting to cheating on assignments or tests. One student who had recently returned to in-person learning noted, "Things are better now than being on my own at home."

The students expressed worry about their futures and how COVID-19 has impacted their plans for the future and ability to meet academic and career goals. They perceive that they are missing key experiences that will help prepare them for college and/or the workforce. One person described it bluntly, "I feel that it's impacting my future a lot already." Adding to this, another student noted, "And so it kind of makes us feel more overwhelmed and basically, stressed with our future. Like we aren't really doing much for it. Like what we are doing right now is not really going to help us in the future, and basically, we're just surviving, but not living the lives that we really want to live."

Some feel that by being isolated and without social activities, they are losing "people skills" and forgetting "how to study." One student described this as, "I feel like depression is really at a high. I feel like it's creating a lot of introverts. And, usually, when you're an introvert, it comes with a lack of skills of how to be with people. And I feel like we all forgot how to be around people and to talk to people and to interact with people. And our people skills are really low, which can cause depression, maybe."

Individual family approaches to COVID-19 safety have, in some cases, created added pressure on students to either socialize when they may not be comfortable doing so, or further detach from their social networks. Students whose parents have more strict policies about socializing during COVID-19 have "fear of missing out," especially when the parents of their friends may be less strict. This is stressful for them and may cause them to withdraw further from their friends. The friend who is missing out feels badly when they see others socializing and the other friends, in turn, feel badly that their friend is not there. Students who have to remain virtual due to health issues within their immediate family are

especially vulnerable to feeling this inner turmoil about missing out. Several students are acutely aware of the need to prioritize their family member's health, but still feel badly about missing out on sports, band and other activities.

Several of the focus group participants had recently returned to some in-person learning or were about to return to in-person. Some of these students were grateful to be learning in-person, while others said they are experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety about returning to school in-person and whether or not they can feel safe. COVID-related changes in learning environments are also a source of stress. "The thought of going to school made my chest tighten," said one student. Another noted that they felt "physical anxiety about being in school." Some students feel pressure to go back to school in-person and one described it as a "weird stress." One virtual student was required to go in to school to take a proctored test, though they strongly preferred to not to have to do so. As they described the experience, "I strongly asked to not have to go in. I was so anxious being in a high school again. How will I function?" Another student put it succinctly: "The change is stressful." A student at a small school commented that, "At a small school, you get quarantined a lot. That's never a good situation." A third student noted, "It's stressful because the teachers are back and forth. The Wednesday break is important for teachers, too, to catch up."

While many students reported struggling during COVID-19, several reported that their stress and anxiety had decreased during COVID-19 due to factors such as more sleep, more time to oneself, more time to work out, and less pressure to hang out and be social. These students appear to have adjusted well to their learning model. As one student put it, "I would say the stress level is lower now than towards the beginning of this school year, because now I'm used to how things are this year." In a few cases, the students' descriptions of having lower anxiety may be more reflective of a sense of apathy or "numbness." To illustrate this point, one student noted, "And I think anxiety levels, at least for the people at my school, are lower, because, honestly, we don't have to turn on our cameras. We don't have to participate. You don't really have to do anything."

In Their Own Words...

Below we feature a sampling of student comments relevant to the topics of their stress, anxiety, and depression.
A comprehensive set of comments can be found in the reports.

I feel like my friends' level of anxiety is really high. The school will switch the schedule all the time, and not communicate well what they are doing (or why, it seems).

I have struggled with anxiety and depression. Being online increased it to a whole other level.

It's just a lot piling up. Like every single class is just giving us more and more work, and they're trying to fit in a lot. Like I know we started a hybrid model pretty recently, because we were virtual from September 10th, so we got five days in person, and then we were virtual from beginning of September to a few weeks ago. And they're trying to fit as much work as they can during in person before we end up possibly going back to virtual, and just the work piling up is stressing a lot of people out, and it causes everybody to not do their work because they're avoiding it.

I think that the stress and anxiety levels within my friend group are high, because, well, me and my friends, we like to like have adventures and explore. But like, as like humans, we're supposed to like socialize and like have more physical contact with each other. But with the pandemic, it kind of prevents us from doing that.

Recently with going online, I think the stress level for teachers and students has been higher than normal because it's just a lot more work than if it would be in person.

So, I'm a freshman this year, so I'm like right into high school. And I notice a lot of people in my grade that are just now going into Algebra I, and they're really stressed, and they kind of don't get it. And our teacher, our math teacher isn't like the best. And everyone's kind of asking me for help, because I had Algebra I when I was in eighth grade, so I'm actually in Algebra II now. So, they ask me for help a lot, and it's kind of stressful for me, because I'm trying to do my own homework, and other people are asking me for help and answers. So that's kind of stressful for me. But I also do think that stress and anxiety has gone up higher than what it was like in the past.

And personally, I, even before COVID happened, I had, I have anxiety and depression, and so stacking online school on top of that, like by the end of the week, I'm completely destroyed. Like my mental health and how I feel, I'm just so on edge. I freak, it's a big crash, and it's really hard. And it's hard to make sure I understand things. And, yeah, it's, I think, especially at my school, everyone is stressed, or they've just completely given up.

The schoolwork is really, can really cause, you know, your mental health to go downhill also, because you're worried about it. And then a lot of people, like me, I take school very seriously, and I like to be, you know, in a good place with my grades, and I like to be proud of my grades and stuff like that, and I know people like that are really having a tough time.

So, I definitely notice a lot of my classmates being very unmotivated. Like, normally, we would have not even one person like fail a class, but this year, half the people are failing classes. I just think it's kind of sad. So, I think depression is probably the biggest issue right now. And I think anxiety levels, at least for the people at my school, are like lower, because, honestly, we don't have to turn on our cameras. We don't have to participate. So, you don't really have to do anything.

I feel like at the end of the day, once this whole COVID situation goes away, I feel like, you know, going back to losing the people skills and like losing the skills to know how to study, you know. How do you be in a classroom and aren't afraid to ask a teacher a question? You know, it's like, you're re-teaching how to teach a baby to walk or something, you know. It's harder now.

I feel like a lot more kids are feeling much more isolated, especially because like teachers say, oh, say your room or like go somewhere where it's quiet, and you can set it up, like your computer. So like a lot of kids are like staying in one room for a long period of time just staring at a computer screen, and I feel like that's just like it's not good mentally, because then you're just like, your mindset is like, okay, I have to wake up, look at this computer screen for this amount of time, then do homework, then do this. And you don't get to go out, because there's a pandemic. Like you can't go out and do the same things that you were doing to even try to distract yourself, you know. And it's hard to see your friends, because some of them can't even go out, or sometimes your parents don't even let you go out. So, I feel like that isolation is really heavy right now with everything going on.

So, for me in my friend group, I feel like the stress level has gone down a lot since the beginning of the year, because at the beginning of the year, we didn't really know what to expect and how things were going to go. And now we've kind of gotten the hang of things and how things work, and we've kind of just been able to go with it.

I'm kind of on the opposite side of that. I'm feeling my friend group's stress level is like super high. The anxiety is really high. Our school, while they have okay communication, or they don't tell us things, they just switch things out the day before. We got a whole new schedule where we were told that we needed to stay at school for an extra hour like the morning at 8:30, when our school day starts at 8:35. So they switch our schedules on us all the time. Or they'll tell us like we're four days next week. And then that Monday that's supposed to be four days, they'll be like, oh, that's cancelled. So, we wake up to a whole different day every day, and so it's just really frustrating going to bed when you don't know what you're supposed to do the next day. So, I feel like in our group chat, it's always like does anybody have any idea what's going on? And everybody's answer is no because we never have any idea. So, I'd say it's pretty high...

... Social-wise, I feel like my anxiety just goes up whenever I see someone because I just kind of panic. Like my friends surprised me for my birthday a couple months ago, and I was like terrified. I was like, okay, just stay away. And they were close enough to each other, but they were all wearing masks. But I was just like 10' away, just like, hi. Yeah, they teased me so much about it. I feel like even when I go back to school, it's just going to be strange, seeing everyone and being able to go close to them.

Project Background

The Voices of Wisconsin Students Project sought to better understand how Wisconsin students are coping with school, learning, and life in general during COVID-19 and to understand in more detail the nature of students' sources of stress and anxiety and their thoughts on what support they need. Equally important was to identify, strengthen, and reinforce examples of students' success and resiliency. To gather this feedback, the University of Wisconsin's Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) conducted a total of 23 virtual Zoom focus groups in January and February 2021 with a total of 160 Wisconsin students (64 middle school students and 96 high school students). The students were from 38 different counties and 68 different rural, urban, and suburban communities. The students attend 96 different public, private, and parochial schools. Separate reports were prepared for middle and high school students. Copies of the reports can be found at <http://www.wipps.org/voices> or directly at:

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-High-School-supplemental>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School>

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/Voices-Middle-School-supplemental>

WIPPS Research Partners responds to community needs by providing research and information that can help citizens and communities make more-informed decisions about issues that matter to them. In the case of this particular project, our goal was to provide information to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) from the perspective of students on the important topic of learning, coping, and building resilience during COVID-19. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy agenda in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues. This project was supported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It was developed with input from many partners including representatives of the DHS, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin - Extension. We partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) to provide valuable oversight of the research project through the Institutional Review Board; MCW faculty also served as members of the research team.

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