

# Supporting Student Learning and Well-Being During COVID-19 Using a Choice Theory Framework

*Cynthia Palmer Mason*  
*Western Kentucky University*

*Lori Mason-Bennett*  
*Sinclair Community College*

**Abstract:** *The primary purpose for this article is to address the impact COVID-19 has had on the stress levels and mental well-being of faculty and students in higher education and discuss the use of strategies associated with Glasser's Choice Theory that faculty can employ to alleviate stress for themselves and their students and create enhanced relationships.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, choice theory, remote teaching, managing stress, enhancing relationships

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and rapid impact on those who work in higher education. COVID-19 is caused by a coronavirus called SARS-COV-2. COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person to person, including between

---

**Cynthia Palmer Mason** is a Professor in the Counseling and Student Affairs Department at Western Kentucky University.

**Lori Mason-Bennett** is a Professor at the Health Sciences Department at Sinclair Community College.

Copyright © 2021 by *The Journal of the Professoriate*, an affiliate of the Center for African American Research and Policy. All Rights Reserved (ISSN 1556-7699)

people who are physically near each other (within about 6 feet). People who are infected but do not show symptoms can also spread the virus to others. Even though the elderly and very young children are easily affected, nobody is immune to this new infectious disease after it enters the body (Bender, 2020; Meng et al., 2020). This disease affects different people in different ways. Infected people have had a range of symptoms reported – from mild symptoms to severe illness.

Accordingly, over 200 colleges and universities in the United States closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Many higher education institutions cancelled in-person classes for the remainder of the spring, 2020 semester while others cancelled graduations. Higher education institutions were making decisions in a fluid and unprecedented environment as they were presented with surmounting challenges in their systems of planning, implementation, and assessment. Most institutions shifted to online learning or distance education programs to cope with the challenges that COVID-19 presented.

Meanwhile, professors and instructors faced their own challenges when transitioning to fully online teaching as many were juggling family responsibilities which included for some the homeschooling of their own children during the quarantine (Ray, 2020). Online delivery of courses presented barriers and additional stress for professors as they were expected to acquire online-driven competencies in planning, implementing, and assessing the performance of their students in a short amount of time. Nevertheless, institutions mostly provided training courses to prepare faculty to effectively implement their courses through electronic delivery. Moreover, there were various devices available for teachers to access to enhance learning for their students with diverse educational needs (Barr & Miller, 2013).

However, the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching at institutions of higher education in the early weeks of the pandemic caused many faculty members to learn and use new teaching methods and modes of delivery. Faculty also had limited time to adjust to the demands of emergency remote teaching with some trying to balance working from home with children. Others felt a need for peer support and mentorship (Johnson et al., 2020). In addition, the pandemic disrupted their research activities and added service and mentoring work

to their duties (Mickey et al., 2020) while wanting to increase support for students (Johnson et al., 2020). The pandemic presented faculty with unforeseen circumstances and obstacles that can often negatively impact the state of an individual's mental health, bringing forth emotions such as anxiety, fear, worry, frustration, disappointment, and triggering psychological stress. A consequence of increased stress and anxiety due to unexpected changes can lead to various real-world consequences, such as a reduction in performance of daily tasks and decreased concentration.

## **COVID-19 Impact on the Mental Health of College Students in the United States**

Student mental health in higher education has been a concern because it can affect students' motivation, concentration, performance, and social interactions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic situation has brought this concern to a new level. Son et al. (2020) noted that the pandemic contributed to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students, including fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones, difficulty in concentrating, disruptions to sleeping patterns, decreased social interactions due to physical distancing, and increased concerns on academic performance. Although students had the opportunity to continue their degree paths, the changes to higher education instruction affected students in various ways such as delayed graduation; loss of job, internship, or job offer; and economic and health related shocks (Aucejo et al., 2020). In fact, college students' psychological distress increased significantly following the COVID-19 response and shutdowns of institutions of higher education in March 2020 (Janis, 2020). Nonetheless, some barriers to students seeking help for their stress and anxiety include a lack of trust in counseling services and low comfort levels in sharing mental health issues with others, suggesting that self-management is preferred by students.

### **Self-Care Strategies to Support College Students**

Amidst faculty's own feelings of anxiety and stress during the pandemic, most show care and concern for students, being responsive to their needs and engaged with progressive educational practices (e.g., ungrading, eliminating unnecessary work) that center on students (Johnson et al., 2020). Faculty are in a unique position to help students by working with them to mitigate their stress and secure resources that offer appropriate

support to help them cope with stress (Dye, Burke, & Mason, 2021). The faculty-student relationship, as it pertains to the persistence and academic success of college students, is a salient factor (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983), considering that students interact often with faculty. Therefore, faculty can “serve an influential role because not only can they provide reassurance, they can also be a link to resources for a student in mental or emotional distress” (Burke, Laves, Sauerheber, & Hughey, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, faculty can implement strategies in the learning environment, in-person or virtual, or through advising that can help students by providing them with information and strategies that could enhance their focus, decision-making process, ability to make a change, and management of their negative emotions while facilitating their understanding of taking personal responsibility (Dye, Burke, & Mason, 2021), which are part of the foundation of Choice Theory.

In *Every Student Can Succeed*, Glasser (2008) explains how to reach and teach every student. He suggests implementing reality therapy which has been effectively applied to schools. Reality therapy is based on choice theory as it is explained in several of Glasser’s (1998, 2001, 2003) books. Choice theory teaches that everything we do is chosen and every behavior is our best attempt to satisfy one or more of our basic needs (Glasser, 2001).

An internal control psychology, Choice Theory, explains how and why we make the choices that determine the course of our lives. Choice theory posits that we are not born blank slates waiting to be motivated by forces in the world around us. Rather, we are born with and motivated by five genetically encoded basic needs that drive us all our lives (Glasser, 1998). These needs are survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom or independence, and fun.

1. Survival includes physiological essentials that sustain our lives, including good health, nourishment, shelter, quality air, safety, security, and physical comfort.
2. Love and belonging include our loving another or others and being loved; being connected to others— such as friends, family, intimate partners, colleagues, and groups with whom we affiliate; and being in contact and having interactions with those to whom we feel connected.

3. Power or achievement involves our desire to matter; feelings of accomplishment and competence; self-esteem, success, and control over one's own life; and recognition, respect, making a difference, and leaving a legacy.
4. Freedom and independence are about having choices and our ability to make choices; to move freely without restriction; to love without undue and unnecessary limits or constraints; to be independent and autonomous; and our ability to be creative.
5. Fun and enjoyment include our pleasure; our ability to laugh, joke, and play; our opportunity to relax and have relevant learning, and our appreciation of being human.

Each person has all five needs; however, they vary in strength. Choice theory explains that everything we do is chosen and every behavior is our best attempt to get what we want to satisfy one or more of our basic needs (Glasser, 2001). Emotional, mental, and behavioral problems can arise when one of our needs is not met. The pandemic has interrupted most if not all basic needs for many, which can lead to mental distress including stress and anxiety. One strategy faculty can use to help college students manage stress and anxiety is the “Circle-Up,” which is grounded in Choice Theory.

### **Circle-up with Students**

Circle Up is a strategy that can be particularly helpful to students who have indicated having concerns with sharing mental health issues with unfamiliar people. First, the faculty should develop effective relationships with students by demonstrating that they possess the personal qualities of warmth, congruence, sincerity, acceptance, concern, understanding, openness, and respect for the students (Corey, 2009, 2017). When faculty notice that students seem anxious or distracted or need to discuss difficult and/or important issues in a supportive environment, faculty can introduce their students to the idea of Circle-Up by involving the whole class in planned discussions. The group could meet one time or multiple times, depending on the group size and the amount of discussion that needs to occur.

The Circle-Up is a powerful communal learning tool that gives students practice in speaking and listening while fulfilling the need for belonging and connection (Glasser, 2008). Positive relationships and connections

are especially vital during the pandemic. The use of circles with groups offers a safe, welcoming, and receptive space that moves from person to person, where everyone can see each other, talk honestly, and all voices can be heard. Even on virtual learning formats, students can still see each other's faces and be heard. As such, the circle creates a place that invites sharing and story and facilitates group cohesion. Circles also offer an opportunity for all involved to collectively learn and find solutions as well as build their confidence and skills. Perhaps the real power of Circle-Ups is that students have an opportunity to connect with one another and talk freely about their problems with attention focused on them when it is their turn without someone trying to persuade or command them.

Before starting a circle, an emphasis should be made to the class that everyone will respect everyone and only one person will speak at a time. Next, emphasize to them that the group is their space as much as it is that of the faculty and the more each member brings things up for discussion, the more the group will be able to help one another. To begin the first Circle-Up, ask students to arrange their chairs in a circle if the class is meeting in-person and to tell the group something about themselves, what they do, and why. Regardless to the format of the course you are teaching (online or in-person), the circle is an opportunity to help one another like a family with people helping each other when help is needed. Students have an opportunity to courageously share their concerns and thoughts, even if they fear judgment and discuss topics they believe could be embarrassing, ranging from issues that interfere with their academics to a traumatizing personal experience. Of course, faculty should be prepared to make an appropriate referral (i.e., resource or counseling) if deemed necessary (e.g., a student's anxiety is negatively impacting their daily functioning, or the student expresses suicidal ideations). When making a referral to professional counseling, faculty should be sure to exhibit genuineness and support because if the student perceives the person making the referral as judgmental or condescending toward them, the referral is less likely to be successful as the decision resides with the student (Burke, Laves, Sauerheber, & Hughey, 2020). The end goal is to support students' well-being.

**The WDEP Framework to Guide the Circle Up.** In the Circle Up, the WDEP procedures will serve as the framework for discussing

how faculty can help students understand how they can make decisions that can add to or subtract from their well-being. The faculty will introduce the WDEP system (Wubbolding, 2000) to the group, noting that they can learn tools to plan and discover what they want, identify choices to obtain or achieve what they want, or how to fulfill their needs and evaluate how their actions contribute to or detract from their goals. The acronym WDEP was developed by Wubbolding (2000). Each letter represents a cluster of appropriate skills and techniques to encourage members of the group to take better control of their lives and thereby fulfill their needs in ways that are satisfying to them and possibly to others (W=wants, needs, and perceptions; D=direction and doing; E=self-evaluation; and P=planning). The goal is to weave these components together in ways that can lead students to evaluate their choices and decide how to move in more effective directions.

**W=Wants, Needs, and Perceptions.** Faculty will ask volunteers to start the discussion by talking about what they want or need help with and continue the discussion until each student has had the opportunity to participate. Students are allowed to discuss what they have heard and they should be encouraged to talk but not pressured. For most of them, the idea that they have learned something in class that is relevant and useful outside of class will be a very positive revelation. The students would be asked to describe what they want (“W”) for themselves and the world around them. For example, faculty can pose questions such as: If you were the person you wish you were, what kind of person would you be? What would you be doing if you were living as you want to live? What do you think stops you from making the changes you want to make? Wubbolding and Brickell (1999) included the following two questions focused on perceptions: What is your perspective of the situation? What do you think you can control? These are important questions for discussion as most people have more control in their lives than they often perceive, and these questions are designed to help them move from a sense of external control to a sense of internal control.

**D=Direction and Doing.** The focus at this point of the discussion is on helping students to increase their awareness of possible consequences of their choices, including the overall direction of their lives, where they are going, and where their behavior is leading them. A focus of the conversation could be to ponder if their current behavior is leading them in the direction where they want to be in a month, a year, or

two years. The focus at this time should be on helping students to increase their awareness of what their choices look like from a distance and gaining awareness of and changing current behavior if they desire. To accomplish this, questions can include: “What are you doing now?” “What actually stopped you from doing what you wanted to do?” or “What do you plan to do tomorrow?”

**E=Self-Evaluation.** After exploring wants, needs, and perceptions and discussing direction and doing, self-evaluation is the next step. Students are asked to describe their behavior, wants, perceptions, and levels of commitment and then to make judgments about them. Through questioning from the faculty and comments from classmates, students can contemplate and determine if what they are doing is helping them and leading them in the direction they want their lives to go as they work toward reaching their goals. After the discussion, students are generally ready to explore other possible behaviors and formulate plans for action.

Questions faculty can pose to the group for self-evaluation can focus on if they perceive their behavior as helping them or hurting them, important or unimportant, meaningful or meaningless, and if it is to their advantage or not to their advantage. Usually, people do not change until they decide that what they are doing is not helping them to accomplish what they want. Questions can be asked during this period to provide students an opportunity to evaluate their present behavior and the direction it is taking them. Suggested questions (Wubbolding, 2000, 2011, 2015) to ask could include: Is what you are doing now what you want to be doing? Is your behavior working for you or against you? Is what you want realistic or attainable? Is it true that you have no control over your situation? How committed are you to changing your life? After carefully examining what you want, does it appear to be in your best interest? Such questions can help students in evaluating the quality of their actions and making choices that are better for their well-being. Without an honest self-assessment, it is unlikely that students will make a change.

**P=Planning.** During this phase of Circle-Up, students focus on formulating structured plans for change. The process of developing and carrying out plans enables students to begin to gain effective control of

their lives, which gives students a starting point. The most effective plans originate within students and should be stated in terms of what the students are willing to do. They should be flexible and open to revision as students gain a deeper understanding of the specific behaviors they want to change. Faculty should encourage students to put their plans in writing and the faculty should attempt to periodically check in throughout the semester to see how students are doing.

Using Circle Ups in the learning environment to help students during difficult times, such as a pandemic, can offer support and enhance a student's sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) suggests that sense of belonging takes heightened importance in certain contexts, such as the college classroom, which has a great influence on student outcomes (e.g., adjustment, achievement). Therefore, faculty who incorporate Circle Ups in their classrooms are employing a communal learning tool that gives students practice in speaking and listening while fulfilling the need for belonging and connection (Glasser, 2008). Positive relationships are vital during the pandemic. The use of circles with groups provides a safe, welcoming, and respectful space that moves from person to person. The circle creates a place that invites sharing and story and facilitates group cohesion. With students being able to see each other's faces and be heard, circles also offer an opportunity for all involved to collectively learn and find solutions while building their confidence and skills. In essence, faculty who incorporate Circle-Ups in their classrooms are supporting student learning and well-being during COVID-19 using choice theory as a framework.

### **Self-Care Strategies for Faculty**

While having concern for students is important in the faculty-student relationship, it is also critical for faculty to be mindful of their own self-care. In congruence with choice theory, if faculty are more aware of what they are doing and the consequences of not paying attention to their health and wellbeing, they can make more conscious choices and plans for self-care, such as tapping into their support networks or practicing mindfulness. Self-care can help create balance and can contribute to good physical and mental health and improved quality of life (Pope & Vasquez, 2005) and help to maintain and promote our physical and emotional health (Myers et al., 2012). When showing concern for students while maintaining a learning environment, faculty should be

aware that there can be a cost to caring such as compassion fatigue and burnout (Figley, 1995). Therefore, self-care, which requires personal initiative, becomes a relevant matter for the self-regulation of faculty.

From a choice theory perspective, it is important for faculty to realize that they have more control over their personal self-care than they perceive. Wubbolding and Brickell (2009) include questions focused on perception: How do you look at the situation? Where do you see your control? These questions can help faculty to move from a sense of external control to a sense of internal control. Relevant questions may help them to gain insights and arrive at specific plans which could include mindful meditation, regular exercise, vacations, learning a new skill for fun, and/or scheduling more time for family and close friends.

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has presented many obstacles for the learning environment in higher education. The rapid transition to emergency remote teaching caused many faculty to learn and use new teaching methods and modes of delivery with some trying to balance working from home with children (Johnson, Valetsianos, & Seaman, 2020). Their research activities were interrupted and service and mentoring expectations were increased (Mickey, Clark, & Misra, 2020). The pandemic presented faculty with unforeseen circumstances that can often negatively impact the state of an individual's mental health, triggering emotions such as anxiety, fear, worry, frustration, and disappointment. However; Johnson, Valetsianos, and Seaman (2020) found that amidst their own feelings of stress and anxiety, faculty participants indicated showing their care and concern for students by being responsive to their needs and engaging in progressive educational practices.

College students comprise a population that is considered particularly vulnerable to mental health concerns; this was brought to a new level with the COVID-19 pandemic. Son et al. (2020) reported that the pandemic contributed to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students who experienced fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones, difficulty in concentrating, disruptions to sleeping patterns, decreased social interactions, and increased concerns on academic performance. In fact,

college students' psychological distress increased significantly following the COVID-19 response and shutdowns of institutions of higher education in March 2020 (Janis, 2020).

Despite the availability of university counseling services, most students did not seek help. Their expressed reasons for not using the services included not feeling comfortable interacting with unfamiliar people, not comfortable talking about mental health issues over the phone, and lack of trust in the counseling services (Son et al., 2020). Findings from this study highlight the need for self-care strategies to support college students.

Mental health for college students is important; it can impact their motivation, concentration, and social interactions. Regardless to their concerns or the reasons for their concerns, it is imperative for those who work with undergraduate and graduate students to build the competence necessary to help them be successful. It seems reasonable to recommend the implementation of the Circle Up in classrooms for student support. This strategy should be particularly helpful to students who indicated having concerns sharing mental health issues with unfamiliar people.

The Circle Up is a powerful communal tool that gives students practice in speaking and listening while fulfilling the need for belonging and connection (Glasser, 2008). Positive relationships are vital. The Circle Up employs the WDEP system. This is a pedagogical tool useful for understanding and teaching specific concepts to students. Each letter refers to a cluster of strategies designed to promote change. Grounded in choice theory, the WDEP system assists people in satisfying their basic needs.

It is important to note that students do not work in your classroom because they think an education is important to them; they work in your classroom because they like you and they see the sense in what you are trying to teach (Glasser, 2008). To be effective with college students, faculty must possess the personal qualities of warmth, sincerity, congruence, understanding, acceptance, concern, openness, and respect for the individual (Corey, 2017). These personal characteristics will allow them to develop positive relationships with students and be more effective in their efforts to support student learning and well-being during the pandemic or any difficulty/distress students may experience.

Although continued study will further contribute to documented ways to help college students manage stress and anxiety, it seems reasonable to recommend using a choice theory framework to support student learning and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## References

- Aucejo, E. M., French, J., Araya, M-P-U, & Zafar, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student experiences and expectations: Evidence from a survey. *Journal of Public Economics*, 191 (2020).  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104271>
- Barr, B., & Miller, S. (2013). *Higher education: The online teaching and learning experience*. (ED543912). ERIC.  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543912.pdf>
- Bender, L. (2020). Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools. UNICEF New York.  
<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020>
- Burke, M. G., Laves, K., Sauerheber, J. D., & Hughey, A. W. (2020). *Faculty helping students in distress: A faculty guide*. Routledge.
- Corey, G. (2009). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Thompson Brooks/Cole.
- Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Thompson Brooks/Cole.
- Dye, L., Burke, M. G., & Mason, C. P. (2021). *Mindful strategies for helping college students manage stress: A guide for higher education professionals*. Routledge.
- Figley, CR (1995). Compassion fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview in Figley, CR, (ed) (pp 1-20). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. Brunner-Routledge.

Glasser, W. (1998). *Choice theory*. HarperCollins.

Glasser, W. (2001). *Counseling with choice theory*. HarperCollins.

Glasser, W. (2003). *Warning: Psychiatry can be hazardous to your mental health*. HarperCollins.

Glasser, W. (2008). *Every student can succeed*. Harper-Collins.

Janis, R. (2020, September 8). COVID-19 impact on college student mental health. *Centerfor Collegiate Mental Health*.  
[https://ccmb.psu.edu/index.php?option=com\\_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2020&month=09&day=07&id=1:covid-impact-on-college-student-mental-health](https://ccmb.psu.edu/index.php?option=com_dailyplanetblog&view=entry&year=2020&month=09&day=07&id=1:covid-impact-on-college-student-mental-health)

Johnson, N., Veletsianos, G., & Seaman, J. (2020). U.S. faculty and administrators' experiences and approaches in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Online Learning Journal*, 24(2), 6-21.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i2.2285>

Meng, L., Hua, F., & Brian, Z. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Emerging and future challenges for dental and oral medicine. *Journal of Dental Research*, 99(5), 481-487.  
<http://dx/doi.org/10.1177/0022034520914246>

Meyers, S. B., Sweeney, A. C., Popick, V., Wesley, K., Bordfeld, A., & Fingerhut, R. (2012). Self-care Practices and perceived stress levels among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 6 (1), 55-66.  
<https://doi.10.1037/a0026534>

Mickey, E. L., Clark, D., & Misra, J. (2020), September 4). Measures to support faculty during COVID-19. *Insider Higher Ed*.  
<https://www.insiderhighered.com/advice/2020/09/04/advice-academic-administrators-how-best-support-faculty-during-pandemi.c-opinion>

- Pascarello, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1983). Predicting voluntary freshman year persistence/withdrawal behavior in a residential university: A path analytic validation of Tinto's model. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 75*, 215-226.
- Pope, K. S., & Vasquez, M.J. T. (2005). *How to survive and thrive as a therapist*. American Psychological Association.
- Ray, R. (2020, April 06). 8 recommendations for universities and professors during the coronavirus pandemic. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/04/03/8-recommendations-for-universities-and-professors-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>
- Son, C., Hedge, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22*(9), e21279. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2196/21279>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge
- Wubbolding, R. (2000). *Reality therapy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Brunner-Routledge.
- Wubbolding, R. (2011). *Reality therapy*. American Psychological Association.
- Wubbolding, R. E. (2015). *Reality therapy training manual* (16<sup>th</sup> rev.). Center for Reality Therapy.
- Wubbolding, R., & Brickell, J. (1999). *Counseling with reality therapy*. Speechmark.