

# **Coping Among Older Adults During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Research Study**

Presented at: Sacred Heart University Academic Festival

---

Presented by: Nicole Sperling, Vaibhavi Siddhartha, and Rebecca Barakat

# Disclosure(s)

---

- We have no commercial relationships to disclose.

# Study Background

---

- COVID-19 = COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a coronavirus discovered in 2019. The virus spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets and small particles produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. The virus spreads readily in crowded or poorly ventilated indoor settings. Illness can range from mild to severe, though not everyone infected with the virus develops symptoms. (CDC, 2022).
- Adults 65 years and older and people of any age with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk for severe illness
- Few research studies on the coping among older adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic

# Coping in Later Life

---

- Coping = activities one does to tolerate or decrease mental strain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
- The presence of adequate coping skills has been found to be protective of physical and mental health among older adults (Yancura & Aldwin, 2008).

Older adults during COVID-19 may experience the need to cope with:

- Economic crises
- Cancellation of important doctor appointments
- Decrease in social life

# Coping in Later Life

---

- Some coping perspectives have suggested that increased age may enhance coping abilities due to an accumulation of life experiences, resources, and strategies that may boost coping skills (Neupert et al., 2019).
- However, considering a global pandemic, COVID-19 pandemic presents a variety of stressors, such as social distancing that may impact coping among older adults.
- It is thus important to understand how old adults cope with COVID-19

# Research Objective

---

- To extend our knowledge about how older adults coped with life, particularly during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

# Study Methodology:

---

- Study Sample: 41 older adults
- Inclusion Criteria: Older Adults living in the Northeast coast of the US
- Recruitment: email, social media, visiting retirement facilities

# Participant Characteristics

---

- Age range – 60 years to 74 years (m= 68)
- Sex – female (n=26) 63.4%; male (n=15) 36.5%
- Marital status – married (n=32) 78%; not married (n=9) 22%
- Employment status – employed (n=33) 80.4%; not employed (n=8) 20%

# Study Methodology:

---

## Data Collection:

- Semi-structured interviews – Lasted between 15 to 30 minutes
- Modes of interviews - Face to face interviews, Facetime, and Phone interviews
- Interview question example - How did you cope during the pandemic? (As a follow-up, they were asked to reflect upon things they are doing to cope considering the pandemic and what coping strategies are helpful to them)

# Study Methodology:

---

## Data Analysis:

- Interviews conducted in English, recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Analysis: Thematic content analysis
- Research team met to discuss tentative, initial themes within the interviews
- Open coding, which involves labeling and categorizing phenomena was adopted. For example, in describing coping strategies, codes from the main features of the data were identified. Examples of these initial codes were, “*going for walks,*” “*talking on the phone with friends and family,*” etc.

# Study Results: Coping During the Pandemic

Primary themes	Subthemes
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Frequent communication with family and friends</li><li>-Reaching out to old contacts</li><li>-Checking in on others</li></ul>
Positive mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Being optimistic</li><li>-Trying to follow CDC guidelines</li></ul>
Embracing New Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-Embracing ehealth/telehealth,</li><li>-Adapting virtual communication technologies</li><li>-Adapting new techniques of job performance</li></ul>

# Study Results: Coping During the Pandemic

---

## Social support

“There was so much that was changing from time to time regarding COVID, so I think I would spend more time talking to my family members and checking in on friends. Sharing what was happening was somehow therapeutic.” (67 –year-old-woman)

“You know I found myself reaching out to people I had not spoken to in along time. I called one person that I had not spoken to for more than 20 years. I am glad they still had the same phone number. I would say if there was something good that came out of COVID, it was helping me reconnect with her.... My husband and I would try and walk more in the evening, you know get out of the house and get some air.” (74-year-old-woman)

# Study Results: Coping During the Pandemic

---

## Positive Mindset

“I try to stay positive as much as I can.” (64 –year-old-woman)

“I think at my age I have seen many problems and challenges. I just have to remind myself that this too will pass.” (73 –year-old-man)

“I mean, with COVID there isn’t much you could do besides follow the CDC guidelines. I sanitized often and wore my mask.... That made me feel better.” (67-year-old woman)

# Study Results: Coping During the Pandemic

---

## Embracing New Technology

“I was not so much keen on connecting with my doctor online, but I think that changed during the pandemic. I always prefer to see my doctors in person but the pandemic sort of got me online (Laugh). One day my doctor asked to meet me virtually and I think it went well.” (74 –year-old-man)

“With all that was going on I needed to see my therapist and with all the corona guidelines we couldn’t meet in person, so she asked me if I was okay meeting her virtually. I had not done that before and was skeptical, but I decided to give it a try. I mean it wasn’t the same as being in person, but it worked. We have done telehealth several times since then.” (68 –year-old-woman)

# Discussion

---

- Older adults mostly engaged in emotion focused strategies of coping as they sought social support.
- Enhanced communication as individuals connected with infrequent social contacts
- Protective role of social connectedness and positive mindset in enhancing well-being during the pandemic among the older adults
- Coping strategies fostered resilience among the older adults.

# Conclusion

---

- Qualitative research approach provided an avenue for gaining a nuanced understanding of coping during the pandemic
- Community-based interventions should be designed to recognize and address the challenges older adults may experience with regard to ehealth/telehealth

# Study Limitations and Future Directions

---

## Limitations

- Challenge in recruiting aging participants
- Varying data collection methods i.e., face to face, facetime, telephone

## Future Directions

- Longitudinal studies to explore trajectories of coping and well-being post-pandemic e.g., among males and females, among young old, middle old, and old-old

# Questions and Discussion?

---

# References

---

- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer publishing company.
- Neupert, S. D., Neubauer, A. B., Scott, S. B., Hyun, J., & Sliwinski, M. J. (2019). Back to the future: Examining age differences in processes before stressor exposure. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 74(1), 1–6.
- Yancura, L. A., & Aldwin, C. M. (2008). Coping and health in older adults. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 10(1), 10–15.