

for a three-day emergency (14.13%; $\chi^2 = 4.03$, $p < .05$). If accepted for presentation, implications for an array of audiences will be developed.

EXPLORING THE “NEW NORMAL”: OLDER ADULTS’ COPING STRATEGIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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COVID-19 stay-at-home orders resulted in social isolation and psychosocial challenges for older adults around the world. To understand their lived experiences during the pandemic, we conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 15 older adults living in community settings. Qualitative thematic analysis of the collected data identified themes and patterns of the “new normal” for these participants: ways of living, communication with family and friends, sense of autonomy, psychological responses, coping strategies, and perceived social support. This presentation focuses on participants’ coping strategies. Participants used common coping strategies, customized to the unique challenges of stay-at-home orders. We categorized coping strategies as problem-focused, meaning-focused, and emotion-focused. Participants’ problem-focused strategies aimed to reduce the risk of infection. Meaning-focused strategies included purposeful errands such as going to grocery stores. Emotion-focused strategies emphasized connecting with support networks (e.g., via Zoom) and efforts to maintain psychosocial and emotional well-being (e.g., seeking professional counseling). They also employed self-enhancing comparisons to increase self-concept and self-esteem. At the beginning of the pandemic, some temporarily used distraction/avoidance strategies such as eating comfort food and avoiding news about COVID-19 to maintain a positive emotional state. Our findings imply the applicability of frameworks such as life course perspective and selective optimization with compensation to highlight the successful adaptive strategies developed by older adults through experience. We argue against the ageist view of older adults as vulnerable. Rather, this study suggests that older adults can flexibly employ resilient coping strategies crafted over a lifetime of experiences in response to crises.

LINKING COPING BEHAVIOR AND MENTAL WELL-BEING IN OLDER ADULTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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In addition to being a significant source of stress, the COVID-19 pandemic required older adults to drastically alter their behaviors and routines. People cope with stress in various ways; however, the pandemic was a unique situation that warranted investigation of this topic. This study aimed to identify the ways older adults coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the relationship between specific coping behaviors and perceived stress and mental health. Two hundred thirty-one older adults, ages 53 to 90, completed an online survey about coping behaviors used to manage stress during the pandemic, as well as measures of loneliness, depression,

perceived stress, and the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives. “Talking with friends and family” (83%) and “increased television watching or other screen-time” (68%) were the most common coping behaviors. A series of one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA), with race, gender, age, education, and income included as covariates, revealed “eating more often” and “drinking alcohol” were associated with greater loneliness, depression, and stress. “Increased screen time” was also associated with greater depression and stress. “Engaging in more family activities,” was associated with a less negative impact of the pandemic, and “talking with friends and family” was associated with less loneliness. These findings suggest older adults who coped with stress of the COVID-19 pandemic through more eating, drinking, and the second most common behavior—watching TV—were more likely to report poorer well-being, and may benefit from programs to boost virtual social engagement.

MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AMONG OLDER ADULTS WITH CHRONIC CONDITIONS

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The COVID-19 pandemic may have a negative impact on mental health, especially among older adults with chronic conditions who are more vulnerable to severe illness. This cross-sectional qualitative study evaluated how the pandemic has impacted the ways that adults aged 50 and older with chronic conditions managed their mental health. Participants included a total of 492 adults ($M = 64.95$ years, $SD = 8.91$, range = 50 – 94) from Michigan (82.1%) and 33 other U.S. states who reported a diagnosis of at least one chronic condition and completed an anonymous online survey between May 14 and July 9, 2020. Participants provided open-ended responses to a question about the pandemic’s impact on how they were taking care of their mental health. The data were coded to ascertain relevant concepts and were reduced to develop major themes. We determined four main themes. The pandemic impacted how participants took care of their mental health through: (1) pandemic-related barriers to social interaction; (2) pandemic-related routine changes; (3) pandemic-related stress; and (4) pandemic-related changes to mental health care. Taken as a whole, this study indicates that older adults with chronic conditions encountered a variety of challenges to managing their mental health in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also demonstrated considerable resilience. These findings identify potential risk and protective factors to target as part of personalized interventions to preserve their well-being during this pandemic and in future public health crises.

OLDER ADULTS AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A TWO-STATE STUDY

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