

*Self-Care Plan of College Freshman Students  
During the Covid-19 Pandemic in the Philippines*

Rosemarie A. Tayoto, De La Salle University, Philippines

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**Abstract**

The covid-19 pandemic affects not only physical health but also mental health and well-being. Loss of loved ones, fear of being infected by the virus, threats to the financial stability of their family, changes in normal routines, and feelings of isolation can contribute to increased anxiety, sadness, and loneliness which pose a greater danger for psychological impairment. Literature pinpoint that promoting self-care has a favorable effect on individuals' mental health. With the current health crisis worldwide, the majority was inevitably shaken by its life-changing effects. The student population is one of those who were directly affected due to the overwhelming challenges and uncertainties they face. It is in this light, that this research was conducted to encourage freshman students to design their self-care plan embedded in online course-based mental health modules to help them overcome difficulties and promote resilience. This research employed a qualitative approach to describe the self-care plan of freshman students. The eighty-two participants were enrolled in a non-academic online course on mental health literacy at a private university in the Philippines. Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the data gathered using the eight dimensions of self-care by Fisher (2015). Results show that students' self-care plan includes systematic (physical self-care), emotive (expressing emotions), luminescent (spiritual practices), cognitive (having a positive mindset), aptitudinal (finding creative ways to use skills and talents), relational (connecting with others), environmental (supporting local communities), and financial self-care. With these findings, implications of the importance of comprehensive and sustainable mental health programs in schools and universities are discussed.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Mental Health; Self-Care; College Students

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## Introduction

It was January 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the highest level of alarm under international law for the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) as a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020). Eventually, WHO began referring to the virus as the covid-19 which rapidly spread worldwide and has greatly affected the lives of the general population. The pandemic has resulted in tons of reported deaths, hospitalizations, risks to health and safety, loss of livelihood, health services breakdown, and economic recession. Different policies to help manage the transmission of the contagious disease had led to a major disruption in the daily life activities of humans of all ages. Many countries resorted to implementing strict health and quarantine protocols that include wearing face masks, frequent washing of hands, physical distancing, minimizing face-to-face interactions, localized community lockdowns, and self-isolation (World Health Organization, 2020 and Haleem, Javaid, & Vaishya, 2020).

It is also evident that the covid-19 pandemic affects not only the physical health but also the mental health and well-being of many (Kontoangelos, Economou, & Papageorgiou, 2020; Fiorillo, & Gorwood, 2020). Loss of loved ones, fear of being infected by the virus, threats to financial stability, sudden changes in normal routines, and the feeling of isolation can all contribute to increased anxiety, sadness, and loneliness which pose a greater danger for impairment in individuals' functionality (Hou, Lai, Ben-Ezra, & Goodwin, 2020) and are also known risk factors for several mental health illnesses such as major depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, post-traumatic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). In the study conducted by the US Consensus Bureau, Household Pulse Survey (2020), the report revealed that 56.2% of young adults ages 18-24 are experiencing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, 48.9% for adults ages 25-49, 31.9% on adults ages 50-64, while 29.3 for adults 65 and up. More so, aside from anxiety and depression, sleep disturbance, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation have also escalated for many young adults who experience the closure of universities, transition to online school or work, and financial issues brought by the pandemic (Panchal, Kamal, Orgera, Cox, Garfield, Hamel, & Chidambaram, 2020). In the Philippines, a study was conducted during the onset of lockdowns and community quarantine to determine the psychological impact of the covid-19 pandemic on the general population. Results showed that 16.3% of the respondents revealed moderate to severe psychological impact; 16.9% of the respondents experienced moderate to severe depressive symptoms; 28.8% reported moderate to severe anxiety symptoms; and 13.4% experienced moderate to severe stress signals (Tee, Tee, Anlacan, Aligam, Reyes, Kuruchittham, & Ho, 2020). These numbers clearly illustrate that in one way or another this global health crisis had brought physical and psychological problems to the general population.

One of the government's strategies to eradicate and flatten the curve is to minimize the mobility of all. This includes the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels which caused immense disruption to the educational system all over the world (Hou, Lai, Ben-Ezra, & Goodwin, 2020). In the Philippines, both the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) were forced to shift gears on teaching modalities and migrate the educational platform to distance learning, modular approach, blended learning, and online learning (Tria, 2020). Indeed, this health outbreak gave an avenue for the educational system to introduce digital learning and maximize the use of the internet (Dhawan, 2020). However, the abrupt changes also create adverse consequences for students, teachers, and parents. There was an interruption in learning, confusion, and stress to all

school stakeholders. Teachers, parents, and students are caught unprepared for distance or homeschooling, higher economic costs, rise in dropout rates, social isolation, increased rates of exposure to violence and exploitation, and challenges in validating and measuring learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2021).

Specifically for the tertiary level, most colleges and universities also encounter issues and concerns related to online learning (Talidong & Toquero, 2020). Reports show that institutions are lacking online teaching infrastructure, limited knowledge, and training of faculty members on conducting online classes, students' uncondusive home environment that affects their learning experience, and the quality of education students' acquire through the new educational system (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). With these challenges, it is significantly notable that students have been directly affected by the "new normal" setup. In the recent study by Baloran (2020) which includes 530 college and senior high school students, results showed that during the entire period of lockdown in the Philippines, the majority of the students displayed anxiety symptoms. Another research on the mental health of college students during the pandemic was conducted in the United States and found that among the 2031 respondents, 48.14% experienced moderate to severe level of depression, 38.48% displayed a mild to severe level of anxiety, 18.04% had suicidal ideation, and 71.26% of the respondents expressed that their level of stress and/or anxiety had increased due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the reasons for the escalated stress level of the respondents are due to academic concerns (e.g., increase in academic difficulties, adjustment to online classes, concerns over grades, delayed graduation), uncertainty regarding the pandemic, health concerns (e.g., both physical and mental of family, friends, and self), financial problems (e.g., unemployment or uncertainty for future employment), living/working environment (e.g., studying/working from home, cabin fever, returning from home, confinement with others), disrupted social life and feeling of isolation due to quarantine protocols (Wang, Hegde, Son, Keller, Smith, & Sasangohar, 2020). Evidence already revealed that mental health should also be one of the priorities during this time of the pandemic, especially for the student population due to the prolonged school closure, quarantine, and social distancing protocols that led to isolation, academic pressure, difficulties adjusting to online learning, delays in significant academic requirements (e.g., graduation, internship programs, thesis writing), and unhealthy home situation (Lee, 2020).

In this regard, it is very essential that students also exert conscious effort to take care of themselves despite the challenges caused by the covid-19 pandemic to promote positive mental health. Self-care is defined as "the ability to care for oneself and the performance of activities necessary to achieve, maintain or promote optimal health" (Richard & Shea, 2011, p. 256) while self-care practices are self-initiated activities to manage stress and promote physical and emotional health (Myers, Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Bordfeld, & Fingerhut, 2012). Although there have been numerous studies conducted about self-care however, up until now they are few that focus on the college population, and studies are conducted before the pandemic. One of these is the study that investigated the role of self-care in supporting college students' psychological well-being. The recent findings pointed out that mindful acceptance, social support-seeking, healthy eating, and sleeping hygiene are the four self-care practices that directly affect students' well-being (Moses, Bradley, & O'Callaghan, 2016). This result was supported by the study by Jenkins, Slemon, O'Flynn-Magee, & Mahy (2019) on enhancing undergraduate nursing students' well-being based on self-care assignments. Findings showed that self-care practices have a positive impact on students' overall wellness. Lastly, a similar study was conducted by Tan-Masukhani (2020) in the Philippines that describe self-care practices of college students in the context of course-based mental health

training, findings revealed that self-care practices do not just help students to manage stress but also boost psychological resources and well-being.

Literature pinpoint that promoting self-care has a favorable effect on individuals' mental health. With the current worldwide crisis brought by the covid-19 pandemic, the majority has inevitably been shaken by its life-changing effects. The student population is one of those who were directly in distress due to the overwhelming challenges and uncertainties that they need to face. It is in this light, that this research was conducted to encourage freshman college students to design their self-care plan embedded in online course-based mental health modules that will help them aid to overcome difficulties during the time of pandemic and promote mental health and well-being.

The purpose of this study is to describe the self-care plan of freshman College of Science (COS) students in the context of a course-based mental health module that aims to help them to attain a sense of balance in their lives as they face a new milestone in their educational level and to cope effectively with the challenges brought by the pandemic.

## **Methodology**

This research employed a qualitative approach to describe the self-care plan of freshman COS students. The participants were enrolled in a non-academic course on mental health awareness and career development at a private university in the Philippines. Out of 184 students who consented to participate in the study only 82 (53 females and 29 males) were included based on the screening criteria set by the researcher (e.g., complete self-care plan output with labels). No additional course credit was given to the participants. Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the data gathered in the online course-based mental health modules using the eight dimensions of the self-care framework by Fisher (2015) which includes systematic, emotive, luminescent, financial, cognitive, aptitudinal, relational, and environmental self-care based on their self-care plan output. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for analyzing qualitative data to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In the online course-based mental health modules, participants were introduced to different topics such as coping with stress, understanding mental health, and mental illnesses, caring for mental health, and managing online learning during the time of the pandemic. Applying what they have learned from the different modules, students were asked to come up with a collage illustrating their self-care plan that they can incorporate into their daily schedule as college students which aims to help them to attain a sense of balance in their lives and to cope effectively with life's challenges, especially during the time of the pandemic. Only students with accomplished informed consent forms and labeled (with description) collage were included in this study and responses were analyzed and categorized to identify the common themes in the self-care plan of freshman students.

## **Results**

The findings of this study on the self-care plan of freshman COS students are presented below as themes using the eight dimensions of self-care by Fisher (2015). Among the eight dimensions of self-care, systematic self-care was the most common practice that the participants intend to incorporate into their self-care plan. According to Fisher, systematic self-care is centered on physical health including how you eat, move, and rest which

primarily aids in nourishing your body. Participants' common responses to their systematic self-care plan include exercise, getting enough sleep, skincare routines, eating healthy, drinking water or hydrating, playing sports, and simply resting. One participant emphasized taking care of her physical wellness by stating “I try to incorporate exercise into my daily routine at least 30 minutes to an hour a day”. Also, another participant stated “I create a healthy sleeping schedule to follow”, and “practice good hygiene and skincare routine”. Participants also highlighted the importance of proper diet in their self-care plan by committing to “eat nutritious food and maintaining a healthy diet plan”. Most participants also aim to stay physically active despite quarantine limitations by playing sports such as swimming, basketball, golf, badminton, taekwondo, and biking.

Another common theme in the self-care plan of the freshman COS students is relational self-care. This dimension focuses on how you connect with others. Relational self-care helps an individual develop social support system through healthy relationships with friends, families, intimate partners, and professional relationships. All these actions may contribute to social wellness and meaningful relationships. Participants during this time of pandemic target to incorporate their relational self-care by keeping in touch with friends online, playing online games with friends, spending time with family members during quarantine, and reaching out to relatives and friends via video calls. Commonly stated responses among participants are “having a regular video call with loved ones and friends”, “being with my support system”, and “eating, watching movies, and creating more memories with family” are some of the priority plans of the participants to prioritize relational self-care. Another participant stated “talking to my mom about my busy day/week” helps her spend more quality time with her mother. On the other hand, a participant mentioned that “keeping up with my boyfriend” and “regular social media detox” also contribute to her relational self-care. There are also participants who intend to spend more quality time with family and friends by attending local trips where there are fewer health protocol restrictions.

The next theme that emerges in the data gathered is luminescent self-care. According to Fisher (2015), this kind of self-care involves any action that supports an individual's spiritual level. Self-care practices under this dimension help in identifying values, beliefs, strengths, life's meaning, and purpose. Common responses of the participants in this dimension are praying, reading the bible, journaling, yoga, taking time for meditation, and positive self-affirmation. A participant highlighted his spiritual self-care by stating “I communicate with God by allotting time for prayer and meditation”. Also, another participant expressed self-care plans by “creating a journal on my progress daily and listing down positive things that happened”. In addition, participants also shared similar goals on committing to self-love, positive affirmation to oneself, self-validation, and rewarding self for small and big victories. All these actions can help increase spiritual wellness, rediscover strengths and abilities, understand own personality traits, and establish a personal brand.

The fourth dimension that was revealed in the participant's responses is emotive self-care. This refers to how an individual expresses himself/herself in a healthy manner. Thus, actions in this dimension help an individual effectively express and regulate his/her emotions and manage daily life challenges. Common responses of the participants that reflect their emotive self-care plans are deep breathing, being humorous, listening to music, singing, dancing, doing hobbies such as arts and crafts, painting, sketching, doodling, knitting, watching movies, and youtube when they are stress. Other frequent responses from the participants also include journaling, creative writing, making a diary, reflective writing, and mood tracker which they plan to do in caring for their emotional wellbeing. Also, a participant stated “I

take some time alone, stop, and introspect” as one of her practice under emotional self-care. Likewise, other participants added “I destress by doing recreational activities like gaming, chilling, watching my favorite shows on weekends”, “Taking time to unwind and relax, “I engage in a creative release like playing a musical instrument”, and “Communicating my feelings or problems to others”. Indeed all these practices may help an individual channel their negative emotions into positive calming strategies and cope with difficult situations successfully.

The fifth theme that was noted in the participants' self-care plan was the cognitive dimension of self-care. This dimension incorporates strategies for setting a positive mindset, focusing attention on strengths, and using creativity to solve problems. Common responses are reading books such as magazines, manga, novels, solving puzzles, watching podcasts, being organized, managing time effectively, setting goals, taking notes, writing a to-do list, and having a timeout from social media and gadgets. Along with these, a participant pinpoints his plan for cognitive self-care by “organizing schedules and deadlines by making a weekly plan” and “taking five to ten minutes time off between classes to stay focused”. Another participant emphasized that “setting attainable goals and prioritizing tasks” could help her improve their mental wellness.

The next theme that emerged in the participants’ responses is the environmental dimension of self-care. This dimension’s focal point is environmental health which refers to how an individual interacts with the world around him. Actions towards this type of self-care help an individual reconnect with his natural environment, create a safe space to rest and recharge, and establish linkage with the community. Common responses from the participants are “taking care of plants or gardening”, “appreciating nature”, “going to the beach”, “watching sunsets”, “taking pictures of pretty sunsets”, “reconnecting with nature”, “road trips”, and “getting some sunlight while working”. Others also shared, “decluttering and organizing my room” and “helping the community through organization and volunteer work”. These strategies may contribute to the improvement of his environment or community which directly impact an individual's wellbeing.

Following this theme is the aptitudinal dimension of self-care. It focuses on how an individual creates meaningful interaction with the world using his unique strengths. Actions in this dimension help build happiness by doing your passion and continuously improving your abilities. Common responses of the participants are “learning to cook and bake”, “doing digital art”, “honing skills in playing musical instruments”, “taking pictures or photography”, “crocheting”, “pottery making”, “learning a new language”, and “making youtube content”. Lastly, the financial dimension of self-care. In general, this dimension shows how an individual allocates financial resources which includes healthy spending habits, saving and sharing with others, and preparing for a financially-secured future. However, participant's response only showed their financial self-care plan by how they will spend their resources. Some participants said “online shopping and window shopping” makes them feel better when they are down or stressed out.

The gathered data above affirms that freshman college students know how to create a balanced self-care plan and prioritize their well-being through different practices that are not only limited to physical activities but also target their emotional wellness, spirituality, cognitive functioning, aptitudinal skills, social relationship, and connection to their environment. This result was also supported in the study of Tan-Mansukhani (2020) wherein she conclude that college students have the capability to create, implement, and evaluate their

self-care plans resulting in positive outcomes. Furthermore, she emphasized that a holistic approach to self-care helps the students manage stress and enhances their psychological resilience in facing the different challenges in their daily life demands.

In the study of Yang, Tu, and Dai (2020) on the effect of the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic on college students in Wuhan wherein they have concluded that positive thinking, being hopeful, and resilience can help reduce the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health among college students. This also aids them to still be functional even in the face of adversity. These activities can be found in the luminescent self-care of the participants wherein they practice being optimistic by listing down positive things that happened the everyday. More so, the study of Wang, Hedge, Son, Keller, Smith, and Sasangohar (2020) on the mental health of US college students during the Covid-19 pandemic emphasized that students find more time to boost their mental health during the pandemic through meditation, doing physical activities like exercise, pursuing their hobbies, and interest. All these practices are forms of self-care that also can be found in the participants' self-care plan on systematic or physical self-care, luminescent or spiritual self-care, and aptitudinal self-care. These findings are also similar to the study of Moses, Bradley, and O'Callaghan (2016) on the self-care practices and well-being of college students wherein mindful acceptance, social support-seeking, healthy eating, and sleeping hygiene are the four practices which were identified to have beneficial effects on students mental health.

## **Conclusion**

Adjusting to college is one of the most exciting yet challenging stages in a student's life. However, due to the current health crisis, this so-called "new adventure" was given a different scenario and the focus was shifted to transitioning from face-to-face to an online learning environment while prioritizing health and safety. Many students experienced difficulties in adjusting to the current educational setup, were overwhelmed with academic requirements, the uncondusive work environment at home, experienced low motivation, troubled to stay focused, hassled on building connections with classmates and professors, managing personal and academic time, challenging relationships in household, feeling of isolation, and limited recreational activities due to restrictions in mobility. All of these may contribute to the declining mental health and well-being of college students during the covid-19 pandemic. However, amplifying self-care practices through a holistic plan can help students to lessen the negative impact of the pandemic and help boost psychological wellness despite the challenges students face brought by this crisis. School plays a vital role in promoting students' mental health, especially in these trying times when students' health is at great risk. A proactive mental health program should be in place as a core component of the curriculum and services should always be readily available for all. Creating a culture of self-care in the university may have long-term effects not only on students' mental health but may also lead to psychological resilience that will aid them in managing difficult situations inside and outside the school.

The findings of this study also recommend for future research to explore the self-care of students in terms of the actual practice and include other variables such as self-regulation and different student population since this study is only limited to the creation of self-care plans for freshman COS students.

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**Contact email:** [rosemarie.aquino@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:rosemarie.aquino@dlsu.edu.ph)