

Post-Pandemic Resiliency: We Get Knocked Down, but We Get Up Again!

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Abstract

The last two years have been like no other with a worldwide pandemic, political division, social unrest, and far too many deaths. Yet we have survived and are still doing our jobs. It may not have been pretty, but we are still here. What have we learned from this experience about ourselves, our students, and our institutions? Join us for this roundtable session to explore how we can continue to ‘get back up’ and rebound from unexpected events and use what we learned from this experience to be better and do better in the future.

Key Words: resiliency, social support, coping mechanisms

Post-Pandemic Resiliency: We Get Knocked Down, but We Get Up Again!

The last two and a half years have been like no other in our lifetimes. We have had a worldwide pandemic, political division, and social unrest. People have lost their lives or lost loved ones. Faculty had to suddenly change their delivery methods and approaches. At the same time, most colleges and universities are facing declining enrollment and budget cuts (June, 2022), and several have reduced the number of faculty and staff (Kroger, 2021; Woolston, 2021). Faculty are continually being asked and expected to do more with less (Woolston, 2021). Students are facing additional challenges and are increasingly asking for special consideration due to their circumstances (Else-Quest, Sathy, & Hogan, 2022). When the pandemic began, no one could have imagined what things would look like today.

However, there are some reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the future. As of today, there are projections that the COVID pandemic is on track to become ‘endemic’ in the next several months (Murray, 2022) meaning that the disease will not disappear but rather become something that we will be dealing with into the foreseeable future (Ip, 2022). Throughout the last two years, students, faculty and staff have shown amazing resiliency and continue to progress toward their goals and ambitions. The social interactions and coping mechanisms that facilitated these actions will undoubtedly be needed as we progress.

The purpose and focus of our proposed session is to provide a supportive environment to share what participants have experienced (the good, the bad, the sad and the ugly) and tactics from the past that assisted in getting us to where we are today. The intended outcome is to share and brainstorm potential support mechanisms and networks for the future as we continue to help our students and ourselves maneuver multiple demands (i.e., school, work, families, pre-pandemic ‘mundane’ tasks, post-pandemic challenges, and the unknown). Our target audience is

all MOBTC attendees, as we have all had to deal with the pandemic and will continue to deal with multiple challenges moving forward.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Individuals chose multiple avenues for dealing with the COVID pandemic. Some people started out optimistic putting up “COVID lights” outdoors as a sign to all who could see that we would overcome. As the months passed, the lights quietly came down. We all became long-haulers in the COVID pandemic – some literally are still battling with debilitating physical effects of the virus. All of us are figurative long-haulers, abiding by a variety of COVID restrictions such as the need to mask, test, or show proof of vaccination status to engage in certain activities. Some people adopted a new dog or cat for companionship. Some took up a new hobby or reconnected with an old one. Some took up cooking/baking or embarked on a quest to master the art of creating perfect sourdough treats. Some began a new fitness activity as a way to get outdoors in the fresh air and others binge-watched TV shows. Some lost weight while many gained a few extra pounds. Some fought isolation by forming a “pod” of trusted “safe” friends with whom to socialize.

Zoom meetings became the norm both for work and social interaction. Masks became a part of everyone’s wardrobe, and everyone became more conscious of their inventory of toilet paper and anti-bacterial wipes. More people sought out counselling to help with their emotional struggles. Faculty were called upon to show “grace and empathy” to students while struggling, often silently, with their own circumstances (Else-Quest, Sathy, & Hogan, 2022). A variety of social media groups formed to give instructors a place to share their experiences, seek social support, or just vent. If you are on Facebook, you almost certainly have seen or perhaps participated in groups ranging from “Pandemic Pedagogy” to “Society for Stressed Professors.”

Some groups insist that we must show grace and empathy to students regardless of the circumstances, while others insist that we must maintain rigor in our classes. It is not unusual to see posts about the “OG” (other group). Some even post about “going in” just to see the responses and stir the pot a bit.

Despite all the chaos caused by the pandemic, life went on. Babies were born, people dealt with medical conditions, got married, divorced, lost jobs, changed jobs. For many people, their stress levels were at an all-time high. Some became burned out and decided to leave their jobs in what has become known as “the great resignation.” Most of us were “knocked down” on multiple fronts. And yet, we are still here; we have gotten back up. It may not have been pretty, but we are still here at MOBTC seeking to learn from and share with our colleagues and friends from other institutions. Specifically, we hope to discover and share ways to help ourselves and our students.

Even though ‘the endemic is near’, our expectations for the future might be a bit too optimistic. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article states: “By “endemic,” they mean Omicron will leave almost everyone highly immune through vaccination, prior infection, or both. Then, they reason, Covid-19 will be a more predictable, less deadly presence, much like flu, and the world will return to normal (Ip, 2022)”. The author goes on to caution us with “Such optimism needs a reality check. This new normal won’t be the same as the old normal: Endemic Covid-19 will still take a toll on health, work and mobility; the only question is how big.”

The struggles are real, both ours and our students. It is a classroom management issue, as we have examples of what we as faculty are experiencing but we can also extend our thoughts and emotions to our students. In some cases, students are trying to help parents deal with pandemic issues such as lost wages, illnesses, etc., and may need to take a leave of absence to

help earn money to support families. So, we as educators need to help our students come to terms and deal with the same issues we're trying to deal with. These discussions inevitably come into the classroom and/or impact our classroom environment. How do we help students deal with these issues and share their needs, experiences, etc. in our classroom – even if it doesn't match the 'topic for the day'?

The answer might be easier than we think. Per a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article we can offer our students flexibility in completing assignments and attending / participating in class, encouragement to continue to pursue their goals using their internal values even when they do not believe they can, and a list of resources such as a list of helping agencies on or near campus so they know where to turn for non-academic challenges (Else-Quest, Sathy, & Hogan, 2022). One of the most valuable items we can offer is letting them know we care – a sentiment near and dear to those who attend MOBTC! Just like all of us, students are looking for social and emotional support. Several studies found that emotional intelligence and social support reduce and sometimes even prevent stress in the academic and other workplace settings during the COVID pandemic (e.g., Szkody, Stearns, Stanhope, & McKinney, 2021; Valenti, Faraci, & Magnano, 2021). We will however need to start incorporating even more inclusive thinking and qualitative (versus quantitative) judgement (Bhatia, Phillips, & Statler, 2022).

Though the pandemic is not over, and the endemic status of COVID means we will be dealing with challenges we've seen over the last couple of years, our students, and many faculty and staff, are ready to move forward as evidenced by more in-person classes and general activity on many college campuses as well as current projections for college admission for this fall (Grawe, 2022). We hope our proposed session will provide participants the tools they need to 'get back up again' and inspire that same resilience in our students.

Session Description

A 60-minute roundtable session is requested with time allocated as follows:

Overview & introductions	10 minutes
Small group breakout: Sharing challenges and suggestions	20 minutes
Large group debrief: Summarize discussions and suggestions	25 minutes
Wrap-up	<u>5 minutes</u>
Total time	60 minutes

As participants enter, we will have music playing to set an upbeat, encouraging mood (e.g., “I Get Knocked Down” (Chumbawamba); “I Will Survive” (Gloria Gaynor); “Eye of the Tiger” (Survivor); “Stronger (What Doesn’t Kill You)” (Kelly Clarkson)). We will begin the session with a brief overview and introductions asking participants to share their top challenges during the pandemic. Participants will form small breakout groups based on their top challenges to discuss approaches, tools, policies, etc. they have found to be helpful in dealing with the challenges they have faced/are stilling facing. We will reconvene as a large group to summarize the small group discussions and suggestions for coping with the challenges. As the session ends and participants prepare to leave, we will again play encouraging music (e.g., “Brave” (Sara Bareilles), “Roar” (Katy Perry)). We hope many will join in what we foresee as an engaging session full of camaraderie, social support and tactics for ‘getting back up again’.

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