

Academia during the Pandemic



Struggling during the pandemic? You're not alone!

By Jennifer Gordon, PhD (Regina)

I'm not ashamed to admit: the idea for this article was absolutely inspired by my own personal experience. As a mom of three kids – ages 2, 4, and 7 – and partner to an accountant who's been working a mandatory 50-60 hours a week, to say that I've found this pandemic "difficult" is the biggest understatement of all time. The kids are driving me crazy, my partner and I fight over child-care, and everyone is sick of each other after months of being cooped up in the house. I also miss my colleagues – lucky enough to work in a department full of people that I love, I miss our daily chats. I miss my lab's weekly meetings and I've been finding it hard to supervise at a distance, especially when my students are struggling with motivation themselves. I've wondered: "how on earth is everyone doing it?". Self-presentation on social media would suggest that families are bonding, homeschooling's going great, and that everyone's enjoying this little break from the daily grind... but I assume there must be others struggling like me, right? Right?!

Turns out I wasn't the only one wondering how everyone's managing. When I pitched the idea for this piece to Justin Presseau, section chair and father of a 2-year old, he said "hey, this would make a great study – let's survey profs across Canada about how they've been coping". So that's what we've been doing and the response has been amazing. Thanks so much to all those who've responded! We're aiming to publish the results soon but in the meantime, here's a sneak peek at some preliminary findings.

1. Mental health and work satisfaction have suffered

Over three quarters of respondents report that their mental health has been negatively affected by the pandemic and that work satisfaction has dropped. On average, respondents report a 20% drop in quality of life. When asked what some of the biggest challenges have been, many found that days had become monotonous and lonely. Among parents of young children, juggling childcare and work, and negotiating childcare duties with one's partner, were by far the most highly-cited challenges (See Box 1).



Day 2 of "working from home" during lockdown, back when interruptions were cute.

Box 1 - The Biggest Challenges

"Loneliness. I don't know how to fill the hours."

"The [lack of] childcare, but also the conflicting messages. People are like, "Oh, you just can't work right now. That's OK! Stop pressuring yourself!" when they have no clue what your deadlines are."

"Getting my spouse and kids to understand that I am 'at work' even though I'm at home and respecting that"

"Trying to figure out who is parenting when, given we have three young kids and both are still working full-time."

"Feeling like I'm failing my marriage, children, and students."



2. Productivity has dropped, particularly among parents of young children

Unsurprisingly, 80% of respondents report that data collection has been negatively impacted by the pandemic and a little over half report a drop in senior-author papers. However, other aspects of academic output appear to be differentially impacted depending on the respondent's family circumstances: 80% of parents of young children report drops in first-author publications versus only 40% of respondents with no children or older offspring. Similarly, 70% of respondents with young children report a drop in grant submissions versus only 30% of respondents with no children or older offspring. These findings paralleled a self-reported drop in work hours: parents of young children report a 50% drop in weekly work hours, on average; those without report only a 10% drop.

Box 2 - Strategies found to be most helpful in dealing with the challenges

"I tell everyone who asks something of me that I am working remotely with no daycare. I think it's important to repeat that to as many people as possible"

"Re-adjust expectations and acknowledge that everyone around the globe is doing the same."

"Breaking the rules and hiring a babysitter for three hours per day. Sorry Public Health!"

"Spending a lot of time trying to do things that make me happy each day."

"I have consciously made an effort to be forgiving of myself during this time - if I'm distracted, struggling with my mental health, need to seek comfort in something else, I've let myself do that."

"Reach out to colleagues and talk about stressors."

3. Everyone's coping as best they can

The most highly endorsed strategies to maximize productivity during the pandemic included publishing existing data and conducting online research, with one third of



Setting up a routine that includes physical activity and getting outside was the most highly endorsed strategy for maintaining mental health.

respondents reporting that they relied on these strategies "very much". Among parents of young children, encouraging kids to play independently, relying on one's partner and working evenings and weekends were all endorsed by over 80% of respondents. In terms of coping strategies to improve psychological wellbeing, nearly all endorsed setting a routine, getting regular physical activity and trying to enjoy the positive changes that the pandemic had brought (e.g. a more quiet life). When asked what the most helpful coping strategies have been, managing one's own expectations and the expectations of others came up frequently, as did reaching out for social support. See Box 2 for quotes.

(cont'd)



Take-Away

Hopefully these findings bring some comfort: if you're having a tough time with changes brought on by the pandemic – whether it be loneliness or struggling to balance work and family life – you certainly aren't alone. Don't believe what you see on social media: most people are likely struggling a lot more than they're letting on!

So what are we to do? At the very least, we can collectively lower our expectations for research output during this time. In my view, being a primary caregiver during the pandemic should be allowed to be included as a “disruption to one's productivity” in grant applications, just as parental and sick leaves are. Allowances should (and no doubt will) be made for disruptions in data collection. Says Justin: “We hope the final results of this study will serve to advocate for such allowances, if needed. We also hope that it will serve to identify possible informal strategies that colleagues may benefit from, considering what may have worked for others, and to identify potential formal supports that could be put in place, especially in preparation of any future waves or other epidemics.” While we recognise that this is only a snapshot of one segment of academia, and we fully support any efforts to explore the experiences of students, trainees, post-docs, research assistant and coordinators, and others in academia and research settings, we at least want faculty members to know: you are seen.

