Mental Health and Workshops during COVID-19 Summary

Prepared by Alexi Pauls
GSS COVID-19 Task Force
Survey Details

• Online survey ran from November 10th to December 4th, 2020. The survey was promoted in the GSS Newsletter, GSS Council and through department emails
• Participation was voluntary, but respondents could enter a draw for 5 prizes of $50 each.
• A total of 573 students responded to the survey with 509 fully complete responses (no skipped questions)
• The goal of this survey was to collect data on graduate students’ mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic
• A specific end goal of this survey was to create workshops in collaboration with SFU Health and Counselling Services to meet graduate students’ specific needs
Overall Mental Health and COVID-19
Q1: What mental health resources have you previously used?

- My SSP: 13.61% (78 responses)
- Mental Health Nurses: 4.89% (28 responses)
- Counselor: 39.44% (226 responses)
- Therapist: 18.85% (108 responses)
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapist: 7.85% (45 responses)
- Psychologist: 16.06% (92 responses)
- Group Therapy/Support Groups: 11.87% (68 responses)
- None: 42.58% (244 responses)
- Other (please specify): 31 responses

Additional Comments:
- Other forms of therapy such as EMDR, somatic and dialectical behavioural therapy (3)
- Other healthcare providers such as medical doctors, naturopaths and psychiatrists (14)
- Medications such as anti-depressants or anti-anxiety (3)
- Other phone apps (3)
Q2: Has confusion about what services are offered and/or covered by your health care held you back from receiving mental health treatment/support?

**Answer Choices**
- Yes 43.78% 243
- No 56.22% 312
- Other (please specify) 11

**Additional Comments:**
- Not located in Canada and this has prevented treatment (1)
- Unclear about the GSS Benefit Plan and so using external insurance to receive treatment (1)
- Hours/availability has prevented treatment (2)

**Total Responded** 555
**Skipped** 18
Q3: Which of the following have issues have impacted your mental health during the pandemic? Select all that apply.

- **Academic** 78.24% (41 responses)
- **Housing** 27.20% (14 responses)
- **Financial** 55.35% (29 responses)
- **Health** 46.34% (24 responses)
- **Personal** 74.30% (39 responses)
- **Immigration status** 18.76% (10 responses)
- **Added care responsibilities (childcare, dependents etc.)** 15.20% (81 responses)
- **Other (please specify)** 54% (53 responses)

Additional Comments:
- Working from home (14)
- News/state of the world (8)
- Isolation from family (6)
- Work stress or added work responsibilities (5)
- Anxiety about the future (job prospects, COVID uncertainty) (4)
- Access to mental health treatments, financial stress causing cancellation of treatments or lack of in-person mental health treatment (2)
Q4: My mental health has been worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Answer Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>36.63%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>42.31%</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>15.02%</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1.28%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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Answered: 546
Skipped: 27
Q5: Which campus are you based out of? If this is your first semester and you are primarily online at the moment, which campus do you expect to be based out of? Select all that apply.

Answer Choices

- Burnaby: 75.23% (407 responses)
- Surrey: 7.02% (38 responses)
- Vancouver: 21.44% (116 responses)

Answered: 541
Skipped: 32
Q6: Have you participated in any of the mental wellbeing activities offered by SFU Health and Counselling prior to COVID-19? Such as mindful meditation, yoga for the mind etc.

![Bar chart showing responses]

- Yes: 14.7% (80 responses)
- No: 84.6% (460 responses)
- These activities were not offered at my campus: 0.74% (4 responses)

Total respondents: 544
Skipped responses: 29
Q7: I found these mental well-being activities offered by Health and Counselling beneficial

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>17.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>55.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>20.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
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Answered: 81
Skipped: 492
Q8: The lack of in person treatment options, such as mental wellbeing activities (mindful meditation, yoga for the mind, wellbeing activities off-campus etc.), therapy, or other activities that may have been cancelled or postponed has negatively impacted my mental health.
Q9: What topics do you feel you could use mental health support for? Select all that apply

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Impostor Syndrome
- Perfectionism
- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Attention deficit disorder (ADD)/Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD)
- Crisis support
- Psychosis
- Addiction
- Eating Disorders
- Loneliness
- Grad school support
- Student/Supervisor relationship
- Suicide and Suicide Prevention
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

Additional Comments:
- Relationship support and family therapy (8)
- Academia supports (separation of school/work from life, what is normal to feel during a PhD, loss of networking opportunities due to COVID, coping with systemic problems in academia) (6)
- Feeling overwhelmed, stress and anxiety (5)
Summary for Overall Mental Health

- Graduate students are seeking mental health support mainly from counsellors, however 42.6% have not used mental health resources.
- 43.8% said that confusion about mental health services has held them back from receiving support.
- Overall graduate students’ mental health has worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic (78.9% agree or strongly agree), mainly due to academic, personal and financial matters.
- Most (84.6%) have not participated in SFU HCS well-being programs prior to COVID-19, but those that did participate found these activities beneficial (72.9% agree or strongly agree).
- Graduate students felt they could use mental health support most strongly for anxiety, depression, grad school support and loneliness.
Mental Health Workshop
Q10: Are you interested in attending mental health workshops (either over Zoom or in person COVID-19 permitting)?

- Yes: 37.45% (200)
- No: 26.03% (139)
- Undecided: 36.52% (195)

Answered: 534
Skipped: 39
Q11: When would be a good time to attend these workshops? Select all that apply

- Beginning of the term: 33.15% (176 responses)
- Middle of the term: 20.34% (108 responses)
- End of the term: 14.88% (79 responses)
- Summer semester: 8.85% (47 responses)
- Fall semester: 9.23% (49 responses)
- Spring semester: 17.89% (95 responses)
- No preference: 51.04% (271 responses)

Answered: 531
Skipped: 42
Q12: Do you have a preference for the time of day for the workshop?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morning</td>
<td>18.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noon</td>
<td>10.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afternoon</td>
<td>16.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening (after work)</td>
<td>34.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Preference</td>
<td>43.13%</td>
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Answered: 531  Skipped: 42
Q13: How do you feel about attending group workshops with undergraduate students present?

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<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer graduate students only</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer the workshop be specific to my needs but am comfortable if under...</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not mind if undergrads are present</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer one-on-one support and don’t enjoy workshop formats</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>12</td>
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Answered 52  
Skipped 49
Q14: Health and counselling have hosted a “COVID-19 Emotional Support Group” for summer term, would you be interested in this continuing?

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<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11.30% 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes but would like a grad student specific one</td>
<td>28.74% 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested/indifferent</td>
<td>59.96% 31</td>
</tr>
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Answered 52 2
Skipped 51
Q15: Have you attended any previously held workshops through Health and Counselling?

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<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>15.16% 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>84.84% 442</td>
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Answered 521
Skipped 52
Q16: Is there a particular reason why you haven't attended any of the offered workshops? (Optional)

Question was available for those that answered “no” to Q15 and gave a total of 232 answers.

Common Themes From Written Responses:

- **Unaware of these resources** (55)
- **Time didn’t match schedule/ too busy, time zone conflicts** (42)
- **Prefer one on one or not comfortable speaking in a group setting, not wanting to speak about personal issues to strangers, don’t like workshop format** (32)
- **New grad student, been remote for degree so far** (20)
- **Too much time on Zoom** (10)
- **Felt like the workshop would be a lot of generic unhelpful advice** (10)
- **Distrust in university management of mental health or in Health and Counselling, university won’t address systemic issues that are causing negative mental health outcomes for students** (9)
- **Workshop currently offered do not meet specific needs** (6)
- **Concerns about being unable to remain fully anonymous over Zoom (suggestion to have no name and no camera on during the workshop)** (3)
- **Don’t want to be in a workshop with their students or other undergrads** (2)
- **Transphobia (afraid of being judged as a trans-student)** (1)
Q17: What did you like and/or dislike about the workshop?

Question was available for those that answered “yes” to Q15 and gave a total of 57 responses

Common Themes from Written Responses:

Positive feedback:

- **Great presenters and presentation/content (10)**
- Helped understanding challenges and how to approach them, learnt relevant info (7)
- Positive feedback for the grad student specific workshops, allows students to relate to their peers in common situations (4)
- Small group was best/department level workshops (3)
- Positive feedback on the ADHD workshop and mindful meditation workshop (2)
- Hearing from others helped (2)

Negative Feedback:

- **Too general (6)**
- Workshops too focused on the undergraduate student experience, did not like when undergraduates were present (5)
- Prefer one-on-one setting (5)
- Time zone differences or time of workshop offering was inconvenient (2)
- Liked the group format but didn’t like sharing in a group and uncomfortable attending a workshop that could force sharing (2)
- Felt too impersonal, no cameras on zoom (which though made people anonymous) took away from the workshop (2)
- Would like to see the slides after the presentation (1)
- Didn’t enjoy the virtual breakout rooms (1)
- Workshops felt rushed (1)
Q18: What topics would you like a mental health workshop to cover? Feel free to provide multiple suggestions.

Common Themes (from 254 responses)

- Anxiety (67)
- COVID support, working from home, isolation, global pandemic (36)
- Imposter syndrome (35)
- Grad student supports (professor-student power dynamic, what is normal to feel as a grad student, academic burnout) (28)
- Depression (25)
- Mindfulness and self-care (25)
- Stress (20)
- Loneliness (20)
- PTSD (4)
- ADD/ADHD (5)
- OCD (5)
- Perfectionism (15)
- Focus mechanisms, productivity, motivation (15)
- Time management (13)

- Work-life balance (12)
- Workshop on what mental health supports are available (accessing the GSS Benefit Plan, SFU Health and Counselling offerings, external supports, difference between the types of mental health providers such as counselor therapist etc) (11)
- Healthy boundaries and coping mechanisms (9)
- Financial stress (7)
- Suicide and supporting other’s mental health (7)
- Eating disorder and healthy eating (5)
- Relationship support (romantic and non-romantic) (4)
- Insomnia and having a proper sleep schedule (4)
- Racism (4)
- Anger management (3)
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (3)
- Parenting as a student (2)
- Chronic Pain (2)
- Trauma related workshops (2)
Q19: Health and counselling offers the following workshops for all students, are there any of these that you would like to be reformatted specifically for graduate students? Please select all the workshops that you would like to be made specifically for grad students. Note: there are already two workshops specific for graduate students, Thriving in Grad School and Thesis/Dissertation Support Group.

Additional Comments:
- COVID-19 issues (unable to enter Canada, isolated, lost activities due to COVID) (3)
- Toxic environment of academia, further grad student supports including mentorship (3)
- Connection with other grad students, including organized coffee breaks (2)

Specific Individual Responses:
- How to live with a spouse who actively tried to sabotage your PhD.
- Would love for wellness Wednesdays to be issued as a podcast if possible
Summary of Mental Health Workshops

- 74.0% of graduate students would attend (37.5%) or are undecided (36.5%) about attending a workshop on mental health.
- Slight preferences were for workshops that would be at the beginning of the term (33.1%) and after working hours in the evening (34.8%).
- Most graduate students are not participating in SFU HCS Workshops (84.8%) mainly because they are unaware of these workshops, the timing does not work for them or they are uncomfortable with group settings for workshop.
- Additionally graduate students are uncomfortable with workshops where undergraduates are present (29.4%) or feel that workshops need to address graduate students needs even if undergraduates are present (25.8%).
- Students would love to see a graduate student specific workshop similar to the “Understanding and Coping with Anxiety and Depression” workshop (76.1%).
- The most desired mental health workshop topics were for anxiety, COVID-19 support and imposter syndrome.
My SSP
Q20: Are you familiar with My SSP? Were you aware that this app is available for free for graduate students?

Answer Choices

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<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52.05%</td>
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Answered 513
Skipped 60
Q21: Have you used My SSP before?

- 52% of participants haven’t heard of My SSP
- 81.5% haven’t used My SSP before
Q22: Do you have any comments about My SSP? How was it? Why did or didn’t you use this service over others?

Common Themes (from 204 response)

- **Never heard of My SSP before (55)**
- Did not find it helpful, hated it, support was insufficient (17)
- Not a fan of the online/phone approach (15)
- Positive feedback on the service (8)
- Felt impersonal, no connection online, felt like a robotic reply (7)
- Poor layout/disconnection occurred (7)
- Didn’t like the counselors (5)
- Scheduling help took a long time or was stood up by counselor (4)
- Felt that My SSP was for more short term problems, need long term support (4)

- Not sure if specific situation was appropriate for My SSP, not sure why it should be used (4)
- Time issues (apparently cut off is 1 am, difficult for international students) (3)
- Heard negative feedback from other students and was put off from using it (3)
- Counselor was not equipped to deal with trauma (2)
- Lack of consistency in use of My SSP (might not get the same counsellor each time, don’t have the same experience each time etc) (2)
- Lack of queer specific counselors (2)
- Lack of faith-based counselors (1)
- Didn’t use due to privacy concerns (1)

Answered 204
Skipped 364
Summary of My SSP

• 52.0% of graduate students were unaware of My SSP and 81.5% had never used it before
  • This was further reflected in the written responses where the most common written response was being unaware of the service
• Common themes from the written responses included that students were unsatisfied with the supports received from My SSP or had a negative experience
• Further responses highlighted the impersonal nature of the phone/online approach and the layout of the software/program