

COVID-19 Pandemic: Emotional Reactions, Coping Strategies, and Realizations among Employees in a University



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ABSTRACT: This study was conducted to determine the emotional reactions, coping strategies, and realizations of university employees during the pandemic as a basis for enhancing a mental health program. Descriptive qualitative research design was used in the study. Data were gathered online through an interactive activity called “Kumustahan”. Findings revealed that the majority of the respondents felt scared, anxious, and worried about getting infected; sad about their limited mobility; stressed with online classes and technology-related concerns; and depressed about being quarantined and the untimely death of a family member, relative, or friend. Employees’ coping strategies include relaxation like gardening, watching Netflix, and playing cyber games; doing household chores; performing spiritual activities; maintaining an active social life via social media; and minimizing online working hours. Despite the negative emotions, the majority were happy with the “work-from-home” and “online classes” of their children. Employees realized the importance of prayers and family; acceptance of events beyond man’s control; feeling of equality regardless of social status; and the need to adapt to change and follow health protocols. In conclusion, employees experienced both negative and positive emotions and coped through problem-based, emotion-based, and religious-based strategies. By finding positive meaning to the situation, they gained positive insights that helped them sustain sound mental health.

KEYWORDS: Coping strategies; COVID 19 pandemic; Emotional reactions; Realizations; University employees

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 commonly called COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic affecting countries around the world. It is an outbreak of an infection caused by a virus that spreads globally (Felman, 2020). Aside from its detrimental effects on physical health, it also threatens employment which can also lead to stress, anxiety, depression, frustration, and uncertainty (Serafini et al., 2020). Along with this, mental health problems have emerged as a significant health complication as cited by Klonoff-Cohen, (2022). The WHO confirmed that fear and anxiety are normally felt during a pandemic but these adversities can be also a path toward growth. Being resilient to its emotional impacts must be strengthened, and mitigation strategies are necessary to ensure the psychological wellness of each individual, acquire the ability to adapt well, and bounce back quickly during the pandemic (Wu et al., 2020). In the Philippines, mitigation strategies such as cancellation and suspension of events with super spreader potential, observance of social distancing measures; travel restrictions; voluntary home quarantine of members of household contacts; changes to funeral services, and clear communication from national and international health authorities to avoid fake news and panic were adapted (Ebrahim et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have led to short-term and long-term psychosocial and mental health concerns. To address these concerns, there is a pressing need for planning longitudinal and developmental studies in the implementation of evidence-based plans during the pandemic as well as post-pandemic (Singh et al., 2020). Thus, people experiencing challenges must learn various ways of coping strategies to reduce unpleasant emotions overcome struggles, and maintain emotional well-being. It is therefore imperative to determine the emotional responses, coping strategies, and realizations of the employees in a university to assist them in addressing the impact of the challenges they encounter through a well-planned mental health program that will ensure psychological wellness. Kar et al. (2021) mentioned the importance of effective coping strategies for stressful situations to help prevent stress-related psychiatric disorders.

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The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is used as the framework of this study. As explained by Bosnjak et al. (2020), behaviors are influenced by intentions. Intentions are determined by three factors such as attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This means that behavior is determined by one's intentions, influenced by attitudes which refer to one's beliefs about a behavior, and subjective norms which are the beliefs about others' attitudes toward a behavior. He further emphasized that external factors can also prevent behavior. In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic is the external factor that influences the intention of not being infected with COVID-19 disease to save one's self and the family. This intention causes an individual to act or find healthy coping strategies to relieve them from the uncertainties of the pandemic. As further explained by Bosnjak et al. (2020), the TPB components such as attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control are determined by underlying beliefs.

Attitude is a function of a person's salient behavioral beliefs; which represent perceived likely consequences of the behavior, for instance, observing health protocols, and developing healthy coping strategies will reduce the risks of being sick with COVID disease. Subjective norm refers to a person's perception of the social expectations to adopt a particular behavior. It is influenced by one's normative beliefs and motivation to comply with the safety health protocols imposed by the government to hinder the spread of the disease. The behavioral responses are the manifested coping strategies that are planned out as a result of the strong intentions to keep the family safe and well.

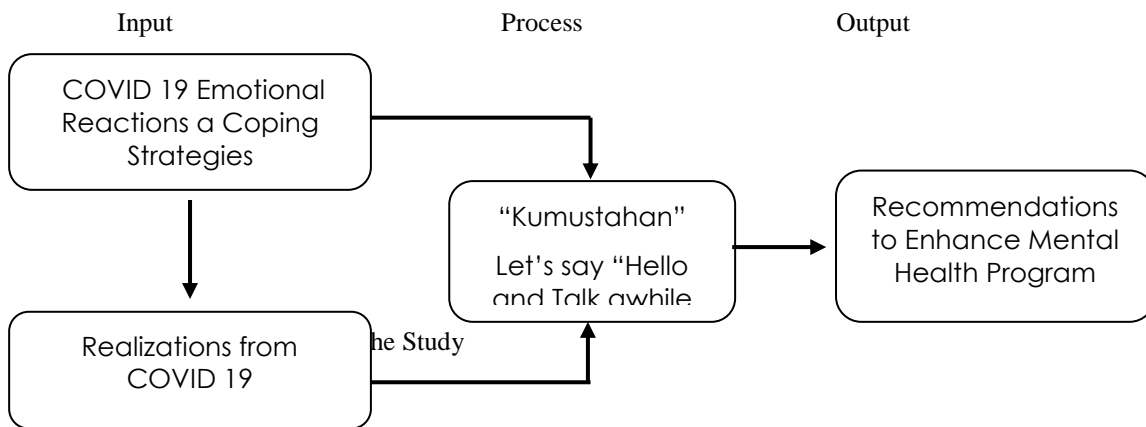
Coping methods includes both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. Chaabane et al. (2020) emphasized that active coping like problem understanding and problem solving, as well as seeking social support like asking help from others and fostering social connections. Meanwhile, widely used emotion-focused coping mechanisms such as positive reinforcement and growth like maintaining optimism and wishful thinking, as well as turning to religion address the cause of the distress.

The problem-focused coping is an approach that involves direct resolution of the main problem. It may involve setting up an action plan that includes planning to deal with situations, seeking social support, writing lists, counseling, making a to-do list, asking for support, and proper time management. It is a head-on management of stress in taking action toward resolution of the underlying cause (Raypole, 2020). The author also emphasized that emotion-focused coping skills help in processing and working through unwanted or painful emotions and reactions. Moreover, this approach helps in managing one's emotions like doing deep breathing exercises to calm the mind to counter negative emotions. Furthermore, religion is especially prevalent when it comes to managing stress and significant life events. The extent to which religion is a part of the process of understanding and dealing with critical life events is the definition of religious coping, which includes a variety of behavioral and cognitive strategies that assist a person in adjusting to or coping with challenging circumstances (Skalski et al., 2022). Thus, religion may offer people a complete and cohesive framework of meaning that allows them to satisfactorily explain challenging life experiences, making it more than just a defensive mechanism. Büssing et al. (2020) found that people enjoy silence and concentrate on their spiritual resources through prayer or meditation and cope with the limitations imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic when they focused on the themes of finding meaning in life, having religious trust and stable relationships, and spending time in reflection. Moreover, impressions of wonder and amazement followed by sentiments of thankfulness, act as mediators between the positive benefits of experiencing nature and quiet moments on well-being.

Hence, this study assumed that if one has the intention to keep oneself and other members of the family safe from COVID-19, one has the belief that it is necessary to find ways to keep away from being infected with COVID-19 disease. Along with this intention and belief, one should find strategies and plan out things to do to avoid it and subsequently stay safe and healthy. According to Chankasingh et al. (2022), it is critical to determine specific coping strategies that may be helpful to an individual, especially during the pandemic, since psychological support can be better tailored to alleviate psychosocial symptoms. In line with this concept, the researchers who are Guidance Counselors and Campus Ministry Director have provided spiritual counseling among students and employees, believed that there is a need to determine the emotional reactions, responses, and insights gained by the employees during the COVID-19 pandemic as bases for the enhancement of the mental health program of the University. Taking care of one's emotional health, especially among employees of a university is vital to sustain a healthy workforce who in turn take care of the students. Specifically, this descriptive qualitative study was conducted to assess the COVID-19 pandemic emotional reactions, coping strategies, and realizations among the employees of the University. This study serves as a reference for the Guidance Counselors in enriching the Mental Health program of the University; and provides the school administration bases for providing support to the program aimed at enhancing the well-being of the employees who will also take care of the students.

Figure 1 shows the flow of the study. The emotional reactions and coping strategies, and the realizations of the employees were the input which were gathered through an online process known as the "Kumustahan" or the "Let's say Hello and Talk awhile" one of the activities of the Guidance Center to determine the state of well-being, provide guidance and counseling services and sustain the sound mental health of its employees. The findings were used as the bases of the recommendations to enhance the Mental Health Program of the University.

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This is a qualitative, descriptive research that describes the respondents' COVID-19 emotional reactions, coping strategies, and realizations. It focused on the "what" question on the situation being studied and did not deal with questions about how/when/why the emotional response occurred. The respondents of this study were the University employees who voluntarily participated in the mental health activity of the Guidance Center known as the "Kumustahan" or the Let's Say "Hello and Talk awhile" and had willingly given their consent to use their responses as research data.

Data were gathered through the "Let's Say Hello and Talk Awhile" or the "Kumustahan" interactive activity of the Guidance Center which is one of the major activities to let the employees experience and feel the "culture of care" of the University. Google classrooms were created and participants in each classroom were invited to join the online activity with the major objective of assisting the employees both the teaching and non-teaching staff to sustain sound mental health amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the "Kumustahan" activity provided the participants a venue to recognize and express their feelings, and emotions about the pandemic; identify and learn their ways to cope with the dreadful situation; and share among themselves, the strategies they use to improve resiliency level and adapt to the radical changes to the so-called "New Normal". Employees' participation in this activity was voluntary. The teaching and non-teaching employees through e-mail were invited to join the group process activity of the Guidance Center. To facilitate the participation and conduct of the activity as well as the collection of data, the process flow was also disseminated.

PROGRAM FLOW OF ACTIVITIES

Pre-registration (via Google Form)

A. Participants: A maximum of 10 participants and 2 facilitators per activity in one Google classroom. Due to the limited slot per session, participants were required to pre-register and were asked to join the meeting on time and to stay for the whole duration of the activity except if the participant was found in need of a one-on-one session. In this case, referral to a counselor for one-on-one counseling shall be done.

B. Time Allotment: approximately one hour and 30 minutes.

C. Platform: Google Meet, the meeting link was sent to those who pre-registered.

D. Facilitators: Guidance Center Staff and Campus Ministry Director

E. General Rules (for strict compliance):

"What you See, What you Hear, Leave it Here"

Please observe the confidentiality of information.

E.1. Keep the microphone mute at all times unless asked to have lighter online traffic.

E.2. Prompt the facilitators via chat box for any technical issues.

E.3. Leave a comment/s to signify presence throughout the activity.

E.4. Listen if one is sharing/talking and wait for a turn to speak, each one will be given time to share.

E.5. Feel free to inform the facilitators in case of a more exclusive session. One facilitator is on standby to accommodate one-on-one needs.

F. Nature of Activities: Group Process/Group Learning Activities

G. Activity Proper

G.1. Opening Prayer (Meditative)

G.2. Getting to Know the Facilitators and Participants Activity

G.3. Relaxation Activity/Meditation/Breathing Exercises (Based on the type/ need of participants)

G.4 Session Proper (First activity): "Let's Say Hello and Chat while"

G.5 Sharing 3 minutes

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G.6 Processing

G.7 Wrap up

G.8. Evaluation (Google Form)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

A total of 12 sessions were conducted among the 129 non-teaching and teaching employees of the University covering all levels, who voluntarily and willingly participated in the activity. The study presented the negative and positive emotional reactions of the employees to the COVID-19 pandemic, coping strategies, and their realizations.

3.1 Emotional Reactions to COVID-19 Pandemic

Each employee shared one or more reactions presented in Table 1 both the negative and positive emotions. Responses were further thematically categorized as personal, family-related, social, socio-family, and work-related.

Emotional reactions as responses to situations affecting one's self were referred to as personal as disclosed in Table 1 that all employees (n=129, 100%) claimed that they were feeling scared, anxious, and worried about the uncertainty of getting infected. Family-related reactions (n=129, 100%) also revealed the same feelings of being scared, anxious, and worried about the possibility of their family members getting infected. Responses classified under the social aspect showed that more than half (n=75, 58.14%) were sad of their limited mobility, frustrated due to canceled travels within the country to visit family members, to have family gatherings and outings, and to travel abroad for international tours. Emotional reactions related to health (n=45, 34.88%) revealed that a number were depressed for having been quarantined due to experiences of COVID symptoms and having other family members being quarantined too while some reactions were socio-family related (n=15, 11.63%) grieving due to the death of a family, relative, or friends.

Table 1. Emotional Reactions to COVID-19 Pandemic (N=129)

Emotional Reactions	F	Percent
NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS		
Personal	129	100.00
- Felt scared, anxious, and worried about getting infected with the disease		
Family-related	129	100.00
- Felt anxious and worried about other family members getting infected		
Social	75	58.14
- Frustrated and sad due to limited mobility, canceled travels to visit family members, family gatherings and outings, and travel abroad for international tours		
Health Related	45	34.88
- Depressed due to experiences of COVID symptoms and being quarantined and other family members are quarantined too		
Socio-Family Related	15	11.63
- Grieved due to death of a family member, relatives, and friends due to COVID 19		
Work-related	20	15.50
- Stressed and tired with computer-related jobs, online class preparations, low connectivity, and other technology-related concerns.		
- Frustrated due to canceled travel abroad for overseas employment		
POSITIVE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS		

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Emotional Reactions	F	Percent
Work-related		
- Happy and grateful for the “work from home” scheme that provides employee salary	129	100.00
Family – Related		
- Happy with “online classes” that kept children at home	76	58.91

Work-related emotional reactions (n=20, 15.50%) were also noted. A few who were about to leave the University for employment abroad felt frustrated by their canceled travel. A number disclosed that they were stressed and tired with computer-related jobs, online class preparations, and low connectivity as well as other technology-related concerns. The conduct of online classes was very challenging because the modality was new to both the teachers and the students. Some older teachers were struggling with the use of the new teaching platform. These prompted a few employees to think of retirement or resignation from the job. It can also be gleaned from the table that employees disclosed positive emotional reactions concerning the work-from-home modality (n=129, 100%) as they still received the same salary while more than half of them were happy with their family being together with their children at home spending “online classes” (n=76, 58.91%).

3.2 Coping Strategies Among University Employees During COVID-19 Pandemic

Data on coping strategies are shown thematically in Table 2. As seen in the table, the coping strategies used by the employees of the University to keep themselves and their families safe from the disease are thematically classified as problem-based, emotion-based, and religious-based.

The Problem-Based Coping was used by those affected or whose family members were infected with the virus and had experienced being quarantined. They addressed the problem directly by asking help from the University Physician for medical assistance and voluntarily requested to be quarantined in a government facility (n=5, 3.87%) while those who did not want to stay in the government facilities (6.97%, n=9), did self-quarantine (n=31, 24.03%) at home. All of the respondents (n=129, 100%) claimed they followed government protocols like wearing masks and all other safety measures for the safety of everybody. The Emotion-Based Coping used by the employees were as follows: engagement in activities (doing household chores such as cooking, gardening 56.59% (n=73), playing cybergames with children (n=68, 52.71%), engaging in relaxation activities like watching TV (n=36, 27.91%), physical exercises and walking in secluded places (n=15, 11.63%) to reduce negative emotions. As mentioned by León-Guereño et al. (2020) engagement in physical activity in general is associated with maintenance of physical health and good mental health. Other emotional coping activities were talking it out with the family, bonding with officemates and colleagues by eating together, constant communication with colleagues, doing constructive class management by coordinating with parents, being appreciative of students’ output by acknowledging their performances (n=15, 11.63%), pausing a while, and turning off of internet connections among 65.89%, (n=85) of the employees during non-office hours, especially during night time.

Furthermore, all respondents (n=129, 100%) used Religious-Based Coping such as praying individually and together as a family and joining online masses on Sundays. It tends to show that the employees find solace in the Supreme Being. The findings are also similar to that of Finlay et al. (2021) that spiritually-minded participants’ coping was through faith-based practices such as “praying for all family, friends, and everyone in the world and that prayer was a way to cope with grief and feel hope for the future.

Table 2. Coping Strategies among University Employees During COVID-19 Pandemic (N=129)

COPING STRATEGIES	F	PERCENT
Problem-Based Coping		
- Asked help from the University Physician for medical Assistance	5	3.87
- Requested to be quarantined in a government facility	9	6.97
- Did self-quarantined at home	31	24.03
- Followed government protocols like the wearing of masks and all other safety measures for the safety of everybody	129	100.00
Emotion-Based Coping		
- Kept busy with household chores such as cooking	73	56.59
- Did Gardening	68	52.71
- Played with children (Cybergames)	36	27.91
- Engaged in relaxation activities (watching TV)	42	32.56

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COPING STRATEGIES	F	PERCENT
- Did physical exercises (walking, etc.)	15	11.63
- Online Talking/bonding with colleagues/	55	42.63
- Coordinating online with the parents, appreciating and acknowledging students' works	15	11.63
- Turning off internet connection during nighttime to avoid stress from receiving midnight messages	85	65.89
Religious-based Coping		
- Prayed individually and together as a family	129	100.00
- Joined online masses on Sundays		

3.3 Realizations Among University Employees During COVID-19 Pandemic

The respondents also shared their realizations from the stressful experience of the pandemic. Their realizations were the results of their appraisal of the happenings during the pandemic and attached positive meaning to these experiences which led them to cope and maintain their well-being. The analyses of their responses showed that they tended to use reframing of their thoughts. They tried to look at the negative occurrence from another perspective. Instead of getting stuck on little details of the unpleasant experience they attached a positive meaning. The majority of the respondents claimed that God permitted the pandemic to happen for a purpose. The lockdown provided them time to pray together as a family and made them more prayerful and feel closer to God. It made them realize the goodness of God that despite the dreadful situation, they were ably coping with their basic needs. They realized that God provides in times of need. It allowed them to bond with their spouse and children in their home which they seldom had before.

DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought both negative and positive emotional reactions to the University employees. The negative emotions presented in Table 1 are categorized based on themes such as personal, family, social, health, socio-family, and work-related including experiences of being scared, anxious, worried, frustrated, depressed, stressed, and tired. These negative emotions, especially of being scared, anxious, stressed, and depressed could have either short or long-term effects. These reactions to the pandemic are normal as a response to the uncertainties of the health conditions in the country and the entire world. As described by the APA Diagnostic Manual DSM 5, anxiety is felt by an individual who is concerned about uncertain future events. Similarly, the findings of the study of Akour et al. (2020) revealed that more than half of the 382 respondents of Jordan university teachers were fearful about SARS-CoV-2 infection at the same time exhibited various levels of psychological distress relative to the exercise of precautionary measures in Jordan.

With the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety is commonly experienced among employees and if not managed well, could lead to anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorder involves chronic and intense fear or anxiety in response to emotional reactions from actual or perceived threats that may happen in the future (Whitbourne, 2020). As to socio-family-related emotional reactions, it was sad to note that a few were grieving for the untimely death of a family member, relative, and friend subjected to the new funeral services to prevent virus transmission. The grieving experience of these individuals, along with the survivors suggests anxiety ranging from light insecurity to panic attacks (Worden, 2018). And so, coping with negative emotional reactions, therefore, plays a vital role in the well-being of the employees.

Being stressed and tired of the online, computer-related jobs, and technological concerns that prompted employees to plan for resignation is not only limited to this University. As cited in the study of Klapproth et al. (2020), a similar finding was also noted and it was suggested that there should be upgrading of teachers' digital skills both in hard and software. On the other hand, despite the negative emotions, the majority had shown to have kept a pleasant disposition relative to work and family-related factors. The majority were still feeling happy and grateful because of their "work-from-home" scheme with a regular monthly salary and because the "online classes" of their children made their family members intact at home. Their being at home made them feel a little bit secure from being infected by the virus.

The findings of the study further showed that university employees practiced healthy coping strategies to relieve themselves from the uncertainties of the pandemic. This is the result of the employees' intention not to be infected with COVID-19 disease both one's self and their families. This supports the statement cited by Bosnjak et al. (2020) that the intention is the immediate antecedent of behavior and the employees' behavioral responses were manifested through finding healthy coping strategies that are planned out as a result of their strong intentions to safeguard themselves. Based on the theory of planned behavior, it is implied that their attitude, subjective norm, and Perceived Behavioral Control are determined by their underlying beliefs that developing healthy coping strategies such as gardening, doing household chores, exercising, praying, communicating online with friends, and just staying at home can reduce the risks of being infected with COVID 19. Subjective norms or perceptions of the social expectations, like others, need to keep themselves safe from the disease, motivate them to comply with the safety health protocols imposed by the

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government to hinder the spread of the disease, and point out the employees' problem-based coping strategies. Similar to the findings of Lara et al. (2021), the employees have also observed the safety protocols during this Covid COVID-19 pandemic. The employees recognized the strict implementation of social distancing among themselves. However, the findings of the said study differed in terms of wearing of face shield and mask which was not strictly observed due to several reasons such as the government curtailment of freedom, health reasons, and others.

The use of emotion-based coping strategies like doing household chores, exercises, games, and the like was similar to the findings of Akour et al. (2020). The aforementioned continued communication with friends can be a social interaction skill and experience beneficial for the emotional health of the employees as to exercise, it was found that lesser physical activity tended individuals to experience anxiety which can be thought that such exercise is a healthy form of coping towards well-being for anxiety reduction (Galli, 2019). Kavanagh et al (2022) concluded that positive emotional coping strategies decreased distress.

The religious-based strategy confirmed the statement of Abellanosa (2020) that Filipinos seek the face of God during serious disasters like COVID-19 which they became innovative in finding their communion with their Church in which the presence of God plays a significant role in their lives. According to Harper (2019), prayer involves talking to one's self or God, to one's needs or intentions, especially during difficult times. He considered this coping strategy as a grounding exercise making one to be aware of their feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Similarly, the study of Sherwood (2018) revealed that family and friends were the topmost in the list of prayers among a survey of non-believers during the crisis. They prayed for healing and for comfort to feel less lonely. Likewise, the results of the study of Surzykiewicz et al. (2022) revealed that the respondents when in difficult situations, willingly used positive religious coping than negative coping.

As to realizations, the employees realized and truly believed that human beings are equal, rich or poor. All have equal chances of getting infected and dying with COVID-19. The untimely death of a family member, relatives, and friends due to COVID-19 made them realize the uncertainty of life which could happen to anyone regardless of age and status in life. It taught them to show love and care to their parents, spouses, and children while they are alive. As explained by Narain (2022) self-realization involves the process of knowing oneself that leads people to a meaningful and fulfilling life. The COVID-19 crisis has provided people with free time, to do unfinished tasks which were not done due to busy schedules. It was a time of self-discovery, bonding with family members, self-control, and so on that many believe that they have developed a better and deeper understanding of themselves during the lockdown period. Moreover, as mentioned by Denney and Aten (2020) many people turn to their faith for comfort, support, and a sense of meaning during stressful life events.

Such study has shown that in times of threats like COVID-19, people tend to interpret negative experiences with optimism which would provide immediate and long-term psychological benefits. Finding significance out of the challenging situation can be considered as an adaptive strategy.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the general findings, it can be concluded that University employees have both negative and positive emotional responses to the challenging circumstances during the pandemic. Problem-based, emotion-based, and religious-based coping were the strategies used to reduce the emotional tensions, and by attaching positive meaning to the situation, they gain positive insights that help them sustain sound mental health. Negative emotions of fear, anxiety, frustration, stress, and tiredness were normal reactions to the abnormal situation. Despite these negative emotions, experiences of lockdown leading to the adoption of online classes and work-from-home schemes kept the family intact, physically safe, and financially secure thereby making them happy. Through the process of reframing, they have attached positive meaning and have positive realizations from the challenging situation of the pandemic. This has contributed to the maintenance of sound mental health during the pandemic. The findings supported the statement of the World Health Organization that fear and anxiety are normally felt during the pandemic but these adversities can be a path towards growth. The findings of the study have similar implications to Ogueji et.al (2021) which emphasizes the importance of psychosocial interventions that alleviate the distressing impacts of the pandemic. This also implies the important roles of mental health practitioners and the specific mental health programs that require enhancement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

With reference to the findings, the following activities are recommended to enhance the mental health program of the University:

- Monitor the emotional well-being of the employees regularly.
- Conduct more physical and psychological-related exercises.
- Provide a wellness lounge for faculty, staff, and students.
- Put up a therapeutic garden.
- Provide online spiritual-related activities of the campus ministry.
- Conduct more technological-related training among the faculty and staff.

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