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# **Food Insecurity in College during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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**Research Conducted for:**

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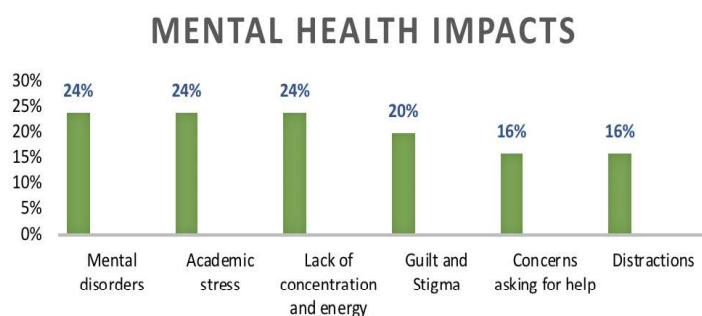
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their diet. Additionally, two different participants admitted that the foods they are forced to eat affect how they physically feel, as they feel unhealthy because while the foods they eat are filling and convenient in terms of cooking time and shelf life, they are not always healthy.

### **The Impact on Mental Health**

An additional goal of this study was to understand the impact that food insecurity had on the participants' mental health.



Many participants between the ages of 18-25 described their worries regarding a lack of money to meet their necessities. Meanwhile, other participants mentioned that mental disorders like depression, anxiety, and even eating disorders were heightened with an increased state of food insecurity. One participant states, *“I’m constantly stressed, and I have so much anxiety and increased panic attacks now... And then I cannot concentrate on my studies because... I’m feeling very weak all the time”* (female, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Some participants noted that they were stressed about their ability to complete and succeed academically and had a lot of stress pertaining to school. The impact of food insecurity on academics will be further discussed in a forthcoming section.

Additionally, several participants described a general lack of concentration and energy because of their food choices. Mostly female (graduate students) participants said they experience guilt when utilizing resources like the food pantry because they feel shameful of their predicaments in being unable to provide food for themselves. Similarly, a few participants admitted that they are afraid of asking others for help for similar reasons. Stigma and guilt pertaining to food insecurity during COVID-19 will be further discussed in a forthcoming section.

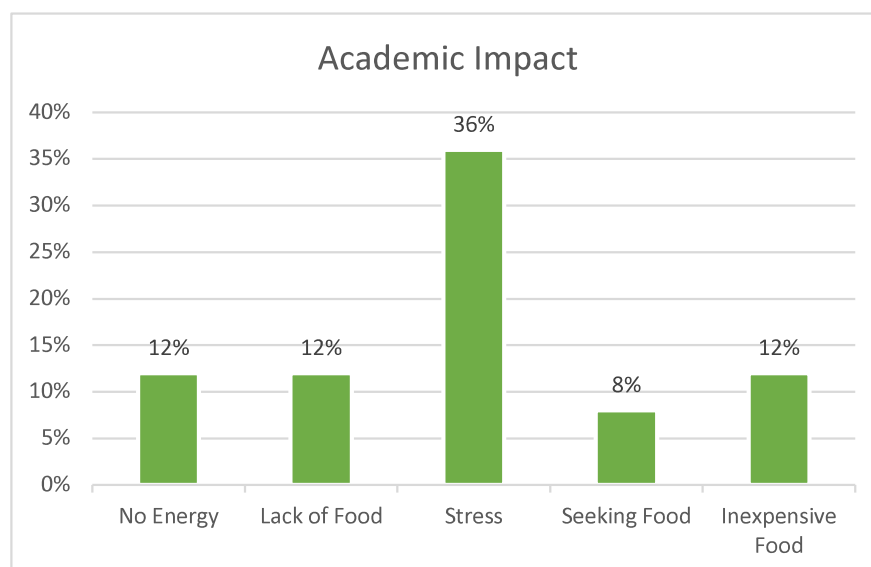
Some other impacts on mental health that participants brought up include stressing over their preexisting conditions. Further, international students discussed their concerns regarding their home countries and families back home. A few participants also touched on developing a negative self-image as a direct result of their struggles with food insecurity.

### **Academic Impact and Concern**

The academic impact that food insecurity has had on students during the COVID-19 pandemic is that students are unable to focus. About 52% of participants identified not being able to focus on their studies. It was a great concern because they did not have enough energy to complete their

academic work due to a lack of food consumption. One participant stated, *“So, I’m hungry all throughout the day. That’s usually only on Sundays though, where I’m just hungry all throughout the day and I’m having to try and study at work, my mind’s a little foggy”* (Carlos, a male, White, 20-year-old senior living on campus). Another participant shared that studies require a lot of “brain food” which typically helps them study for longer periods of time, but with a lack of food they are only able to study for 1.5 hours. This is down from the four consecutive hours of previous study time with consistent access to food (Mathew, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Responses from the focus group support this experience.

Stress was found to be the second greatest problem that was connected to the academic impact of the pandemic. 32% of participants indicated increased stress due to concerns such as needing to search for food and stretch their budget. As noted by a student’s response: *“You know, it’s just more of that added stress of like trying to figure out how to stretch my budget in ways that I need to... is just a really stressful thing to do”* (Sam, non-binary, Caucasian, 22-year-old senior living off campus).



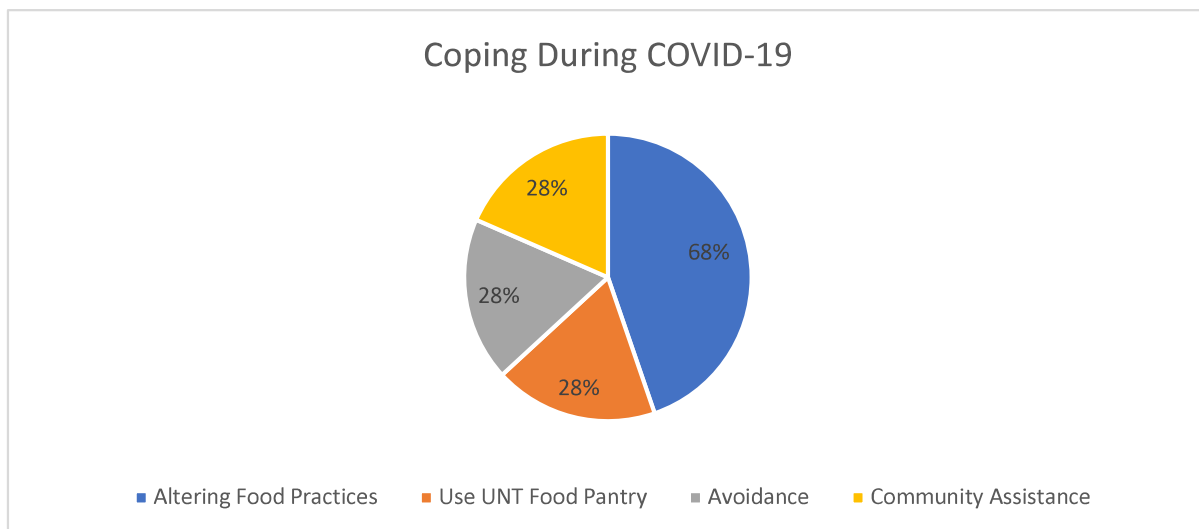
## **Coping**

### **Coping Prior and During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Prior to COVID-19, students utilized a range of methods to cope with food insecurity experienced. While some students expressed using school functions, work, and other community resources to obtain meals prior to the pandemic, some looked to consuming snacks, saving food, and prioritizing items for budget friendly recipes. A participant shared, *“[...] before I came into college, when I had food insecurity, it was like I was saving food, so, and not eating as much at like family dinners, so I can make sure that my little brother had more”* (Sophia, female, Caucasian, 20-year-old junior living off campus). By doing this, the participant learned to only eat half her meals and save the rest for later to ensure she and others can eat.

In addition, the financial impact during COVID-19 directly affected how much and what kinds of foods students were able to buy. Twenty percent of participants depended on the UNT cafeteria as their primary source of food, which was closed when the pandemic began. A few students have utilized a food pantry but expressed concerns for health impacts, including nutritional value of their food items and unmet allergy restrictions. *“I cannot get food from food pantry because most of their food has sodium, they’re like and like, so that really is bad for me like, doctors strictly told me not to. So now I’m just, my food is just limited to snacking. That’s it.”* (Amala, South Asian, 25-year-old sophomore living off campus). Participants have had to cope by minimizing their budget and using their savings, when applicable. One participant reported selling plasma while two others sold their car and clothing to ensure they had money for food.

There were two main types of coping methods participants used during COVID-19. The first was that of food coping where students altered their food practices to prolong food sources, secure food, and store food items. Seven participants (28%) were identified as using the UNT Food Pantry to which one responded, *“[...] I use the UNT food pantry to help cut costs on food. So, a lot of what I’m eating for that is like snacks and like pastas [...]”* (Sam, non-binary, Caucasian, 22-year-old senior living off campus). The second strategy to cope with food insecurity included distraction, such as new hobbies, playing video games, reading books, and exercise. One student noted: *“[...] I think with this pandemic, like one good thing that happened is that we have gotten so much time with ourselves, and, like, staying at home, you, like, try to pick up new hobbies, and I picked up learning how to cook.”* (Michael, Asian, 22-year-old junior living off campus).



### **Coping Strategies to Ensure Food is Available Daily**

Students incorporate many strategies to ensure that they are able to feed themselves and their families every day. However, we found that some strategies were utilized more frequently than others. For example: 80% of participants were found to prioritize selecting foods with high concentrations of carbohydrates such as potatoes, pasta and rice due to their ability to leave students filling full for longer periods of time versus other more nutritious but less filling foods.

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