

Exploring the Stress Experienced By Senior Citizens of Cabuyao during the Now Normal Transition



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ABSTRACT: This qualitative research study aimed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has caused stress and its contributing factors from the perspective of senior citizens who have experienced it first-hand. A set of semi-structured questionnaires were asked and answered by ten respondents from Cabuyao City. The participants' responses were interpreted and categorized into themes such as family, financial strain, grief and loss, and challenges of restricted mobility. The findings of this study suggest that senior citizens, regardless of economic stability and health concerns, have all experienced being stressed due to the pandemic. However, senior citizens have managed to cope and deal with mental stress through different coping strategies to be able to alleviate their stress.

KEYWORDS: stress, senior citizens, now normal, health, support system, family, financial state, coping, qualitative research

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been the most relevant issue in all walks of life during the surge of COVID-19 epidemic. It may already have been talked about often during the pre-pandemic phase. However, the issue surrounding mental health was firmly underscored during the pandemic. Jafri et al. (2022) explained that high levels of mental stress are linked to pandemics. During the most recent pandemic, the general public reported experiencing high levels of depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and post-traumatic stress disorder in many different countries. Additionally, Zhou et al. (2021) also stated that in addition to endangering the public's physical health, COVID-19 also put an excessive amount of psychological stress on everyone, particularly sensitive populations like the elderly. Many studies and researches have been made on the lived experiences of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic however, there are minimal studies on their recovery status.

According to the World Health Organization (2022), The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant and far-reaching effects on health systems, economies, and societies. It is one of the biggest global crises in generations. Many people have lost their lives or their means of support. Communities and families have been torn apart and stressed. Learning and social interaction have been lost for children and teenagers. There have been business failures. Millions of people have crossed the poverty line. Additionally, early in 2020, as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) spread across the US, older adults were disproportionately more affected by the pandemic's negative effects. These included more serious complications, higher mortality, worries about disruptions to their daily lives and access to care, difficulty adjusting to new technologies like telemedicine, and worries that isolation would exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions. However, given the scope and severity of the pandemic, there was concern about a mental health crisis among older adults. Older adults typically have lower stress reactivity and, generally speaking, better emotional regulation and well-being than younger adults (Jeste et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, while the rest of the world has their own strategies on combating the spread of COVID-19 virus, the Philippine Government has their version of lockdowns such as ECQ or Enhanced Community Quarantine. Several researches stated that the most vulnerable sector during the pandemic in the Philippines are the elders or senior citizens. Buenaventura et al. (2020) elaborated that Filipino senior citizens confront more difficulties since they lack moral support at home and already experience loneliness. Even while physical separation is essential to stop the virus from spreading, many elderly people are now unable to visit friends and family, which further isolates them. Those who do not have access to technology or who have less finances tend to be more socially isolated and unable to make friends outside of the home. When there is a lack of social engagement, it can

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cause long-term sadness and a loss in emotional health; this effect is more pronounced in geriatrics who are less proficient with digital platforms.

This is considered as an existing issue since elderly people are believed to be more productive and satisfied with their quality of life if they tend to move from time to time or have activities that will keep them busy all throughout. However, majority of them were forced to be stagnant in almost all aspect since they were considered the most vulnerable age groups and were more susceptible to catch an infection that furthermore hampered their productive lifestyles. This research focused on examining the mental health status of senior citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. On account of this, this research would be helpful in understanding the in-depth encounters of the senior citizens during the pandemic. The issues and challenges mentioned above could be seen and observed not only in one country but are being experienced worldwide.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The present study followed the qualitative approach. Qualitative methodology was used since it aims to investigate and comprehend the experienced distress of the senior citizen and understand their experience during the transition stage called the "now normal." According to how Tenny et al. (2022) defined it, this method investigates issues in the real world and offers a better understanding.

The study examined older people's distress during the new normal transition. The American Psychological Association defines distress as stress brought on by feeling overburdened by demands, losses, or imagined threats; it frequently involves unpleasant moods and physiological responses. It has a negative impact by causing physical and psychological maladaptation and seriously endangering people's health. Pearlin (2004) stated, "Adulthood is not a series of transitions, but a lifetime of continuous change as required by distress. Societies support individuals in their development by socializing them for certain events. There are similarities in life courses because the social clock dictates many stresses, and individuals face similar external circumstances and stresses and react similarly to one another".

A new normal transition, on the other hand, was acceptable and came after the development of extensive, restrictive public health measures, such as the identification and separation of positive cases, the isolating of all contacts who tested positive for COVID-19, and the promotion of personal protective measures and social solitary confinement as recommended by the World Health Organization, (2020).

B. Research Locale

The study was conducted in Cabuyao, Laguna, wherein 10 participants were recruited by snowball sampling and guidance of the OSCA or Office of Senior Citizens Affairs.

C. Population and Sampling

The researchers used the non-probability snowball sampling approach. After acquiring OSCA's (Office of the Senior Citizens of Cabuyao) permission to perform the study, snowball sampling was utilized to help researchers identify other possible participants. Inclusion criteria for the ten potential participants of the study were: senior citizens with ages ranging from 60-67 years old, scored 14-40 in the PSS, and had been quarantined due to severe COVID-19 symptoms. The PSS (Perceived Stress Scale) was used to make sure that the possible participants were experiencing high levels of stress.

Lastly, participants who did not experience being quarantined due to severe COVID symptoms and those who scored lower than 14 on the PSS and are older than 67 are excluded from the study.

D. Research Participants

The targeted participants of this study were ten senior citizens from Cabuyao, ages 60-67 years old, who experienced being home-quarantined during the height of the pandemic. The participants were chosen using the Perceived Stress Scale and snowball sampling. The ten participants who had scores in PSS that belonged to the 14 to 40 "moderate to high stress" bracket were invited to a face-to-face semi-structured interview with the researchers.

H. Ethical Consideration

This research adhered to the Nuremberg code; this means that human dignity and autonomy was the utmost priority of the researchers. The only risk identified in this study mostly lies in the mood changes of the participants since the questions on the semi-structured interview are targeted towards stressful experiences during the COVID-19 transition period. To minimize this risk, the researchers tried to lighten up conversations and monitor the gestures of the participants if they were uncomfortable. This way, the researchers can gauge if the interview would push through, take a break, or terminate it. Furthermore, there was a debriefing process in which the researchers entertained questions about the direction of the study and also provided a summary of the information they (senior citizens) provided.

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The participants were ensured that they would not suffer any damage as a result of their participation in this study. The participants, the chosen senior citizens of Cabuyao City, Laguna were asked to give their full consent through an ICF or Informed Consent Form that was distributed days before the interview. Also, the privacy of research participants was safeguarded; the researchers used code names like R1, R2, and so forth to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees. Moreover, the research placed a high value on respondents' voluntary participation, and they were also given the prerogative to leave the study anytime they opted to.

In terms of the confidentiality risk, the anonymity of the participants was preserved through the usage of audio recordings and using code names like R1, R2, and so forth. The audio recordings were only used for transcription and were stored in a separate flash drive to which only researchers have access. The audio recordings will be deleted 1-2 months after the study is published. Before the publication of the study, the participants were informed of the results and transcription of their answers. They were contacted using the phone numbers they provided on the ICF form. The researchers had shown them the summarized compilation of their responses so that they would see that their answers were purely used for the study only.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data from the interview conducted with the elderly inhabitants of Cabuyao is presented in this chapter after analysis and interpretation. This chapter displays the themes and codes from their inputs.

1. How do senior citizens perceive the stress that they experienced during the transition to now normal?

Table 1. Superordinate theme: Senior citizens perspective in the new normal

Subordinate Themes	Participant	Responses
Discouragement	#5	<i>"During COVID, the stress was intense, the pain and expenses, and we desperately feel down. We are really in debt and we do not know how to pay off. Up until now, the debts remain unpaid. I hope the debt will be finished because the expenses remains unpaid. The fact that the whole family got COVID."</i>
Mixed-feelings	#6	<i>"When you are in your senior age already it really felt different, it was the worst. Our mind is always occupied by thoughts of dying, but the only reason that keeps me going and gives me strength was my family especially when my daughter was about to give birth, I tried harder to get better."</i>
Adaptation	#5	<i>"The new normal is like what we had before, where you saw the people without wearing face mask and they are happy. Not unlike before(during lockdown) that there was a curfew at 7pm everyone should be inside their house and you cannot see people roaming around the street. Wearing face mask caused stress to us due to difficulty in breathing but now we are back to normal."</i>

Subordinate theme: Discouragement, mixed feelings and adaptation

Participants shared their personal experiences of facing discouragement and the challenges they encountered while adjusting to the changes in their lives. Senior citizens talked about feeling down due to various reasons such as stress, physical pain, financial expenses, debt, and other related issues that come with aging. The participants talked about how these challenges affect their day-to-day lives and make them feel discouraged. They expressed that they are still hoping to survive and pay-off their debts. Some of them shared that being a senior citizen can often make one feel like they are in their time of dying. They talked about how the challenges they experienced can take a toll on their mental and emotional well-being, despite all this, they remained hopeful about their future.

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Brooks et al. (2020) pointed out that quarantine can lead to financial loss for individuals who are unable to work or have to stop their professional activities without prior planning. The impact of such financial loss is likely to be long-lasting. The studies reviewed by the authors revealed that quarantine-related financial loss caused significant socioeconomic distress and was associated with an increased risk of psychological disorders and anxiety symptoms.

Other participant's lived experiences of adapting to the new normal have been complex and emotionally challenging. These senior citizens have had to make significant adjustments to their daily lives and routines, which can be difficult and stressful.

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It was discovered that health knowledge, planning, and action control had a direct correlation with hand-washing behavior. Additionally, action control acted as a mediator between planning and hand washing, as well as volitional self-efficacy and hand washing (Pacholik-Żuromska A., 2021).

In regards, to mask-wearing behavior, there was only one direct significant link between health knowledge and behavior. This direct association aligns with other studies and suggests that instructing people on health knowledge is an effective way to promote mask-wearing behavior during pandemic situations (Barrett C, 2021).

According to Sniehotta FF, et al., (2016), when it comes to social distancing behavior, health knowledge was significantly connected to the practice of social distancing. This finding suggests that interventions in the future should focus on educating older adults on the importance of maintaining social distancing practices. Even those who don't have stable behavioral habits must put forth efforts to self-monitor social distancing in public areas.

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Fiocco A. J. et al.,(2021), conducted quantitative studies that examined the impact of the ongoing pandemic on older adults. The research findings suggest that this demographic has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the heightened risk of contracting the virus, older adults did not report feeling any greater sense of vulnerability than younger age groups. Moreover, they did not experience any significant new health-related concerns during the first six months of the pandemic. Additionally, the research showed that older adults did not feel that they needed to be treated differently due to their age, indicating a strong sense of self-reliance and independence. However, other study shows that older adults find certain aspects of physical distancing mandates to be stressful. Specifically, they feel most impacted by the lack of in-person contact with others and the need to alter their daily routines. To accurately predict the mental and physical health outcomes of the pandemic on older individuals, such as loneliness, functional ability, and overall health, it is crucial to investigate not only the physical distancing behaviors but also the extent and emotions associated with being separated from others and the degree and feelings connected to changing their activity patterns. Heid, et al., 2021)

The answer of the participants could be linked to Pearlin's Theory of Distress (1989) which explains why exposure to specific stressors, access to psychosocial resources, and outcomes may differ among populations. This is due to the numerous life transitions a person faces that affect how they cope and change their behavior. Dealing with distress is determined using four factors, namely: individual characteristics such as intelligence, family background and personality, coping skills, social networks such as family, friends, and colleagues, and lastly, the timing of the stress. Hence, the participants had mixed and conflicting viewpoint about the pandemic due to their distinctive predispositions.

2. What are the factors that cause distress to senior citizens during the transition to now normal?

Table 2. Superordinate Themes: Navigating life's profound challenges

Subordinate Themes	Participant	Responses
Family	#5	<i>“After being tested positive for COVID and got home-quarantined; aside from being financially challenged I became sad and frightened in fears of infecting my family which happened exactly. Aside from being sad and scared, I get nervous every time I wear a face mask.”</i>
Financial strain	#7	<i>“You know, the prices... especially when you do not have a job. Fortunately, there were few people who remembered you, they would give you assistance. From there, you manage to survive, you manage to get by. I already experienced it before. I already experienced hardships so I got used to understanding that such is life.”</i>
Grief and loss	#10	<i>“You know, when my mother died. She died before I got to see her for the last time. It was really heavy for us. I cannot forget it.”</i>
Challenges of restricted mobility	#6	<i>“The stress? I get easily irritated especially when I am alone in the house– I get easily nervous.”</i>

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Subordinate Themes: Family, Financial strain, grief and loss, challenges of restricted mobility

Based on the participants' responses, the impact of financial stability on senior citizens during COVID-19 has been proven to be concerning. Seniors facing financial instability may experience heightened stress, difficulties in accessing essential resources, and a higher vulnerability to health risks. "You know, the prices... especially when you do not have a job. Fortunately, there were few people who remembered you, they would give you assistance. From there, you manage to survive, you manage to get by. I already experienced it before. I already experienced hardships, so I got used to understanding that such is life." (Participant #7).

According to Frimpong et. al. (2022), because certain non-profit organizations' finances are largely damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployed senior citizens who depend on them for financial help may not receive it. Due to underlying medical issues that prevent them from working during the COVID-19 pandemic, senior citizens find it difficult to preserve their income and meet their necessities.

Research participants have voiced their concerns about the sadness of grief. The grieving process might also be intertwined with their mortality concerns, making the experience even more complex. "You know, when my mother died. She died before I got to see her for the last time. It was heavy for us. I cannot forget it." (Participant #10).

Bereavement is the experience of losing a loved one, and grief is the natural response to this loss. According to Goveas and Shear (2020), acute grief is characterized by extreme agony, disruption, and an overpowering sense of helplessness. Nonetheless, the majority of people are able to adjust to the death of a loved one and the subsequent changes in their living environment. Losing a loved one produces a tremendous degree of turmoil resulting in a wide range of conflicting feelings and emotions.

The participants have opened up about loneliness which, among seniors, is associated with adverse effects on mental and physical health including an increased risk of depression and other health conditions. "The stress? I get easily irritated especially when I am alone in the house— I get easily nervous." (Participant #6).

"After being tested positive for COVID and got home-quarantined; aside from being financially challenged I became sad and frightened in fears of infecting my family which happened exactly. Aside from being sad and scared, I get nervous every time I wear a face mask." Participant #5)

According to Adler & Muacevic (2022), they have discovered that older adults are impacted physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and financially by COVID-19 and their anxiety surrounding the virus but perhaps more so by the effects of isolation due to restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus. Furthermore, compared to younger people, senior citizens are less comfortable using virtual alternatives to in-person conversations. As a result, senior adults do not communicate virtually with their younger family members or with one another. The potential for normalcy to gradually emerge and reopen may lead older people to remain alone. Social isolation among senior persons increases the risk of heart disease, depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and mortality, among other things.

The participants' responses are supported by Norman Garmezy's Resilience Theory, which addresses how IQ, sex, family stability and cohesiveness, and socioeconomic level might affect an individual's capacity or ability to cope with stress. Individual characteristics, such as a person's inclination to respond to novel and difficult circumstances—in this case, the pandemic—may also be indicators of their ability to function well under pressure. A number of the elderly citizens' stressors were identified, and they also discussed coping mechanisms and how they overcome the stress, demonstrating the participants' resilience.

3. How do senior citizens cope with stress?

Table 3. Superordinate Themes: Resilience through diverse coping strategies

Subordinate Themes	Participant	Responses
Faith	#10	<i>"Prayers, whenever I feel worried I just pray and surrender everything to God."</i>
	#4	<i>"First of all, trust God."</i>
Family and support systems	#6	<i>"Thinking about my kids and grandchildren relieves my stress."</i>
	#5	<i>"My family gives me strength."</i>
Social media	#7	<i>"Social media which is a big help. Listening to music such as praise songs is helpful in gaining inspiration."</i>

Subordinate Themes: Faith, Family and Support systems, Social Media

Spirituality and faith are just two of the most common coping mechanisms Filipinos utilize. It is easier to accept unfortunate circumstances when they contextualize it as the Supreme Being's will. Praying gives them enough reassurance that in everything

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they do and whatever happens to them, it is God's way of edifying them. Hence, the word "Bahala Na", whose etymology came from "Bathala Na", which means, "it is up to God" or "leaving everything to God" is commonly heard by Filipinos who are not that certain, confused, or wavering, and the simple solution would just cast everything to God.

Participant #10 shared "Prayers, whenever I feel worried I just pray and surrender everything to God."

"First of all, trust God." Participant #4 added.

As Jao (2009) explained, Filipinos consider spirituality as one of their means of adjusting. This attitude that Filipinos oftentimes exhibit does not necessarily mean a defeatist resignation but can be interpreted as a security blanket or a psychological support that they can depend on during hard times.

Participants shared that what inspired them the most to continue is their families. Since they are older and more vulnerable to the disease, what makes them stronger is thinking about their closest kin.

Participant #6 shared "Thinking about my kids and grandchildren relieves my stress." Participant #5 added "My family gives me strength."

One of the strong values Filipinos possess is being family-oriented. According to Scroope (2017), since Filipinos belong to a collectivistic culture, they typically see themselves as members of a group. Most Filipinos have a great feeling of community pride, which they express by telling tales or providing information about their town, family, or barangay (village). Hence, as Goyola (2019) explained, Filipinos hold their family in high regard. Family for them is vital and must be the primary priority among else because Filipinos are known to have strong and solid family ties and the love and care do not end with the nuclear family but also reach to the extended family.

Due to the pandemic, there has been an increase in internet and social networking usage among all ages with most of the reasons for using is for finding new information and staying in touch with family and friends (Zoleta and Zoleta, 2023). Participants shared that during their home quarantine period using social media helped them cope with their situation.

According to Participant #7 " Social media which is a big help. Listening to music such as praise songs is helpful in gaining inspiration."

Castillo et. Al (2021) mentioned that although older people have struggled during the isolation period the usage of gadgets and the internet have improved their well-being. This is because even though they cannot be physically together with their loved ones, they still have an avenue to communicate with them. In addition, the internet has been their source of information and entertainment. Here in the Philippines where there are 84.45 million social media users as of February 2023 Zoleta and Zoleta (2023). The staggering numbers comprise of people different ages. Boosting with 87,400,000 users Facebook remains the most visited social media in the country, about 7.9% of it are Filipinos aged 55 to 65 above.

This is supported Lazarus and Folkman (1984) Coping theory since these individuals utilized different functions that people utilize to cope actively: the social support, on which people tend to connect with other people to overcome a hard time; radical acceptance, on which people acknowledge and accept adversities as naturally occurring; positive reappraisal, where people find meaning in adversities and grow from it; strategic problem-solving, where people make techniques to solve the problem.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study examined older citizens' experiences in the now-normal transition, and they experienced stress for various reasons. These variables include changes in routine, feelings of loneliness, uncertainty about the future, health issues, and unstable finances. These stressors have significantly impacted the senior population and must be addressed to help them better adapt to and deal with the new normal.

In terms of health concerns, this study highlights that senior citizen, one of the most vulnerable populations, are particularly susceptible to health-related problems. The participants reported having trouble in breathing, which can be a particularly distressing and alarming symptom. Additionally, many of these seniors are concerned about their families getting infected by the virus, given their own heightened susceptibility to the disease. This underscores the importance of taking extra precautions and measures to safeguard the health and well-being of our aging population during these challenging times.

In terms of financial aspect, the participants have mentioned that they experienced economic stress from high prices of prime commodities especially those who stated surviving without stable income. Other financial stresses mentioned focused in impact to businesses where there was a challenge of recovery due to quarantine expenses, debts, and even declining income of family's breadwinner.

Conflicting perception was observable from the point of view of the participants. Some participants expressed disdain for the pandemic, while some maintained mixed feelings and neutral stance. In contrast, others gained more appreciation for life and viewed it as a challenge and opportunity for resilience and personal growth with moments worth cherishing. For them, it served

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as a learning opportunity on how to navigate the challenges they have faced during the pandemic and how being cautious, vigilant, and adhering to protocols would help them overcome the stress.

Family support plays a crucial role in helping senior citizens overcome mental stress. Emotional support, companionship, and a sense of belonging provided by family members contribute to their well-being. Regular interactions and communication with family can alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation, fostering a positive mental state. Additionally, family support often involves practical assistance in daily tasks, which can reduce stress and enhance the overall quality of life for senior citizens.

Government support for senior citizens can play a crucial role in addressing mental stress. This support can include accessible healthcare services, mental health programs, community engagement initiatives, and financial assistance. By fostering a supportive environment and ensuring that seniors have access to resources, the government can contribute to their overall well-being and reduce mental stress. Social programs that promote social interactions and activities tailored to older individuals can also enhance mental health in the senior population.

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