



Society for
HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

Impact of COVID-19 on Interns and Post-doctoral Training

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1. Society for Health Psychology Student Advisory Council (2019-2020 Board)

Summary

The survey was conducted to describe and identify training concerns that interns, and post-doctoral fellows were experiencing in response to COVID-19. The survey was conducted for non-research purposes and was sent out to the Society for Health Psychology's (SfHP) main and student listservs between March 27, 2020 and April 10, 2020. One-hundred-and-two trainees completed the survey and identified multiple concerns related to meeting training requirements for the year, being required to continue in-person work despite not feeling safe, and related to telehealth. Training programs are encouraged to follow the direction of the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) in encouraging remote work and being flexible in training requirements. Trainees are encouraged to contact APPIC for an informal problem consultation if needed (APPIC, 2020b).

Impact of COVID-19 on Interns and Post-doctoral Training

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the entire world physically, emotionally, and financially. Loved ones and friends have passed. Entire states across the country have shut down, encouraging non-essential workers to work from home. Schools and universities have been forced to close to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and learning has been moved online. Although these are critical steps to controlling the current pandemic, these steps have put additional emotional, financial, and caregiving strain on individuals and families across the globe.

Doctoral trainees, specifically those completing their clinical internships or post-doctoral fellowships, are among those impacted by COVID-19. Widely considered the capstone experiences of clinical training, these are critical periods in which students are consolidating their graduate training under the supervision of a licensed psychologist, prior to becoming independent practitioners. Given the unprecedented crises caused by the pandemic, the impact of such a situation on clinical interns and postdoctoral fellows is unknown.

The Society for Health Psychology's (SfHP) Student Advisory Council (SAC) set out to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on pre-doctoral interns and post-doctoral fellows within the field of psychology in order to identify ways the SfHP and other relevant organizations can support members in training. The survey was conducted for non-research purposes to provide data for the SfHP SAC to be able to advocate for interns and post-doctoral trainees at a broader level within the American Psychological Association (APA), American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS), Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC), and other relevant organizations and institutions. The goal of this document is to provide a summary of the information gathered from the survey.

Aim

The current survey aimed to identify and describe the prevalence of current challenges experienced by interns and post-doctoral fellows in response to COVID-19.

Methods

Participants/Procedure

The current survey was emailed through the Society for Health Psychology listservs (general and student-specific) and individuals were encouraged to forward the email to interns and postdoctoral trainees who may be interested in taking the survey. The emails included the link to the online Google Forms survey. One-hundred-and-two trainees responded. Due to the sensitive nature of the survey, participants were informed that the survey was anonymous, for non-research purposes, and could be used for advocacy efforts within their training program, APA, APAGS, APPIC, or other professional organizations. Participants were allowed to skip questions and no questions were required. If participants did not feel comfortable voicing their concerns via the survey, they were encouraged to email studentchairdiv38@gmail.com, however no trainees chose this option. The survey was emailed to both listservs on March 27, 2020. The second recruitment email was sent on April 5, 2020 and the survey closed on April 10, 2020.

Measures

Information on Training/Setting

Participants completed questions asking about their current training status (i.e., on internship or post-doctoral training) and the type of training setting.

Challenges Encountered

Participants were asked to identify current challenges they were experiencing on internship or post-doctoral training related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three questions were

used to identify these challenges. First, participants were asked to check a list of challenges they were experiencing related to COVID-19 (ex. “I am being required to continue in-person work despite feeling this is unsafe,” “I am not getting paid (e.g. furloughed, sent home without pay),” “My site is not providing options to work remotely (e.g. telehealth)”, etc). Participants were allowed to write in other challenges they were experiencing. “Other” responses were reviewed by three members of SAC and coded into themes. Participant answers may have counted for more than one theme.

Second, a free-response question asked participants the following: “In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your training experience as an intern or postdoc? What difficulties have you encountered? How have you approached these challenges (e.g. talked to your DCT, HR, doctoral program)? Have these challenges been solved? If so, how?” Free-response items were reviewed by three members of SAC and coded into themes. Participant answers may have counted for more than one theme.

The final question asked participants, “Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know that we didn’t already ask you?;” to which participants answered via free-response format. Free-response items were coded by three members of SAC and were coded into themes. Participant answers may have counted for more than one theme. Please reference figure 1 for the survey that was sent to participants.

Data Analyses

Data from Google Forms was exported into an Excel spreadsheet, coded, and then imported into SPSS (version 25). Frequencies for each item were conducted via SPSS. Free-response items were coded into themes by three SAC members.

Results

Information on Training/Setting

A total of 102 trainees (55.9% interns, 43.1% post-docs, 1% no response) completed the survey. About 34% of participants were completing their training within an academic medical center. Table 1 provides additional information on training setting.

Challenges Encountered

The top three challenges trainees encountered were: concerns about meeting training requirements for the year (50%), being required to continue in-person work despite feeling unsafe (24.9%), and lack of options for remote work like telehealth (22.5%). Table 2 summarizes responses from this question including free-response “other” options.

The top three themes for the free-response question regarding the impact of COVID-19 on trainees’ experiences were: DCTs/supervisors being supportive/flexible, DCTs/supervisors not supportive, and trainees being required to work onsite without social distancing. Table 3 summarizes responses from this question. Other common concerns noted were related to one’s own health/safety and concerns related to retaliation and advocacy. Table 4 provides additional themes related to this question.

Discussion

The survey helped us identify and describe the prevalence of challenges current interns and post-doctoral fellows are experiencing in response to COVID-19. Current interns and post-doctoral fellows that completed the survey appear to be experiencing numerous training challenges in response to COVID-19 including concerns related to meeting training requirements, concerns related to safety, and lack of options for telehealth/remote work.

Although challenges were common, many individuals also identified positive ways that their training program was responding to COVID-19 related disruptions.

APPIC has provided guidance to training programs and trainees on how to navigate challenges during this difficult time (APPIC, 2020a). Yet, the data we have acquired through this trainee survey may be a resource for identifying additional ways organizations can support trainees. For example, making sure trainees feel safe in their workplace environment, including moving to remote work, providing access to adequate personal protective equipment, and policies in place to protect patients and trainees. Per APPIC, training programs are encouraged to move towards remote work and telehealth (APPIC, 2020a). APA has provided resources for trainees and supervisors on transitioning to teletherapy (APA, 2020a; APA, 2020c, APA, 2020d). Although psychologists may be deemed essential employees and providing mental health services is essential to the well-being of patients, trainees are often exempt from being deemed essential employees and should be provided a safe training environment (APPIC, 2020a).

Training programs are encouraged to follow the direction of APPIC while being flexible with training requirements for the training year and making sure interns and post-doctoral trainees are ready for independent practice (APPIC, 2020a). Trainees are encouraged to contact their state's licensing board to inquire about the number of supervised hours needed for licensure as this may be impacted by COVID-19 (APPIC, 2020a). APA, APAGS, and the SfHP also provide resources and webinars for trainees on numerous topics relevant to the current pandemic (APA 2020a, APA, 2020b, SfHP, 2020). Trainees may also find peer support through a social media group moderated by APAGS (APAGS, n.d.).

The SfHP SAC understands that this is an unprecedented time and that training directors and training programs are doing their best to provide a safe training environment for trainees as

well as providing patient care. This survey was formed to advocate for trainees during this difficult time. Trainees are encouraged to talk to their DCT, home institution, and APPIC about any concerns and challenges related to their training due to COVID-19. Trainees are also able to complete an informal problem consultation with APPIC if needed (APPIC, 2020b).

Disclaimer

The SfHP SAC wants to acknowledge several limitations related to the current survey. First, this survey did not include demographic variables such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, and marital status. It is very likely that some groups may be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 related disruptions to training. Our survey cannot speak to these potential discrepancies. Further, the survey did not ask about the type of training program trainees were in, type of program graduated from, length of training, or the type of post-doctoral training (research vs. clinical) respondents were receiving. Additionally, there is potential bias in respondent answers as it is likely that many of the participants are SfHP members. Further, the SfHP SAC wants to highlight that the results of this poll are limited to the time range of March 27th-April 10th. It is possible that many training programs have addressed challenges mentioned above and may have provided additional resources to trainees as the severity of COVID-19 increased across the United States.

Table 1.
Training Status and Setting (N=102)

Variable	<i>N (Percentage)</i>
Training Status	
Intern	57 (55.90)
Post-doctoral trainee	44 (43.10)
No response	1 (1.00)
Setting	
Academic Medical Center	35 (34.30)
Veterans Affairs	31 (30.4)
Community Mental Health	8 (7.80)
Counseling Center	7 (6.90)
Private Practice	1 (1.0)
Other	20 (19.60)
Primary Care	2 (2.0)
setting/Hospital	
University	2 (2.0)
Hospital	2 (2.0)
Outpatient Hospital	2 (2.0)
Did not specify other	2 (2.0)
setting	
Academic Health Center	1 (1.0)
and General Hospital	
Community Health	1 (1.0)
Primary Care	
Corrections	1 (1.0)
Counseling Center and	1 (1.0)
Primary Care	
Federally Qualified Health	1 (1.0)
Center-Healthcare home	
Primary Care Clinic	1 (1.0)
Primary Care/Community	1 (1.0)
Mental Health	
Private Community Clinic	1 (1.0)
Private Medical Center	1 (1.0)
Residential	1 (1.0)

Table 2.
Challenges Encountered (N=102)

Variable	<i>N</i> (Percentage)
I am concerned I won't meet my training hour requirements for the year	51 (50.00)
I am being required to continue in-person work despite feeling this is unsafe	30 (29.40)
My site is not providing options to work remotely like telehealth	23 (22.50)
I am having issues related to childcare/caregiving responsibilities	15 (14.70)
My site is not providing adequate mental health/emotional support to me	15 (14.70)
I don't have PTO or sick leave to use but need to take time off	12 (11.80)
I don't know how to advocate for myself at my site	12 (11.80)
I am not getting paid	3 (2.90)
Other	33 (32.4)
Required to continue onsite work (some responses included comments related to social distancing while others included concerns related to safety)	6
None of the above/no additional concerns	3
Lack of telehealth equipment/strong WiFi/technological difficulties	3
Sites slow to allow work-from-home	2
Mixed messages about work split (telehealth in office vs. home)	2
Challenges have changed improved since pandemic began/able to work remotely	2
Additional emotional concerns	2
Lack of info and resources for Post Docs/Interns either from internship or graduate program	2
Not getting the specialized health psych training wanted/expected/can't participate fully in certain rotations	2
Providing telehealth with little training/supervision	2
Training director/graduate program is not advocating and unresponsive	2
Afraid of retaliation for advocating needs	1
Intern was asked to increase caseload	1
Required to use PTO	1
EPPP, Licensure, Board Certification concerns	1
Living with "at-risk" populations	1
Research delayed	1

Table 3.

Themes with "In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your training experience as an intern or postdoc? What difficulties have you encountered? How have you approached these challenges (eg. talked to your DCT, HR, doctoral program)? Have these challenges been solved? If so, how?" (N=79)

Theme	N
DCT/supervisors are supportive/flexible	20
DCT/supervisors not supportive	14
Required to continue onsite work without social distancing	10
Changes to rotations/lack of diverse training experiences/reduced interdisciplinary work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solution: collaborating with colleagues and professional organizations to develop ways to support staff, patients, and professional community • Solution: filling time with didactics, online training, research activities, etc. 	9
Concerned about personal health	8
Delay of internship, graduation, licensure, EPPP testing	7
Job market concerns - delays in making offers, interviews, lack of jobs available	6
Power differential issues - afraid to voice concerns	6
Decreased patient attendance/reduced contact hours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solution: advocated for telehealth 	6
Technological difficulties using telehealth	5
Telehealth not an option/feasible (e.g., neuropsych testing)	5
Lack of decisions from supervisors - waiting on APA guidance	3
Required to terminate with patients	2
Increased administrative work	2
Confusion on telehealth format to use	2
No concerns	2
Reduced supervision hours <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solution: supervisory coverage established 	1
Given laptops to perform telehealth, but software program not supported on laptops	1
Filed complaint with APPIC (informal problem consultation), and problem was resolved	1

Table 4.

Themes with "is there anything else you think would be helpful or us to know" (N=30)

Theme	N
Concerned about own health/safety - "What if I contract COVID-19 onsite?"	5
Concerned about retaliation for advocating needs	5
None	5
Survey is helpful	4
Desire for job market resources/concerns related to job market	3
Inconsistencies in training/protocol for telehealth	2
Required to use PTO	1
Supervisors preferring patients and trainees onsite	1
Lack of PPE	1
Telehealth as a good alternative	1
Concern for other trainees at site	1
Concern related to EPPP and licensure	1
Concern related to increased administrative responsibilities	1

Figure 1.

4/19/2020

Impact of COVID-19 on Clinical Psychology Interns and Postdocs

Impact of COVID-19 on Clinical Psychology Interns and Postdocs

These are difficult and unprecedented times. Trainee safety and well-being, as well as patient safety and care, are of utmost importance. The Society for Health Psychology's Student Advisory Council continues to advocate for trainees within the field of psychology, and we want to hear from you about the impact of COVID-19 on your training as an intern/postdoc. We want to stress that this survey is anonymous. Information obtained from this survey may be used to assist with advocacy efforts within your training program, APA, APAGS, APPIC, etc. Participation in this activity is voluntary and anonymous, and responses are for SfHP's informational and service-oriented purposes only. This is not a research activity. If you would prefer to voice your concern via email or have questions about this survey please contact studentchairdiv38@gmail.com.

Information

1. Are you currently on internship or postdoc (in a mental health or related field)?

Mark only one oval.

- Internship
- Postdoc

2. What type of setting is your internship or postdoc?

Mark only one oval.

- Academic Medical Center
- Community Mental Health
- Private Practice
- Veterans Affairs
- Counseling Center
- School
- Consortium
- Other: _____

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- 3. If you feel comfortable, please list the name and location of your internship or postdoc site.

- 4. Please identify which challenges you are experiencing on internship or postdoc related to the COVID-19 pandemic (select all that apply):

Check all that apply.

- I am being required to continue in-person work despite feeling this is unsafe
- I am not getting paid (e.g., furloughed, sent home without pay)
- My site is not providing options to work remotely (e.g., telehealth)
- I am concerned I won't meet my training hour requirements for the year
- I don't have PTO or sick leave to use but need to take time off
- I am having issues related to childcare/caregiving responsibilities
- I don't know how to advocate for myself at my site (e.g., don't know who to talk to)
- My site is not providing adequate mental health/emotional support to me

Other: _____

- 5. In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your training experience as an intern or postdoc? What difficulties have you encountered? How have you approached these challenges (e.g., talked to your DCT, HR, doctoral program)? Have these challenges been solved? If so, how?

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- 6. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know that we didn't already ask you?

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms

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