

## How can we facilitate social intimacy of remote post-secondary students?

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## Introduction

The pandemic has caused a disruption across the globe, and with any disruption it allows century old systems to be reconsidered and redesigned. Schooling for one has been severely disrupted by the pandemic and many students and faculty are struggling to cope with the new strategies outlined by the government and institutions. Since the pandemic schooling in most post-secondary institutions have moved to fully online formats and have shut down their campuses. Before the pandemic a lot of school institutions used a combination of online methods as a supportive tool for face to face learning. (Sunqrot, Al-Shalabi, Sabbah, Al-Majawleh, & Abusara, 2020) Many strategies have been implemented to allow for online/remote schooling to continue as the main format for many students this year. However, strategies in regards to how students can maintain social intimacy with each other has yet to be implemented/improved in a remote learning environment. The social aspects of college and university are what makes it tolerable for a lot of people whether that be studying with friends in the library, working in the labs together, having dorm room parties, or collaborating in class between friends and professors. These support groups are very important for a student's mental health because it helps to outweigh the hard work. When the schooling moved to an online format due to the pandemic a lot of that went away overnight. No longer can students work with their friends in the labs or have them over for a game night. The social lives of a lot of students have been restricted to a lonely online work schedule, where there is no time to do things that are important and vital to one's mental health. Suddenly outweighing the stress of school is significantly harder.

## The new method of learning

In the course of several weeks in spring 2020, pharmacy education underwent more significant changes than it arguably had experienced in the previous decade. The changes were often

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made on a daily basis as we realized the depth and breadth of the problems caused by the pandemic. These problems challenged our assumptions about processes we had in place (both those established over decades and those implemented in recent years) for providing educational programs at all levels in our colleges and schools of pharmacy. This pandemic has also disrupted the fundamental elements of community, time, and place that we used as foundations for the success of our institutions. Pharmacy faculty and staff members and students have had to quickly adapt to new situations, including how we educate and learn, how and where we work with others, and how we balance our professional and personal lives. (Brazeau, 2020)

### **Online methods**

Before the pandemic, the online format known as Moodle was being used in a majority of courses for university students around the world, but was typically used as a supportive tool for face to face learning. (Sunogrot, Al-Shalabi, Sabbah, Al-Majawleh, & Abusara, 2020) The website was used for submitting and keeping organized with projects and assignments. It also acted as a hub for teacher resources and notes from lectures. The pandemic came at a time that didn't allow for time off, and a solution needed to be put in place immediately. The pandemic started to really become a problem around March and April, which is when students in Canada were just finishing up their semester and students in Australia were just starting theirs. This was a problem that was happening around the world at the same time and required an international solution the next day. Typically when problems like this come up and they need solutions the next day and the easiest and first solution that comes to mind is what is put in place. These websites like Moodle were adapted to be able to handle the increase in use as well as apps like Zoom were put into place for educational facilities all around the world due to its ease of use, lack of need to download software and its ability to host a large amount of participants at a time. This solution was great for those that had their own personal laptops, places to work and high internet speeds. However, there were challenges for students that didn't have high internet speeds, or students who didn't have access to their own laptops or personal computers. This required students to frequently share with siblings or parents who also had their own online responsibilities. Furthermore electronic stores were shutdown so students were not even able to purchase devices or even send theirs in for repairs. (Sunogrot, Al-Shalabi, Sabbah, Al-Majawleh, & Abusara, 2020)

Zoom was a good substitute for some students but other students who needed to work found some difficulties. Pharmacy students in Jordan would often worked as pharmacy technicians during the time of their studies. They would usually schedule their classes during the day and

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work at night on late shifts. However, with the pandemic came curfew restrictions from 6pm to 8am. This meant that students could only work during the day or risk losing their job. Instructors were able to pre-record videos in these instances. This however, reduced personal face to face and available questions with instructors. (Sunqrot, Al-Shalabi, Sabbah, Al-Majawleh, & Abusara, 2020) Students and professors are less inclined to show their video over zoom due to a variety of reasons either because they are in their personal home and don't feel comfortable, slow internet connections, or because no one else in the class has their videos turned on. This restricted face to face interaction is changing the way students and teachers talk to each other. It's hard for the instructor to gauge if their students are retaining or understanding information when they can't see and evaluate their expressions.

### **The push to return back to face to face learning**

Returning back to face to face classes is going to be a very important push for the universities themselves around the world. The basic business model for most colleges is tuition which comes twice a year, remaining closed could mean losing as much as half its revenue. Low income students who who may not have reliable internet access, or private places to study may drop out or take a gap year to wait out the pandemic, which would cost the university institution a considerable amount of money. (Paxson, 2020) These schools have many buildings on their campuses that are just sitting there not being used, so a considerable push to return to campus will be played by the institutions in order make use of its money spent on these buildings. Universities are constrained in their ability to control the virus on campus, the comings and goings of student and facility would have to be tracked and testing would have to be performed regularly on campus and options to quarantine would also have to be available. At the same time program administrators have a high degree of control over the parameters of the interactions, as they can control a students and facilities schedules. They could designate which students are in which classes and when those classes meet. Holding large classes in person would increase the risk of an outbreak at a considerable rate. So these classes would have to remain online, or be divided into smaller sections. The students would have to refrain from all contact outside of academic and residential settings, small settings like dining halls, or parties would be sufficient enough to cause an outbreak that would shut down the whole campus. (Gressman & Peck, 2020)

### **Mental Health in students**

A recent study by Ben Fong revealed that depressive symptoms in students can be a direct result of lack of physical and social behaviour. In the study a questionnaire found that

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“individuals aged 18-25 spent more time relaxing, but experienced more physical strain.” (Fong et al., 2020) Students were experiencing behavioural changes and avoiding social activities outside the home, this usually included a lack physical exercise and lack of social interaction. Remaining homebound due to social-distancing guidelines can reduce physical activity and deteriorate physical health. In regards to physical health it has been revealed that adequate physical activity can prevent the onset of depression symptoms and stress. (Kim et al., 2019), (Anderson & Shivakumar, 2013) The lack of social relationships from friends and family members has also been associated with depression. (Teo, Choi, & Valenstein, 2013), (Werner-Seidler, Afzali, Chapman, Sunderland, & Slade, 2017) Working from home has been found to have mixed effects on physiological attitude and work-life balance (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2014), (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013)

In order to maintain social relationships and communications with friends more screen time and effort overall is required to maintain those relationships. In the face of a pandemic and remote schooling students more than ever are having a harder time maintaining those social relationships with others. Class allowed for students to meet at least once a week with their friends and gave them an opportunity to hangout without much effort. Now with remote schooling and social distancing guidelines, more effort is required to hangout with classmates. To substitute this students are relying on the use of electronic devices for communication and are spending more time in front of the screens and less time outside. This was found to positively increase the level of depressive severity.

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