

Secrets in a Pandemic: Finding Unexpected Contentment in Stressful Times

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Abstract: The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has created a vast array of challenges and some benefits that must not be overlooked. Describing the experience of teaching with social anxiety and pulling upon pedagogy about caring instructors, this reflective essay explains how teaching through the pandemic led to the author finding enjoyment in teaching. Suggestions for effective online teaching and recognition of the value of online teaching to some people are discussed.

Keywords: pandemic, social anxiety, online teaching, caring teaching, COVID-19

I have an embarrassing and shameful secret: Teaching during the pandemic has helped me love teaching. I am happy to be teaching online, from home. I like it.

Let me explain.

I carry a secret every day at work. I look at everyone else and see happy, outgoing people who love their jobs, who do more than I ever could, who volunteer time and effort to run student organizations and attend student fundraisers. People leave work and go to volunteer with organizations, meetings, and clubs. They may have second jobs, leadership roles in organizations, activities in the community, churches, and schools.

I don't.

I can't.

I'm an extreme introvert with diagnosed social anxiety disorder and a splash of episodic major depression thrown in for good measure. For me, this means that every day I experience emotional exhaustion and/or compassion fatigue. Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2014) characterize emotional exhaustion as "when teachers feel their emotional resources are depleted and over-extended by the contact with other people". The typical definition of emotional exhaustion, similar to burnout, emphasizes the chronic nature of the stress. Ali (2019) explains compassion fatigue as emotional exhaustion that may "come from a single occurrence, but can also worsen with repeated exposure". Common symptoms of emotional exhaustion include feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, exhausted, frustrated, irritable, and helpless (Ali, 2019; Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2014).

In my professional life, emotional exhaustion is combined with social anxiety. According to the American Psychiatric Association (n.d):

A person with social anxiety disorder has significant anxiety and discomfort about being embarrassed, humiliated, rejected or looked down on in social interactions. People with this disorder will try to avoid the situation or endure it with great anxiety. Common examples are extreme fear of public speaking, meeting new people.

The National Institute of Mental Health (2017) estimates that about 12% of adults will experience social anxiety—up to 15 million Americans—with many more suffering without diagnosis because the disorder "remains both under-recognized and undertreated" (Leichsenring & Leweke, 2017). The common treatments of psychotherapy and psychotherapy help some people, "and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) aims to reduce anxiety about particular situations. Still, reducing

exposure to anxiety provoking activity is highly valued by suffering persons” (Schneier, 2006). While therapies exist, socially anxious people still often prefer to avoid anxiety-producing activities.

For me, managing life with social anxiety involves many factors. I participate in a combination of psycho and pharmacological therapies. I have been teaching for six years, which should reduce anxiety according to CBT protocols that include exposure to anxiety-producing situations (Leichsenring & Leweke, 2017; Schneider, 2006). CBT protocol suggests people suffering from anxiety reduce social avoidance and increase social activities (Leichsenring & Leweke, 2017), but after six years of teaching and ten years of medication and therapy, my social anxiety has not eased. I have learned to make selective choices about where I place my energy, which activities I say “yes” to, and which I avoid based on my available emotional energy. Practicing self-compassion about these choices is difficult when I see others who are far more involved than I am, but to keep functioning, frequently I have to say “no.”

Despite following suggested protocols to reduce social anxiety, every day at work is a battle against anxiety. Performing the normal, daily activities of a life and career is terribly stressful, causing such distress that people want to get help (Aarons-Mele, 2017). To manage social anxiety, some people, like me, prepare and practice extensively; I script and practice every class day since any uncertainty increases my anxiety. I try to organize clearly, have many resources available, and am horribly embarrassed whenever students find an error in a document or on my learning management system (LMS). No matter what I do, I constantly dread social events, including teaching face-to-face and lecturing, talking to students, office hours, department meetings, etc. I begin to worry about the fall semester, so much so that I have a constant upset stomach and panic attacks as early as the end of July. But I go to work.

Despite my therapies, self-management techniques, and CBT exposure, forcing myself into anxiety-producing situations is emotionally exhausting. It’s a battle to teach class, to lecture, and to organize and work with small groups. It’s a battle to talk to people and to smile and be friendly. It’s a battle to interact and to stop second-guessing myself enough to speak or act. It’s a battle to stop replaying every interaction and hiding my face in my hands over the stupid words I used or comments I made, or the comments I should have made but did not. This “post-event rumination” is common in people with social anxiety, and “even in situations that weren’t that bad, they [the anxious people] will interpret them in a negative way, and identify weaknesses that they showed” (Montopoli, 2016).

Every day I go home emotionally exhausted—drained, spent, with nothing left. I can barely make dinner and eat with my kids, barely walk the dog. On a day when students laughed at me in class, or someone asked a question I felt I did not answer well, or I did not moderate a discussion well, or I watched micro-aggressions and did not know how to step in—on days like that, it hurts to breathe. At these points, additional interactions are impossible, and any reduction in anxiety-provoking experiences is welcome. So, I was secretly thrilled when classes went online. This removed many of the stressors that caused me intense fatigue, and it led me to find my pleasure in teaching.

Situation

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic turned the world upside down and altered the way businesses and schools run. In early 2020, colleges began taking drastic measures—sometimes in one leap, sometimes in a series of daily alterations to plans—to move courses from the standard in-person, on-campus format, to an alternative, online delivery method. Thousands of students were sent home or told to stay home after spring break, and courses were completed in virtual environments (Mangan, 2020; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021).

Teachers of all types struggled to shift to new teaching delivery methods. Some had experience and excellent guidance, while others struggled to create online courses that continued to deliver the

main learning goals, keep people safe, and slow the spread of this new, deadly virus (June, 2020; Hodges et. al., 2020). In limited time frames, most college professors worked diligently to complete semesters as best they could. Moving a course online mid-semester is nothing like intentionally creating an online course, so results were not ideal (Hodges et. al., 2020).

In this environment, stress was high. Professors, schools, and students were concerned about health and safety, grades, jobs, and successfully completing the semester. With increased, persistent stress, burnout often follows. Burnout “comes about when exhaustion replaces feeling energized, cynicism replaces being hopeful and involved, and ineffectiveness replaces feeling efficacious” (Ghadnizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2014). While the episodic stress of the pandemic stretched into weeks and months, Zoom fatigue became common (June, 2020), and professors and students struggled through summer semesters and prepared for an uncertain fall. Most people seemed to struggle with the move to online education, which left me feeling out of sync. In the move to online education, I was able to beat burnout and (re)find my joy in teaching.

Moving Online

As a college instructor, I, like most of us, was glued to my email and phone updates in March 2020 as my school delayed spring break by a week, then another, and then moved the rest of the semester to an alternative, virtual learning format.

Secretly, I was thrilled. Teaching online is ideal for me. I can teach, connect with students, and minimize personal interactions by staying at home.

My university gave us two weeks to move our courses online. With the shift came a flood of suggestions for resources to help professors. I received daily emails from the school about how to use new technologies, the updated classroom plans, the safety protocols on campus, and how to help struggling students. I received emails from publishers, publications, and organizations promoting webinars and free and paid resources to help with the successful transfer to teaching online. The rate of information coming at me was overwhelming.

Luckily, I taught my course online before, so I had resources ready to quickly adapt my course to an asynchronous, online format. Despite all of the new resources available, I decided simple was better and streamlined my course, focusing on the most essential learning outcomes and the assignments I thought would give students the best learning experiences for the time and effort put in (Hodges et.al., 2020; Lederman, 2020). I decided the spring semester format shift was not the time to try new delivery methods or assignments, or to experiment and explore. My goal was to help students complete the semester as successfully as possible.

Students were under significant stress. Some moved home to areas without reliable internet access, and others went home to uncertain or unsafe environments (Redden, 2020; June, 2020; Means & Neisler, 2020). According to a Digital Promise survey of over 900 students, only 35 percent of students had taken two or more online courses, and 43 percent had never taken an online course (Means & Neisler, 2020). With students’ strong preference for in-person education, at the start of the pandemic, most had never had a fully online course schedule (Means & Neisler, 2020; June, 2020). Some of my students who had never taken an online class suddenly had four or five online courses to navigate. Students were suddenly managing the pandemic, different living situations, and potential job losses in addition to navigating learning management systems more extensively than ever. Some had challenges managing time, new learning models, and assignment deadlines (Lederman, 2020a; Lederman, 2020b; Means & Neisler, 2020). Concerns about grades were high (Lederman, 2020a; Means & Neisler, 2020). A significant proportion of students dislike and know they have difficulty with the online format.

For my students, my role was support in addition to teacher. I posted weekly videos, provided written updates, and held Zoom meetings. I offered students understanding and flexibility. I responded quickly, positively, and, hopefully, with caring and concern to the constant stream of emails flooding in. I welcomed and encouraged that contact. Suddenly, because of the virtual format, I had the emotional energy to connect with and care for students.

Standing in front of a classroom has been a nightmare for me since I started teaching. Because of social anxiety and extreme introversion, having all eyes on me, the instructor, is terrifying and causes me to freeze. The freeze reaction to fear has recently gained attention as an addition to the flight or fight response to frightening and stressful situations (Schmidt et. al., 2009; Seltzer, 2015). When I freeze, I forget what I am going to say. I get distracted by students laughing, yawning, or looking confused. I never feel like I am getting the point across, speaking clearly, or making sense. I do not feel like I am helping or that the students are learning anything, which is exhausting. To minimize my time in front of the classroom, I create an active learning environment where students are working in groups, working on tasks or projects, role playing, and/or learning from each other.

The focus on active learning where students are participants in their learning rather than my being the sage on the stage helps moderate some of my anxiety and allows me to focus on my strengths as a teacher, which are more one-on-one interactions and showing empathy and caring. Following the literature on caring instructors (Strachan, 2020; Walker & Gleaves, 2016), after years of trying to fit myself into the stereotype of the stern, strict teacher, I found that I fit with the characteristics of caring teachers: “listening to students, showing students empathy, supporting students and their learning, setting high expectations of students and their behaviors, praising students when appropriate, and showing concern for students’ personal lives” (Strachan, 2020). When interacting with students in small groups and one-on-one, I try to build relationships that are encouraging and supportive to help students learn and succeed by emphasizing trust, acceptance, individual attention, and authenticity. It is a good teaching method, and it also fits with my personality.

In addition to having sound pedagogy, in the active classroom I enjoy my students as people, both one-on-one and in small groups. When I talk to a small group, I more often feel that I answer students’ questions and make connections. I love learning their stories and knowing who they are, where they come from, and their goals for the future. I try to remember personal details, such as a child, a puppy, or a trip, to ask about later. I like helping students one-on-one; I can see their understanding and skills grow over the course of the semester. I like building relationships and being a source of positive growth for them. I work hard to build a classroom culture in which students develop confidence in skills where they typically feel weak (mainly writing and public speaking). These aspects of teaching that I enjoy help to build rapport with students, which is an essential move toward increasing student learning and increasing professor satisfaction with the job according to Grantiz et.al. (2009).

Still, these caring, personal interactions cost me dearly in terms of emotional energy as an introvert and a socially anxious person. As is typical with social anxiety, my meta-thoughts while with students are extensive—relax my arms to increase approachability, show my palms to increase trust and vulnerability, and listen more to show patience and interest. I try to listen more than I speak and answer quickly and in a way that does not place blame, offend, or sound negative. These are things I want to do to be a good teacher, but they cost me more than I can give.

I have less anxiety and more energy teaching online from behind a screen. Following best practices in online education (e.g., Darby, 2020; Bessette, Chick, & Friberg, 2020), I make short videos each week, talking to students about the previous week, the current week, and what is next. I make general comments similar to how I would in class and respond to questions that arise via email, if appropriate, for the entire class. As I have created these videos, I have gotten over my fear of watching myself and found freedom in the ability to be seen without being seen. I can re-record when I make a

mistake or forget something, which eliminates much of the meta-thinking about my mistakes that occurs in the classroom. The screen barrier allows me to present my friendly and encouraging face without the immediate inter-personal feedback that causes my anxiety to flare.

With less anxiety and more emotional energy, I spend my time interacting with students via email or Zoom. As is true for many introverts, writing is easy for me; I prefer and enjoy writing to students versus talking to them in-person because I have time to think and revise. Zoom still causes anxiety, but the virtual is still easier than in-person for me. I end the day without the exhaustion of in-person teaching and feel more successful at being a caring instructor. I love setting up online resources, planning the best learning situations I can, and responding to and working with students on projects. I find ease and comfort behind the screen. I guess, second guess, and judge myself less, and I enjoy my students more. Working from home has suddenly reduced my guilt over being so insecure, over not being the teacher I want to be, and over not being a dynamic lecturer.

For me, COVID-19 has been a work blessing. I feel rested and rejuvenated in a way I have not since I started teaching full-time five years ago. I am able to put forth the best of my teaching self without draining all of my emotional energy. In part, this has to do with the idea of job-person fit mismatches, which often lead to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). With more emailing and less face-to-face, in-class contact, there is, for me, a better fit between “the needs of *the self* and the need to meet the needs of *others*” (Lysova et. al., 2019). Although I often feel guilty for feeling this way and believe other people do not feel similarly, the truth is that in-person teaching leads to my feeling “overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Having summers off has helped me avoid burnout, but I have frequently wondered how long I can teach in-person without significant personal cost. COVID-19 has done for me what Lysova et. al. call giving individuals a way to “craft or re-design jobs in ways that optimize their sense of prosocial impact” (2019) so that the job satisfies the particular dispositional signature. When COVID-19 forced everyone home, I sighed with relief at the permission to stay home, email, avoid in-person contact, and interact in ways that better suit my introverted, anxious nature.

My reaction to being sent home for the pandemic feels like a deep, dark secret. I feel guilty and ashamed every time I hear or read about my colleagues wishing to get back to the classroom or missing the in-person interactions since I would prefer to stay at home. As the pandemic continues, many people have published articles about their fear of returning to the classroom. Like most, I am afraid of the COVID-19 virus, but my reasons for wanting to stay at home are deeper and more personal.

Are there other people out there like me? A common stereotype laughs at people who never leave their homes and instead order food and supplies and work online. I know there are writers, introverts, bloggers, and other people with anxiety, agoraphobia, depression, and similar difficulties who speak of our lives. We share our experiences and find, with some surprise, that out there, hidden and alone, are other people like us. Some people have expressed increased feelings of togetherness and community during the pandemic (Newman, 2020), partly because technology allows us to connect in safe ways. Maybe this is true in college teaching? If so, then maybe there are more of us. I do not wish social anxiety on anyone, but solidarity with others like me would be valuable. Even if I am the only one, perhaps others will understand and be more understanding of colleagues and students who find comfort and rejuvenation in the COVID-19 workplace.

Caring Pedagogy Online

During the pandemic, being called to be caring, flexible, and available has added additional stress for many professors, resulting in what one called “Panic-gogy’ (for panic + pedagogy)” (Kamenetz, 2020). According to one study:

Instructors should just be mindful that while they are enacting caring behaviors, they avoid burnout...even while demonstrating caring behaviors toward others, instructors can become fatigued. Being proactive about burnout can help an instructor avoid the emotional and physical toll that sometimes results in showing care for others (Strachan, 2020).

This call to be caring fits well with my personality and teaching methods, and in the virtual environment, it actually *reduces* my potential for burnout and my emotional exhaustion. Most current research suggests that building connections, relationships, and interactions online is the best way to practice online education (Darby, 2020; Hodges, 2020). Doing this takes just as much time as connecting with students in person, but for me, it is a safer and more satisfying way to connect. Sproles writes:

I often think we underemphasize the stress of face-to-face teaching’s regular public speaking commitments—something many people fear more than death. Technology relieves some of the stress of public speaking and increases our options for teaching and communicating with students in and out of the classroom. (2018)

For me, this is certainly true. Online teaching has allowed me to practice caring, empathetic teaching in a much healthier way. I can be the teacher I want to be without completely draining my emotional energy stores. Eliminating the public speaking aspect of teaching eases my anxiety. Then, I can read and reply promptly to student emails. Students frequently tell me, as do my sons attending college, that professors do not respond to emails. Whether it is a question about a class or advice about course registration, students are left waiting, often for days or longer, for an email response from a professor. My department chair occasionally sends out emails asking faculty to respond to student emails. This is surprising as email is an easy way for me to communicate with students, and prompt responses demonstrate caring for and consideration of student needs.

Even when I tell students the limitations on my email responses (not after 8 pm, usually not on Saturdays), students often seem surprised at my prompt email responses and my queries about their lives. They often thank me for the response, as if it is unusual. Especially now during the pandemic, when a student indicates they have been affected by COVID-19, I ask about that aspect of their lives. I ask how they are doing, if they feel okay or better, and how family members are doing. Sometimes these questions are ignored, but frequently students tell me how their mom is doing in the hospital or how they are feeling after being diagnosed. My role in these email exchanges is usually just to listen; students, like all of us, often just need to be heard. They are often overwhelmed, may feel lonely or alone, and need someone to listen, just like what often happens in or after in-person classes.

The difference for me is the barrier of the screen, and the ability to think through by typed responses provides me with the space I need to demonstrate caring without draining myself. I provide comments expressing empathy and tell students I am here to help if I can. All of these actions follow what Walker and Gleaves call “a relationship at the center” (2015). In their definition, I find my way to teaching; with the relationship at the center, “the participants showed the most explicit attention to relational matters and reflected critically one very nuance of their behavior if it could feasibly affect their students (Walker & Gleaves, 2015).

The relational nature of teaching comes naturally to me after raising four sons. I was strongly influenced by *The Available Parent* by John Duffy (2014), which emphasized maintaining the relationship over all else. Through the work of Chick Moorman (1998), I learned about and applied “words which praise, nurture and empower children.” Moorman writes:

Your choice of words, and your style of communication, are critical to the self-esteem, emotional health and personal empowerment of your children. There is an undeniable link between the words you speak and the attitudes and outcomes children create in their lives. By intentionally selecting words and phrases that build self-esteem and encourage self-responsibility, you can empower your children and enhance their effectiveness as capable, caring human beings. (1998)

I have applied many of these lessons learned from parenting to teaching. From my oldest son who spent the first five years of his life screaming with anxiety, I learned to be present, stay with him, help him work through his fear, and wait. Sometimes, as Duffy (2014) claims, being available is all you can do. My second son had brain tumors that led to intractable epilepsy; over several years, we dealt with a series of brain surgeries, seizures, rages caused by a malfunctioning brain, impulsivity, and social problems. He taught me to never give up, to search for answers, to be present, to accept people where they are, and to help lead them to a better place. I carefully chose words, following Moorman’s (1998) advice, to prevent him from seeing himself as damaged or incapable while guiding him to thoughtful action, reduced impulsivity, and acceptable behavior.

Being a mother was my calling, but many of the needs of students are the same as the needs of children. First, the relationship is primary. My boys taught me to never give up on them and to always search for answers. I can do the same with my students: be present, be available, and ask but do not push.

Second, never belittle or embarrass. I hear stories of students being taunted or laughed at in class, embarrassed, or shamed. I believe this does nothing but teach students to be silent and afraid. So much of in-person teaching is exhausting to me because I am always double-checking what I say before I say it, considering how it will sound, and how I can rephrase to be more accepting of where the person is and guide them gently to the next place, versus saying ‘No, that’s wrong.’ This is the difference between, ‘No, that’s wrong,’ and ‘How would it sound if?’ or ‘That’s an interesting idea, have you considered...’ My fear of distancing students, negating their experience, or reinforcing negative ideas they have about themselves keeps me anxious about each word I say and how I say it. Teaching online via email or video gives me more space to make those communication decisions because I can think about them before I type them, re-read what I wrote or re-record a video, and decide the best way to guide a student toward success. The space to think and respond eases my anxiety.

After the relationship and words, stories are important. My students are all interesting people with stories and struggles, goals, hopes, and dreams. They have backgrounds that draw me in like stories from my English literature background drew me in. I can relate to my business students through their histories, their present situations, and their hopes for the future but I have trouble relating to analysis of spreadsheets or distribution management. Again, the distance of the screen versus face-to-face gives me space to listen and respond.

Being able to stand behind the mask of the computer screen via recorded videos, emails, or video calls allows me some manner of emotional protection. I participate and express myself. I try to help others and express caring, but it does not drain my emotional energy. Even answering emails at night or on the weekend is relatively easy since I have confidence in my writing, in addition to more time to think, meaning I can answer and put the interaction aside without ruminating so that there is

little expense to myself. I end a work day and a work week having found more pleasure in my teaching. When I am not so emotionally drained, I am able to care more for my students. The pandemic has forced us into unique situations and challenges, but technology allows me this option to become a more successful and fulfilled professor. Krishnamurthy (2020) says, “Preparing our students to succeed in this environment will be important”, and acknowledging and valuing students and teachers alike who succeed and thrive in the virtual environment is important, as well.

Teaching online means bringing my caring pedagogy to classes without the extensive dread, post-contact negative self-reassessment, and complete emotional fatigue. I build upon my mothering history to incorporate many other suggestions for building community and effective online teaching (Darby, 2020; Dietz-Uhler & Hurn, 2013; Forbes, 2020). The question looms, however: How do I take this back to the classroom?

Epilogue: Moving Forward

My other deep secret is that I dread the return to the classroom at the end of the pandemic. Of course, I want the disease to end, I want people to stop dying, and in some ways, I want a return to normal. I dread returning to the face-to-face classroom, however. I hope for a permanent increase in online or hybrid courses.

The hybrid course model with synchronous Zoom meetings is a space I am still trying to navigate. Some days, the online lectures I have prepared to replace the in-class activities are easier since I speak only to black squares. I cannot see students’ faces (their choice), their expressions, or their movements, which allows me to focus on the content and not my continual self-doubt. In some ways, however, Zoom classes are just as anxiety-producing. Asking questions and waiting awkwardly while no one answers is pure torture, and I end many class sessions by banging my head on the desk in failure and self-doubt. In other ways, Zoom classes are successful, particularly the breakout rooms where I can drop in and hear students talking like they would during in-class small groups. The breakout rooms also allow me to interact in the small group, person-to-person environment with which I am more comfortable. I have hope that hybrid or synchronous classes will be less anxiety-producing in the future.

Despite all of my reflection on my teaching style, my severe social anxiety, and the pedagogy of caring and online teaching, I do not know how this will help me return to the classroom. The pandemic has certainly reinforced the value of being a caring teacher—students need this, and it seems that higher education in general has made more room for the caring instructor. Perhaps that will ease some of my self-doubt and anxiety that I am doing it wrong or will be found out by other professors.

Still, I know I will be teaching three in-person classes next fall, and already my stomach is roiling and panic is grabbing at my throat. Maybe for me, the ultimate secret of the pandemic will be that I found my best teaching online where I can be the teacher I want to be without ruining myself. In the meantime, I will believe more strongly in the power of caring teaching and take that back to the classroom.

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