

The Online Professor Today: From Isolation and Depression to Connected and Thriving

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ABSTRACT: The online professor today is part of a high-risk group of workers experiencing adverse physical and mental symptoms that were unknown a decade ago. Depression, isolation, divorce, diabetes, antisocial behavior, PTSD, chronic pain, and even suicide is among crises happening now within this population segment once highly revered, yet few studies exist that determine how quickly the declination is occurring and if remedies from mainstream healthcare professionals are being offered; and if so, the degree of healing. Amelioration is often approached from an opposite perspective—meaning, change the behavior and the mindset change follows suit, as modeled by Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, and Kaplan. New research, innovation, and application shows there is a surprising disconnect for achieving long-term and fulfilling change, in contrast to practiced methods in conventional healthcare. Subsequently, this research posits that change begins first with the mind, and after we better understand how identities and beliefs produce automated habits, behaviors once hazardous can be transformed into health and happiness.

Keywords: Online professor, Depression, Conventional healthcare

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1. AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH ABOUT A SURPRISING POPULATION SEGMENT

College professors today are both fragile and hardy. Still, recent studies show that more than 50% of married college professors, particularly those who teach in homebased online environments, will divorce. Increasing numbers will develop physical and mental health issues. This group of educated professionals may seem an unlikely segment of the U.S. population to generate abysmal statistics, yet it is a combination of biology and psychology, brought about by the stress of the profession, that transforms these unwitting circumstances into unfortunate reality. Further, due to the rise of online universities, fueled by the growing demand of students seeking to earn a degree from home, combined with workplace shifts because of COVID-19, qualified faculty are being aggressively sought by universities to fill teaching positions—often virtual and temporary. Therefore, as applicants are hired into the talent pool and begin experiencing related stress and isolation, cracks in relationships, poor health, and depression will systemically rise [1]. This research explores the symptoms of professional re-posturing and recent changes in patterns that contribute to psychological-

sociological behaviors that lead to inappropriate, awkward, and even tragic consequences. However, there is good news! Better health and healing already exist within each of us—and healthcare professionals and university leaders focused on wellness are positioned to contribute.

2. ADAPTING TO VIRTUAL TEACHING DURING COVID-19

While online teaching positions, telemedicine, and scores of jobs in various industries boast advantages, conveniences, and freedoms--and as virtual work remains essential due to ongoing access challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, many online professors, such as the subject in the case study, will develop feelings of isolation and disconnection from peers, family, friends, and even their students [2]. Some professors claim to lose track of time and their surroundings as hours pass. Many teachers find themselves working odd hours in the day and consequently they forget to stand, stretch, move about, or even eat. When they do, food choices are typically fast because these are more convenient and less time consuming.

Online teaching is 24/7 (because there is no time clock), thus many online teachers feel perpetually stressed and controlled by university policies and deadlines that extend beyond classroom duties, and for adjuncts there are no guarantees for continuous teaching assignments. This issue alone is worrisome, and consequently, more than 30% of respondents shared their sleep cycle is significantly impacted because of uncertainty in online teaching. Data shows there is a hunger for ways to manage time, develop a happier and healthier lifestyle while performing exceptionally as an online teacher. These authors polled an assorted mix of online teachers and

performed a case study—and the following information came to light.

3. ABOUT THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The survey instrument was crafted by these writers and distributed using two social media outlets to a targeted audience of faculty members who teach online as ten relevant questions in a five-point Likert Scale format using Survey Monkey as a convenience sampling for data collection and analysis. Respondents participated consensually, anonymously, and were demographically broad-brush in makeup [3]. No specific college or university was targeted because of IRB limitations. The number of clustered responses were sufficiently revealing with outliers considered to make reasonable assumptions in support of information provided in this article. The receipt of double-digit No Opinion responses (not shown) was compelling, but not useful for this study. While the instrument was not validated prior, data corroborated with previously published materials, some cited in this piece, strongly indicate that results obtained are valid and reliable. Because online teaching is new in the industry, a paucity of journalistic or scientific studies have been conducted that target this growing population segment to identify ill health effects that occur. Consequently, responses from the survey clearly show a need to pursue both short-term and longitudinal research into this area to best determine how healthcare professionals can provide wellness options and methods that ameliorate adverse symptoms shared within this group. Six from the ten responses from the questionnaire are shown below.

3.1 What Our Respondents Shared

1. My physical health and well-being have improved over time after becoming an online teacher.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 29%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 35%

2. Teaching online has negatively impacted my food choices.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 35%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 43%

3. I feel more socially connected and grounded as an online teacher compared to teaching in face-to-face environments.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 22%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 58%

4. Teaching online has negatively impacted my sleep cycle.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 32%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 49%

5. I feel less stressed teaching online than in face-to-face classroom environments.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 46%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 33%

6. Teaching online has negatively impacted by ability to exercise or move my body daily.

Strongly Agree/Agree: 46%

Strongly Disagree/Disagree: 46%

4. YOU CAN FEEL BETTER, WORK BETTER, LIVE BETTER! A CASE STUDY

In a case study recently conducted, the subject, an online professor had physical manifestations that were associated with the perceived stress they experienced daily: weight gain, fatigue, brain fog, poor sleep, and generalized anxiety in relation to the demands of their job [4]. Upon further investigation, the subject's identity played a crucial role in how they perceived their life situation [5]. Most individuals are unable to change the external demands put upon them and consequently seek out solutions that are finite and lasting rather than a quick fix [6]. The lasting solution included a deep dive into the subconscious mind of the subject to understand the lens from where they were viewing their life.

The subject in this study believed they were responsible for the happiness of those around them, including their own happiness. This identity/belief was established forty years ago and has created a repeat-stress-loop that influenced how they perceived daily tasks and situations [7]. The body can recover from days or several weeks of a repeat-stress-loop; however, when the stress response continues over years or decades, the body will begin to manifest disease, thereby negatively impacting the subject's overall health and well-being.

By putting other people's happiness ahead of their own for so long, the case subject embodied this repeat stress loop that ignited tension the minute anyone around them was displeased. After the subject saw how their decision of people pleasing was established to keep them safe, yet keeping them stuck, it was a moment of awakening and true understanding of what no longer served them. This identity and unwitting distraction negatively impacted their capacity to meet online university deadlines, enjoy student interactions, and maintain a work/ life balance making the subject perceive what was happening to them far more glum than actual reality [8].

The survey results demonstrate how identities and beliefs can positively or negatively impact health and well-being. Survey question six illustrates how an identity/belief can inform perception. While 46 percent of participants did not feel online teaching negatively impacted their ability to move their body daily, 46 percent felt online teaching was a hindrance to daily exercise. The two responses side by side read as a contradiction. Results illustrate how personal perspectives allow individuals to view their circumstances as either negative or positive. Survey question five also demonstrated closely distributed percentages, with 46 percent of participants agreeing that online teaching was less stressful than face-to-face classroom environments. The remaining 33 percent of participants agreed that online teaching was not less stressful,

and presumably more stressful than face-to-face. Again, identity/belief appears to inform participant's perspective and whether they perceive online teaching as stressful or not [9].

5. THE METHOD, THE METRIC, THE MODIFICATION

Prior to the intervention, the subject experienced afternoon brain fog 7/10 (0- no brain fog and 10- complete brain fog) that slowed down their productivity and contributed to their overall exhaustion. In addition, the subject rated their energy level 3/10 (0- no energy and 10- fully energized), quality of sleep 4/10 (0- insomnia and 10- fully rested), and anxiety 8/10 (0- no anxiety and 10- consumed by anxiety) prior to the intervention. After changing their identity to I am a participant in the outcome that needs to be done, instead of, I am responsible for everything and everyone's happiness all at once, the subject lost 7 pounds in forty-five days initially, and this personal pursuit is ongoing, afternoon brain fog decreased (3/10), energy increased (8/10) sleep improved (8/10), and anxiety lessened (2/10).

By default, conventional medicine has taught patients to view their body as separate compartments that work independently to create personal wellness. Therefore, it is understandable that online teachers may not connect their unsatisfactory health state (if that is their situation) to their personal identity and beliefs. According to Lipton [10], "Just like a single cell, the character of our lives is determined not by our genes but by our responses to the environmental signals that propel life" (p. prologue xiv). Dr. Lipton, a Stanford School of Medicine stem cell biologist between 1987 and 1992, was famous for his contribution to epigenetics. Lipton discovered that environment controlled the behavior of a cell, ultimately turning genes on and off. This discovery ran counter to established theory that genes-controlled life, and unfortunately, humans had no control over their "genetic-fate" [11]. Most importantly, Lipton's work provided scientific evidence that the mind and body are not only interconnected, but that identities and beliefs (environment) can influence gene expression, and therefore directly influence our health and wellbeing [10].

6. IN CONCLUSION—OR THE BEGINNING?

Teaching is not only a passion and a noble calling, but it also provides financial attainment for a lifestyle that directly impacts a professor's health and well-being. As the responsibilities of online teachers pile on, often without corresponding pay, it is important to consider how these demands affect their mental, emotional, and physical health in the long-term. The notion of quick-fix, short-term solutions is no longer sufficient or effective. Online teachers must start thinking beyond blood tests, and prescription medications to maintain their health and well-being. They must be proactive and consider outside-of-the-box solutions with guidance from their healthcare provider or wellness coach. When an individual aligns their subconscious identity with their

conscious health behaviors, these changes positively impact their health and create lasting change that remains intact forever.

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