

# Keeping an Eye Out for Opportunities in Challenging Times



Generally, I work hard at seeing the glass half full—always looking out for potential opportunities to innovate in the face of challenges; or as my mother would

have (endlessly) encouraged me, to “make lemonade out of lemons.” I’ve tried hard to look for such openings during the pandemic years asking, “How can we continue to do our research in a rigorous but altered fashion?” or “How do we alter our research design and approach to answer our questions when we have barriers to accessing participants?” or “How has access to nutrition (education) changed?” and finally, “What might we do better if we are forced out of our own backyards or go-to ways of conducting our work?”

Good examples of that kind of entrepreneurial outlook are in this month’s issue of JNEB. In Wilson et al,<sup>1</sup> I was inspired to learn of “micro-pantries,” or neighborhood food assistance outlets, often compared to Little Free Libraries, where individuals or groups in communities and neighborhoods build small structures to leave or take foods and household supplies, as needed. Little Free Pantries precede the pandemic, originating in 2016,<sup>2</sup> and most recently have contributed substantially to efforts to support individuals experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. A finding reported in this article highlights that the user group for micro-pantries changed during the pandemic to include a broader range of individuals who lost employment,

those who were concerned about exposure to COVID-19, and those who lost transportation needed to access food. Investigating lesser-studied avenues, such as micro-pantries, illustrates the myriad channels of food assistance that can impact food and nutrition status and highlights a potentially different set of individuals who need access to food assistance but who may not utilize more formal food banks.

Another example of an exciting pivot in response to pandemic restrictions is the *Flint Families Cook* program, which successfully transformed an in-person cooking and nutrition education program for children (*Flint Kids Cook*) into a virtual family-focused program in Flint, Michigan.<sup>3</sup> Through this program innovation, they demonstrated effective program reach as well as improvements in perceived self-efficacy for cooking and consumption of fruits and vegetables and in nutrition knowledge. Responses such as this (i.e., a change in delivery strategy from an in-person to a virtual platform) open the door for broader participation in the community and for enhanced reach across communities. Thus, responses that were necessitated by difficult circumstances provoked an innovation that may enhance future research and program implementation efforts.

Additional examples of productive adaptations are being reported in many other studies. For example, standardized instruments usually administered in person are being converted into instruments that are administered via online platforms. Such adaptations change who can

respond and how participants are recruited and also have the potential for greater geographical reach and inclusion. Furthermore, qualitative studies are increasingly being conducted online and are reaching large numbers of participants with greater diversity and inclusion.

Thus, while the times we live in have caused incredible angst and have limited productivity in some areas, these same circumstances have prodded us into a new creativity that has implications for our work that are well beyond pandemic times. Maybe that “lemonade” coaching was for the best as it helped to teach me how to look at challenges and think about ways to positively influence work in the here and now, and also for the future.

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## REFERENCES

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2. Little Free Pantry. The mini pantry movement activates neighbor engagement with food insecurity. <https://www.littlefreepantry.org>. Accessed February 14, 2022.
3. Saxe-Custack A, Egan S. *Flint Families Cook*: virtual cooking and nutrition program for families. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2022;54:359–363.