Coping With Food Insecurity Among People Seeking Food Assistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Whitney Fung Uy, PhD, CPH, wfunguy@centerfornutrition.org, Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition; Mayra Crespo-Bellido, RDN, PhD, Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition; Heewon Gray, PhD, RDN, University of South Florida; Lauri Wright, PhD, RDN, FADA, University of North Florida; David Himmelgreen, PhD, University of South Florida; Dinorah Martinez Tyson, PhD, University of South Florida

Background: Coping strategies (CS) to manage crises such as a pandemic or food insecurity (FI) are markers of resilience and potential protective factors that may support stability and promote individuals’ well-being.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to identify CS among people seeking emergency food assistance (EFA) during the COVID-19 pandemic and compare the strategies between people that sought assistance for the first time before or during the pandemic.

Study Design, Settings, and Participants: Guided by the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, in-depth interviews (n=36) were conducted to explore CS of participants seeking EFA at food distribution sites in West Central Florida between November 2020 and July 2021.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: Applied thematic analysis was conducted to identify emergent themes.

Results: Participants reported strategies such as reducing food purchasing, finding “helpful” pantries that provided preferred foods, meal-planning and freezing foods, seeking social support, and changing their mindset. Six emergent themes described their experiences coping with FI: (1) normalizing restricted food intake, (2) stretching food dollars, (3) realizing that pantries were an overrated safety net, (4) maximizing pantry food utilization, (5) experiencing FI with added pandemic and non-pandemic stressors, (6) envisioning a hopeful future post-COVID-19. A major difference between the two populations was that new visitors perceived their situation as temporary and things would be “back to normal” soon, whereas for “before COVID” participants, seeking EFA was a crucial, long-term solution that involved innovative strategies such as bartering and “food bank shopping” to ensure they never ran out of food. Together, these CS and themes describe how people seeking EFA actively manage multiple stressors to improve FI and financial stability.

Conclusion: Study findings can inform interventions at EFA sites by incorporating concepts like motivational interviewing to support participants through stressful times.

By identifying CS that may promote food security (eg, culinary skills and food assistance information seeking), people seeking EFA may be able to better utilize pantry foods to have sufficient and healthy food.

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Development of a Food Waste Knowledge, Attitudes, and Motivations Questionnaire for Adolescents

Joanna Fung, BS, joanna.fung@sjus.edu, San José State University; Jinan Banna, PhD, RD, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Yanyan Wu, PhD, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Giselle Pignotti, PhD, RD, San José State University; Susan Chen, PhD, San José State University

Background: How adolescents contribute to food waste has yet to be thoroughly studied, especially in home and restaurant environments. There is limited research on adolescent food waste knowledge and whether their actions are influenced by peers and family members.

Objective: To develop a valid and reliable questionnaire to assess food waste knowledge, attitudes, and motivations for adolescents.

Study Design, Settings, and Participants: The questionnaire was guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior and Self-Determination Theory. Development included item generation/adaptation and factor analysis (FA), as well as assessment of internal consistency and test-retest reliability. The questionnaire yielded 50 items and the scales included home, school, restaurant, throw, expire, compost, and relatability. Adolescents between the ages of 13-17 (n=70) took two identical online questionnaires 15 days apart.

Measurable Outcome/Analysis: To test construct validity, a FA was conducted using Kaiser’s criteria, Scree plot, and varimax rotation. Cronbach’s alpha measured internal consistency. Test-retest reliability was assessed by conducting Pearson’s correlation. A p-value <0.05 determined significance.

Results: Through FA, the number of subscales identified in each scale are as follows: home (4), school (4), restaurant (3), throw (3), expire (2), compost (1), and relatability (2). Relatability (α=0.791, p<0.001) and compost (α=0.875, p<0.001) scales demonstrated good internal consistency. Six items were removed due to poor internal consistency. All scales, except restaurant (r= 0.229, p=0.121), demonstrated good to moderate test-retest reliability.

Conclusion: This valid and reliable questionnaire can be used by researchers and nutrition professionals as an assessment tool for existing food waste education programs or in the development of new programs and policies. To further improve internal consistency, more items should be added to each component identified in FA.

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