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# Stress of Erasmus students in Poland related to COVID-19. A study explaining the experiences of March 2020

## Stres studentów programu Erasmus w Polsce związany z COVID-19. Studium wyjaśniające doświadczenia z marca 2020

### ABSTRACT

The article explores the situation of Erasmus students staying in Poland during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and their stress related to COVID-19. The research is explanatory. It is based on the students' narrative explaining their situation and the stress associated with it. The article identifies the stress patterns of Erasmus students resulting from the pandemic and the lockdown. The following sources of stress were identified: lack of knowledge, insufficient information, information chaos, limitations imposed on social life, separation from relatives and friends, the need to make difficult decisions based on incomplete data, the virus itself, the health of friends and relatives belonging to risk groups, severe restrictions on a personal freedom, being "stuck" in a foreign country, transport problems and the inability to return home, an unprecedented and unexpected situation, a lack of predictability on a personal and global level, a cancellation of plans and uncertainty in the future, the risk of putting other people at risk. Stress reactions were physical (e.g. fever), behavioral (e.g. screaming) and cognitive (e.g. negative thinking). The following methods of coping with stress were used: positive thinking, humor, following the mind and not emotions, performing physical exercises, learning new things (e.g. playing an instrument, preparing dishes), planning and scheduling days, searching for reliable information and social support, limiting access to the media.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, SARS-Cov-2, coronavirus, lockdown, stress, stress management, Erasmus, students.

### STRESZCZENIE

W artykule przedstawiono sytuację studentów Erasmus przebywających w Polsce podczas wybuchu pandemii koronawirusa oraz ich stres powiązany z COVID-19. Badania mają charakter eksplanacyjny. Bazują na narracji studentów wyjaśniających ich sytuację oraz powiązany z nią stres. W artykule przedstawiono wzorce stresu przejawianego przez studentów Erasmus, wynikającego z pandemii oraz lockdownu. Zidentyfikowano następujące źródła stresu: brak wiedzy, niewystarczającą informację, chaos informacyjny, ograniczenia nałożone na życie społeczne, separację od krewnych oraz przyjaciół, konieczność podejmowania trudnych decyzji na bazie posiadanych niepełnych danych, samego wirusa, obawę o zdrowie bliskich osób należących do grup ryzyka, ostre ograniczenia wolności osobistej, „utknięcie” w obcym kraju, problemy transportowe i niemożliwość powrotu do domu, bezprecedensową i niespodziewaną sytuację, brak przewidywalności na poziomie osobistym i globalnym, anulowanie planów oraz niepewność przyszłości, ryzyko, wystawianie innych osób na ryzyko. Reakcje stresowe miały charakter fizyczny (np. gorączka), behawioralny (np. krzyk) oraz poznawczy (np. negatywne myślenie). Stosowano następujące metody radzenia sobie ze stresem: pozytywne myślenie, humor, podążanie za umysłem, a nie za emocjami, wykonywanie ćwiczeń fizycznych, uczenie się nowych rzeczy (np. granie na instrumencie, przygotowywanie potraw), planowanie i sporządzanie harmonogramów dni, poszukiwanie wiarygodnej informacji i wsparcia społecznego, ograniczanie dostępu do mediów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** COVID-19, SARS-Cov-2, koronawirus, lockdown, stres, zarządzanie stresem, Erasmus, studenci.

## INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the stress of international students who participated in the Erasmus program at Wrocław University of Economics and Business when the global pandemic of SARS-COV-2 broke out, and Poland introduced the national lockdown. The first COVID-19 patient was identified on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in a hospital in Zielona Góra. It was a man who had just arrived from Germany. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, rectors of all Wrocław universities, following the decision of Medical University, decided to cease all lectures and workshops from March 11<sup>th</sup>. From 15<sup>th</sup> Poland introduced a cordon sanitaire, consequently strictly limiting the possibilities of crossing the Polish borders. From March 20<sup>th</sup>, the Polish government introduced the state of epidemic.

The situation was unique and dangerous and, therefore, stress-inducing. Although it could affect everybody, some groups suffered from the problem more than the average person. This paper aims to explore the stress of one such group. Therefore it focuses on the stress of international students participating in the Erasmus program in Wrocław when the pandemic was endangering Poland and during the Polish national lockdown.

To relate to the SARS-Cov-2 induced stress, one has to refer to stress in general. Stress “can be defined according to: (a) the stimulus, (b) the response, (c) the stimulus-response concept”.

- (a) According to the stimulus: stress is the force or stimulus which acts on the individual and which leads to a tension.
- (b) According to the response: stress is the physiological or psychological response which an individual manifests in a stressful environment.
- (c) According to the stimulus-response concept: stress is the consequence of the environmental stimuli and the individual's idiosyncratic response. (Dolan, 2007, p. 22).

Therefore the COVID-related stress of the Erasmus students can be understood as:

- a) COVID itself causing lockdowns and other actions that induce the stress;
- b) the reactions of the psyche, or body, like panic, fever, screaming, etc.;
- c) The interaction between COVID-generated problems and individual students' responses.

“«Stress» is a term borrowed from engineering to describe a process in which an agent exerts a force on an object. Applied to humans [...], a stressor is a stimulus that challenges the body's homeostasis and triggers arousal” (Kolb & Whishaw, 2006, p. 607). The given definition is of type (a), specifying stress as stimuli. Forcing people to change their behavior in every public place is an example of that.

Stress is also perceived as (APA, n.d.):

the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave. For example, it may be manifested by palpitations, sweating, dry mouth, shortness of breath, fidgeting, accelerated speech, augmentation of negative emotions (if already being experienced), and longer duration of stress fatigue [...]

This definition is of type (b) and focused on reaction. Therefore, COVID-19-related stress can be described as being obsessed by the pandemic, by the worries about our families' health, and the physical effects of a long “staying at home” period.

“A brief definition of stress is «the non-specific response to all the demands made». This simple definition implies the interaction of the organism and the environment, whether it is another organism or the environment in which we move” (Dolan, 2007, p. 21). It can be “any demand, whether physical, psychological, external or internal, good or bad, produces an identical and stereotypical biological response within the organism” (Dolan, 2007, pp. 21-22). The COVID-19 causes many different demands both external and internal in character. The state-imposed restrictions can serve as an example of external demand. Nevertheless, many demands can be internal. Coping with loneliness and the internal processing of depressing information are examples.

“We feel some degree of stress whenever we are faced with demands or opportunities that require us to change in some manner” (Comer, 2007, p. 155). Of course, the pandemic elicited many stringent requirements. It induced many significant alterations, e.g., the changes in people's everyday routines.

“People who sense they have an ability and the resources to cope are more likely to take stressors in stride and respond constructively” (Comer, 2007, p. 155). The students can be expected to have better health resources. Still, as their life experience is lower, they probably do not possess as many “stress management procedures” as older people do. Moreover, the students have higher new-technology use skills; therefore, it is easier for them to find the necessary information and use electronic communication. From the other perspective, the students who stayed in Wrocław during the pandemic breakout and the lockdown lost most of their social resources, such as direct face-to-face contact with their friends and family members.

Emotional distress tends to shut down somebody's defenses against viruses and other pathogens, increasing vulnerability to infectious diseases such as cold and flu (Gray, 2007, p. 607). Therefore, the stress induced by SARS-Cov-2 may lead to getting flu or even to being infected by the COVID itself.

Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave. For example, it may be manifested by palpitations, sweating, dry mouth, shortness of breath, fidgeting, accelerated speech, augmentation of negative emotions (if already being experienced), and longer duration of stress fatigue. [...] By causing these mind-body changes, stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorder and disease and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life (APA, n.d.).

Therefore it can be expected that the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic causes a deterioration of the life quality of the whole population by the disadvantageous impact on their bodies and minds.

Stress “is a function of the interaction between an individual’s characteristics (e.g., experience, vulnerabilities, resources) and their context (e.g., historical moment, geography, cultural milieu)” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Therefore, the stress of the students of different nationalities can vary. Particular attention should be given to the role played by social life and interpersonal relations. For the extrovert nationalities accustomed to intense socializing, the restriction preventing them from meeting people can be more severe than for students in whose countries socializing a lot is not a custom. That means that even in the COVID situation, the stress of students can be different. For some of them, adaptation to a new condition, like following restrictions, will be easy, for some of them – more difficult.

Chronic stress can affect your health, causing symptoms from headaches, high blood pressure, and chest pain to heart palpitations, skin rashes, and loss of sleep (ADAA, n.d.). This kind of physical reaction can also be expected in the student’s cases.

## 1. METHOD AND RESPONDENTS

As the situation was new and unique, I decided to conduct a study of a qualitative character. Its purpose was to identify the stress sources, stress reactions, stress dynamics, and stress management methods of Erasmus students facing pandemic and limitations, and others being stuck in a foreign country. I chose the group of students participating in my “Stress Management” course as the lesson and workshop subject fitted in well with my research. The research was conducted on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, during the first “Stress Management” lesson conducted in the form of distant learning. The answers were collected via MS Teams assignments. Twenty-nine respondents, most of the students participating in the “Stress Management” lesson, took part in the research. The characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 1. The answers were coded to ensure their anonymity.

As presented in Table 1, most of the respondents were of Spanish, German, Belgian, and Turkish origin. The group consisted of participants who lived near Poland in countries

with similar cultures (like Germany and the Czech Republic). There were also respondents from rather more distant countries characterized by totally different languages and cultures, like Turkey.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents who took part in data collection on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Respondent no.	Age	Gender	Nationality	Citizenship
1	23	M	German	German
2	22	F	Spanish	Spanish
3	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
4	20	F	Belgian	Belgian
5	22	F	Czech	Czech
6	20	F	Belgian	Belgian
7	20	F	Belgian	Belgian
8	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
9	Not given	F	German	German
10	21	M	Spanish	Spanish
11	22	F	French	French
12	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
13	24	M	German	German
14	24	M	German	German
15	20	F	Turkish	Turkish
16	21	M	French	French
17	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
18	23	F	Spanish	Spanish
19	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
20	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
21	20	F	French	French
22	21	F	Spanish	Spanish
23	20	F	Spanish	Spanish
24	22	M	Spanish	Spanish
25	19	F	Spanish	Spanish
26	21	F	Belgian	Belgian
27	20	F	Turkish	Turkish
28	22	F	Turkish	Turkish
29	22	F	Turkish	Turkish

Abbreviations: M – male, F – Female.

Source: own research.

The respondents’ task was formulated in the following manner: “Describe your stress related to the COVID-related situation.” It was very general to give the respondents the opportunity to express themselves freely and, therefore, to gather as much information as possible. The collected answers were subject to content and narration analysis.

## 2. STRESS SOURCES AND STRESSORS

The analysis of the answers leads to several findings. It permits us to enumerate different aspects related to the COVID-19 stress of Erasmus participants studying in Poland. Firstly, the level of stress induced by SARS-Cov-2 and its consequences was linked to distance or closeness in time or space. There-

fore, the pandemic, even serious, located far away from the place of living, was not perceived to be endangering students, nor their families. But when it approached Poland where they were studying or their home country, where their families lived, it started to be perceived as perilous.

### 2.1 Time and location – distance aspect

The first aspect emerges from the analysis of content and narration related to the distance in time and space. The COVID-19 stress of respondents depended strongly on time and location with regard to the closeness to the pandemic. It means that if the SARS-Cov-2 was noticed away from the respondent country, the stress level was low, or there was no stress at all. The same applies to time. Just when the information about COVID-19 was emerging, it did not stress the respondents. But at the time when the pandemic was noticed in Europe and was getting to be the no. 1 subject in media, the stress level related to the pandemic rose significantly. Moreover, respondents who had the chance to know the “initial situation” (meaning – COVID problem of China) were more aware of and, therefore, more stressed by the pandemic than people without such knowledge.

At the first appearance of SARS-Cov-2, the respondents were not stressed at all. Respondent no. 28 said: “When the situation first came out, I have no idea about it will be this level.” The students pointed out that the information about the Coronavirus in China seemed to be irrelevant to them. Respondent no. 19 wrote: “Some information came to me while I was there in Wroclaw that there were many infections in China, but I never thought that as a consequence of this virus, Spain (and other countries) would close all its borders or that I would not even be able to go out on the streets except to go to the doctor, go to the supermarket or go to the pharmacy.” The 25<sup>th</sup> respondent detailed that approach: “Nowadays we are living a strange moment, which can be as well stressful. We reach this situation because a new illness called Coronavirus was originated a few months ago in China. First of all, we saw that disease from a very far perspective because it was all happening on a continent different from Europe. Consequently, we did not need to be so worried about it. However, the situation got worst, and now it was declared a Pandemic all over the world. When the virus started in China, my levels of stress were not very significant. I did not know exactly how the disease was like, but at first, I was not worried. I remember reading *Tweets* about the situation in China; most of them were jokes. Later, the virus stops being only a problem for Chinese people. Moreover, it started to be a problem for Italian and, therefore, for all of Europe. Then, my levels of stress slightly increased. Of course, I also used to read *Tweets* about jokes related to the virus, and I had fun, but with small signs of concern that I did not experience before. On the one hand, I was a little bit stressed because one of my classmates from the University was doing

an Erasmus in Rome, and I was worried about how she was managing the situation. On the other hand, I was becoming more and more stressed because of the number of people who were infected, and so the number of deaths was increasing in Italy. And finally, what I think that was the most stressful part of that moment was that if Italy was not able to manage the virus, other countries may not. I was especially concerned about Spain, my home country, and Poland, where I am doing an Erasmus.” Most of the students, as respondent no. 29, emphasized that distance made people not think seriously about COVID “I never thought that this virus, which started in China at first, would spread at this level worldwide. The Covid-19 virus appeared before I came to Poland for Erasmus, and it spread rapidly while I have been here and is now available in all European countries. Honestly, the virus is making me nervous right now. In the last week, I got stressed because of this.”

The 13<sup>th</sup> respondent was more aware of the danger from the beginning because one of his friends was influenced strongly by the situation: “Since the COVID Pandemic started, I went through different stressful situations. The first one occurred before the virus spread across the EU when my friend who went to visit her parents in the Hubei province in China told me she’s forced to stay in her house, and the whole province was sealed off from the rest of the country.” It proves that shorter geographical, space, or time distance made people more stressed by the situation. It particularly related to the moments when the virus was reaching their host country, Poland, or their homelands. The 14<sup>th</sup> respondent wrote: “My stress level is increasing on a daily basis. Three weeks ago, in Wroclaw, there were no signs of the extent of this catastrophe. Everybody, including me, was watching the news of the rapid evolution of Corona and thought: «it’s getting serious but no need to panic right now». Then the border closing happened on Saturday, and my mood switched completely!” A similar stress pattern was presented by the 13<sup>th</sup> respondent: “When the COVID virus finally reached Poland, the situation and still causes stress for me because of the uncertainty of the future.” The higher stress level was generated by the COVID-19 situation for the students who lived in the countries with a higher level of infections and deaths and most severe restrictions. Respondent no. 17 explained that: “At the moment I am in my home country, Spain. The situation here is complicated. The whole country is in a state of alarm, the borders have been closed, and the exits to the street have been restricted.”

To sum up, the stress related to the situation increased when the danger seems to be less distant, and therefore the perceived and real probability of the peril is more evident.

### 2.2 Knowledge, information, and communication

Analysis of responses proves that at the first stage of the pandemic and restrictions connected with it, most of the stress

emerged from problems with knowledge, information, and communication on different levels. The most general dimension is knowledge (or rather lack of it) about the Coronavirus itself. But, as seems to be more significant, communication about the situation at the country and University level was crucial. For the respondents, the biggest problems were caused by lack of information, excessive communication, unavailability of relevant information in English or in their native tongue, the discrepancy between information emerging from different channels (even official ones), and information arriving too late or becoming out of date very quickly.

One of the stress sources connected with the Coronavirus was lack of knowledge about SARS-Cov-2 was the insufficiency of reliable knowledge about it. The 7<sup>th</sup> respondent emphasizes: "First, what is Coronavirus? We don't really know. The symptoms are different for everyone. Some even have none. This non-precision is worrying." She also observed: "This epidemic is taking on a great scale and nobody knows for how long, nobody knows the scale it will take, nobody knows anything... The only information we have is statistics." Therefore the first knowledge and information problem linked to knowledge is connected with the global, general level, and the fact that it affects everybody. Moreover, the existing knowledge did not seem to reduce the stress level. It was actually otherwise, just because it turned out that COVID symptoms are mostly unspecific and could be attributed to many other illnesses. The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent commented: "In fact, symptoms such as fever, mucus, or cough are very common, and if anyone around us has them, we will probably think it is a coronavirus." The respondent no. 16 underlines the "[...] unknown aspect of the disease. Doctors know very little about this pathology. This idea is a source of stress because we face an unknown enemy. Something invisible. [...] As the disease is unknown, it is very difficult to imagine how many people will be infected by the virus."

Moreover, the existing knowledge on SARS-COV-2 was also perceived as stress-inducing: The 3<sup>rd</sup> respondent stated that: "There is more than enough data for people to perceive this situation as a threat to their own existence and that of their environment."

Nevertheless, the most stress-inducing problem relating to the information was its changeable character. Respondent no. 6 wrote: "[...] for me, the most stressful thing with this pandemic situation was the constantly changing information that we received."

Moreover, there were two types of information according to their character. One type seemed to be positive and aimed to calm down the emotions, and the second one was very negative and including a lot of non-confirmed news. The 3<sup>rd</sup> respondent commented: "Fake news can be widely distributed. The more alarming and worrying the story is, the more likely it will be. Right now, especially the youngest, they receive the information through the networks, and they

are absolutely uncontrollable, generating collateral damage to them. [...] There is a message that is being continuously transmitted in the media, and that is to try to normalize the situation. It's easy to say, but not so easy to do. That same message reaches people who take it consistently and responsibly, but also others who have thoughts like «they are not telling us the whole truth». The «what ifs» are bad advisers, behind one another appears and far from reassuring, they alter more." The 11<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: "What stresses me is all the hysteria around it because when all people are scared of something, it is easy to spread the fear to everyone and put aside the rational mind." The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent commented: "To sum up, fear of coronavirus is spreading faster than the virus itself."

Additionally, the stress was also induced by the changed shape of media behavior, with predominant content focusing on pandemic only. According to respondent no. 17: "The situation is stressful, only TV news about COVID appears on television, and it is almost never good. There are more and more sick people, and the days are getting longer."

Apart from the specific problems with uncertainty, which were formulated by respondents no. 10 and no. 21, there was a general feeling of insecurity. The 14<sup>th</sup> respondent complained: "Every day I wake up and nobody exactly knows what is going to happen today." Also, the 25<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: "What more stress me, is also the uncertainty of not knowing how the problem will develop." The 21<sup>st</sup> respondent backed that opinion: "First of all, the stress that I feel comes from the fact that this virus is new and that we don't know when the situation will get better."

On a personal level, one of the biggest stress-inducing problems was the uncertainty of the situation. The fact of the unknown duration of pandemic and restrictions with connection to their influence on students' lives was a serious stress source. The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent commented: "This year we are supposed to be happy and meeting people, not locked in a room. Also, we do not know when the quarantine will end, and this uncertainty makes me nervous". Respondent no. 21 wrote: "In France, we are in confinement for at least 15 days, but we don't know how long it will last. And this is very stressful."

There was a stressful aspect of the situation relating to the moment when the students were unable to get the relevant information in English or in their native tongue. The foreign people who were staying in Poland usually were not provided with information understandable for them. Respondent no. 16 explained: "First of all, all the information from the government, University or even shops was first in Polish with no translation in English. One of the most stressful things for me related to this was that we couldn't directly understand what was going to happen in a few hours. We needed to look for a translation or ask someone speaking Polish."

### 2.3 Decisions

The necessity of fast decision-making was the next important stress source. Mostly it was related to the alternatives: stay in Poland or go back to the home country. If the decision was to return to their homeland, the students faced another challenge, which was to decide about the means of transport. The decisions had to be made under conditions of high uncertainty and in a situation when conditions were changing very quickly. Moreover, as mentioned before, there were many problems relating to the information, which was the basis for decision-making. As the respondents are very young people, just beginning their adult life (see Table 1), for most of them, it was probably the first serious decision-making situation in their lives. The stress was not only connected with the difficulties in decision-making, but it was also present after the decisions when the respondents wondered if their choice was an optimal one.

The chaotic or changing information was a crucial problem that caused the students a lot of stress relating to decision-making. Respondent no 4 related: "My Belgian university asked us last Friday to stay in our Erasmus country if it was possible. Then we decided to stay there. [...] Then, on Monday, when all planes to Belgium were already canceled, our Belgian university told us to come back as quickly as possible. We called the Belgian embassy, which urged us too to come back. [...] I was still afraid to have taken or not the right decision, where would that bus bring, if German borders would be already closed or not, what would we do after being in Berlin, what would I do in Brussels because my father is asthmatic so I had to put myself strictly in quarantine..." Another Belgian student, the 26<sup>th</sup> respondent, added: "My university asked me to stay in Poland so, with my Belgian friends we decided to stay in Poland, the 4 of us. Two days pass and we receive an email from our Belgian University who changed mind and asked us to come back but... there were no planes anymore... [...] We had a big discussion with my Belgian friends, and at that moment, I began to feel the Stress little by little because I really didn't know what to do." The Turkish student, the 29<sup>th</sup> respondent, was also confused by the chaotic information she obtained, and, therefore, had a hard time trying to make the right decision: "I decided to stay calm and stay where I was without panicking. But I received mail several times a week from my school and the National Agency of Turkey, and they have told us something different every time. I realized that they were more panicked than I did, and I even thought of returning to my country because of the emails they had thrown."

Moreover, also the necessity of making the decisions in a very fast manner was very problematic. The 14<sup>th</sup> respondent described it: "In two hours I had to decide if I am staying in Wroclaw or going back to Germany."

The additional problem was, before or even after the decision, so many things we didn't know and, therefore, the

decision-maker did not know if her or his choice was right or wrong. Moreover, many students observed that many of their peers just "followed the crowd." The 6<sup>th</sup> respondent commented: "When the announcement that the pandemic was becoming serious in Poland, a lot of students have decided to leave Wroclaw to go back in their home country. In my case, I haven't decided to take this decision because my home university told me that we needed to stay here. A few days after, Poland announced that it would close the borders. Since our University told us to stay, I decided to stay. This was a difficult decision to take because we didn't know what will be the consequences in case of staying or leaving." The description of the situation description made by respondent no. 13 confirmed that problem: "Also a lot of German students left back to Germany and because of the human drive to follow the masses it also made me think about leaving Poland. However, I decided to stay since, in Germany, the virus is spreading much faster, and Poland seems to have appropriate measures right on time. The mental struggle between the options of staying and leaving also caused stress for me."

The decision was difficult, not only because of the changing situation and insufficient information. It also could mean the cancellation of the Erasmus adventure, which was perceived by many students as a big opportunity to have the greatest time of their life. The 15<sup>th</sup> respondent explained: "After that, I am also very tired when I am thinking about myself because I had to find the solution about should I stay or go back to my home country. It was also such a hard decision for me because Erasmus was my dream. In contrast, if I stay here, I always wonder how my family members' health is. In the end, I decided to go back to my country, but then Poland close all of the borders, so I stayed here." Moreover, the quotation shows that sometimes stress occurred because the decision, even after it had been made, could not be implemented because of rapid situation changes such as borders closing or flight cancellations.

### 2.4 Interpersonal relations and social support

The other huge problem, both inducing stress and limiting stress-reduction, was a lack or limitation of interpersonal relational and social life. Therefore, a very important resource, social support, was not accessible for most respondents or significantly reduced. All face-to-face relations were limited, including family and new Erasmus friends. As social support is a valuable resource, which helps to reduce stress, in an obvious way, the lack of it makes stress worse. Moreover, also the students themselves are prevented from being social support for their families, which is also a source of stress for them. Nevertheless, some of the respondents observed quite a reverse problem. Too intense relations, caused by the severe limitations of going out, also can lead to many tense situations.

Many students (especially of Spanish origin, as in March 2020 Spain imposed on its citizens very tough restrictions) were stressed by the fact that their close ones were left without social support. Respondent no. 2 described the situation in the following manner: “Also, right now I cannot go back home to my family, and I’m stressed about the fact that someone near me might get it, and I cannot be there to help them or just be with them, but I also know that in my country (Spain), the situation is out of control right now, so it would be worse to be there than it is to be here. But I’m worried about my loved ones.” The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent shares the same preoccupation: “My mother lives alone in Cádiz, and my brothers live in other cities, so they can’t be together because of the quarantine. The situation in Spain is terrible, so I am very sad because they can not cope with this situation together.”

The lack of possibility of seeing their families also affected the students personally. Respondent no. 16 said: “In my case, being away from my family and friends can be a source of stress. It is difficult to realize the situation in France and how I will be able to come back.” The same concern was shared by the 20<sup>th</sup> respondent: “This whole situation also causes us great emotional stress because being on Erasmus, we are far from our family and friends. [...] And now even though we are in the same city, we still can’t see our family because we are isolated, which causes us stress.”

Moreover, isolation from new friends and the impossibility of leading a typical student’s social life were significant stress factors. Respondent no. 6 noted: “It was also difficult to see all my “new” friends from Erasmus going back to their home country without knowing how much time they will stay at home or even if I will be able to see them again.” Respondent no. 10 points out: “Moreover, there exists the possibility of isolating or withdrawing from others, and fear of going to public spaces. This is very stressful for me because I am a very sociable person, and I like to be in touch with others. [...] in Poland, we do not go out in the streets either. Discos and bars are closed, so we are at home, and this makes us angry. This year we are supposed to be happy and meeting people, not locked in a room.” Respondent no. 22 commented: “Although it is quite shocking that you can’t suddenly exercise your normal life overnight.” The 24<sup>th</sup> respondent, a Spaniard, defines his biggest stress source fluently: “Not being able to get together with your friends or family members who are not at your place of residence.”

The particularly stressful situation was faced by the people living alone in a room or a flat. The respondent 10<sup>th</sup> described his situation fluently: “Moreover, I live alone in an apartment, so many times, I feel completely alone, and I cannot make plans with other people.”

Moreover, students with strong family bonds and belonging to a totally different culture could really feel a total lack of social support and feel totally alone. Respondent

no. 15, a girl from Turkey, described her situation in the following way: “Furthermore, I am an Erasmus student at the Wrocław, which means I am far away from my home, my family, my friends.” Another Turkish girl, respondent no. 28, explained: “I’m stressed because I’m a foreigner in this country. I have no family here.”

Apart from presenting their own situation, the students also refer to the problems of older adults. Respondent no. 3 described them as follows: “Older people with some type of disability are often very sensitive to the affection that theirs transmit to them with visits and accompaniments. Reducing that will leave many feeling a little abandoned and may tend to depression.”

Also, the risk of staying in one place with the same people all the time was noticed by the students. The 3<sup>rd</sup> respondent commented: “For some, it will be favorable, and for others, it will be a torture. When people have to live longer than usual, sometimes family conflict increases, and it seems that up to the number of divorces.”

## 2.5 Transportation problems

After the pandemic reached Polish borders and the government was about to introduce the lockdown, other problems emerged. For people who had decided to go back to their countries, transport became a highly stressful problem. The sources of stress were the following: the uncertainty about the possibility of getting on board, the problems of traveling through different borders, flight cancellations, etc. Moreover, most of the students living in a country belonging to the “Schengen zone” had not faced before the problems of closed borders. Moreover, the time of journeys extended enormously. Additionally, once students started their journey home, they could not be sure if they would finally be able to reach their destination. Also, for some students, it meant taking and combining many means of transportation in order to get home finally.

The journey home was very complicated for several students, although their countries were not very far from Poland. Respondent no. 4 related: “Then, on Monday, when all planes to Belgium were already canceled, our Belgian University told us to come back as quickly as possible. [...] Finally, on Tuesday morning, I have decided with another Belgian girl to come back to Belgium with an embassy bus that brought us until Berlin on Tuesday night. We had to pack everything very quickly. I was still afraid to have taken or not the right decision, where would that bus bring, if German borders would be already closed or not, what would we do after being in Berlin, what would I do in Brussels because my father is asthmatic so I had to put myself strictly in quarantine... Still, when we left Wrocław, when we took the bus to Berlin, I had a huge knot in the stomach. I didn’t know if I had taken the right decision; I was very sad that my Erasmus ended so soon, even if I have the hope of coming

back as soon as possible... During the trip, I was feeling very stressed until I reached the Belgian border.” The 26<sup>th</sup> respondent’s narration is also highly dramatic, as was the situation: “The day where University closed, I came back home, and all my flatmates were very stressed on their computer trying to find a flight ticket the fastest possible [...]. My mom called me and really tried to convince us to come back; she found a solution: we could take an Uber, then a bus and three trains. [...] Olivia and I make our luggage very fast, took the last bus, that was possible to come back. On our way, we were both really stressed because we didn’t know if they would let us take the bus if they would be controls at the borders. ... [...] After 18 hours of the trip, we finally arrived safe and sound in Belgium.”

## 2.6 Unprecedented situation

Also, COVID created a totally new and unexpected situation. Such a worldwide pandemic with consequences that were so severe happened for the first time in history. Of course, it was also the first such a situation that has ever occurred in the respondents’ lives.

The narration of the students often contained expressions such as “never before” and “change everything”. It both showed the novelty and gravity of the situation. The 23<sup>rd</sup> respondent noticed: “The situation that we are experiencing in relation to the COVID-19 is something that we have never faced before.” Moreover, the influence of the virus over the whole globe was underlined. Respondent no. 25 commented: “To sum up and to take everything mention into account, the situation which first started as a virus in distant China now it turned to be one of the most important problems that need to be solved in the XXI Century.” This opinion was backed by the 29<sup>th</sup> respondent, who stated: “The coronavirus, which now surrounds us, has become the center of the world and is on the agenda, has suddenly changed our life.” The 27<sup>th</sup> respondent agreed: “When this virus started to affect our lives, it really changed everything.”

## 2.7 The health of family members and friends

Actually, the virus itself seemed to be not such a big problem for respondents themselves, and they did not fear that they could get ill and lose their life. However, they were stressed by the virus because of their family members or friends who belonged to high risk groups (such as older adults, people with immune system problems, people working in hospitals).

Special attention was given to elderly family members, and the health of grandmothers, grandfathers, and old parents was a significant source of concern and stress for the students. The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent wrote: “On the one hand I was frustrated that I was not allowed to go back to Poland; on the other hand I was now afraid for my grandmother who was already sick.” The 15<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: “This is the hard-

est one, my family members are old, and I always wonder they are safe, far away from me? Because of this virus affects old people more than young ones.” Respondent no. 19 mentioned: “On the other hand, I am also quite worried about my grandparents, as they are more likely to be infected, so it is important that I do not have much contact with them.” The same concern was shared by the 20<sup>th</sup> respondent: “The COVID is causing people many types of stress either to their own health or to that of their own family. Older people are more at risk from this virus and we, being young, are very good carriers of this disease. This causes us great stress when we see that people in our family like our grandparents can be infected and even cause their death.” The 23<sup>rd</sup> respondent agreed: “It also makes me very anxious that an older member of my family can contract this disease because they are the weak points of this story.” The 25<sup>th</sup> respondent added: “Let’s start with Spain. In my case, I am stressed because all of my family live there, and some of the members are old enough to be considered population at risk.” Respondent no. 26 stated: “My only stress was for my grandma that is in Belgium, and that continues to go out.”

Also, the students were stressed by the risks faced by unhealthy family members. The 7<sup>th</sup> respondent said: “I also am stressed for my family, especially for the people who already have health problems. They are more in danger than others.” The respondent no. 23 added: “For example, my grandparents are people with a weakened immune system and that if they contract the disease, it is quite easy for them to complicate and they may die.” The 21<sup>st</sup> respondent stated: “Besides, I worry about the fragile people in my family. In fact, I am young and healthy, so I’m not scared about the virus, but I’m afraid to hear that someone in my family is infected with the virus. The virus is everywhere, and we can never be too careful.”

Moreover, the students were concerned with the infection risk for family members working with ill people. The 25<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: “Another aspect that it is also stressful for me is that my mother works in a hospital, so she has more probabilities of contacting the illness.”

Moreover, even though the family members were not in the risk group, the students were still stressed and concerned about the infection risk for their close ones. Respondent no. 24 defined his stress in the following way: “That my family can catch the virus and can get sick and even die.” The uncertainty and being away from home increased this stress. It was formulated, for example, in the narration of respondent no. 6: “Secondly, the fact that we are not with our family can be quite stressful because we don’t know exactly how the situation with the virus is going in our home country.”

## 2.8 Canceled or endangered plans and future

The next, and one of the most significant sources of stress, is related to plans. The students are stressed because their

long-term and short-term plans had to be canceled. Some of those plans were connected with academic life, some with private life (like vacations). Students were uncertain about their Erasmus programme, about finishing their academic year and their future career, and the career possibilities during a potential economic crisis. They also had to cancel their vacations. Moreover, their dreams about Erasmus as the adventure of their lifetime disappeared.

One of the most important stress sources related to the plans and future emerged from uncertainty about the continuation of lectures, possibilities of passing the course, finishing University on time, and starting a professional career. The 6<sup>th</sup> respondent wrote: “Thirdly, the sudden cancellation of all the usual lectures in class caused worry because we didn’t know yet how classes will be able to continue.” Respondent no. 7 among the biggest stress problems explains “Stress related to the future. Finally, I am stressed about our future. [...] Can we already plan our studies for next year?” The 11<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: “I’m also stressed about the academic year because classes online are kind of complicated to follow, and information comes from everywhere, so it’s confusing. And my main concern is that I really don’t want to double this year.” Respondent no. 14 emphasized: “I am concerned about my Erasmus and studies in general.” This worry is backed by respondent no. 20: “Finally, we students are stressed by the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen with our studies and especially when we are in another country.” The 24<sup>th</sup> respondent among stress-inducing factors states “the uncertainty of my studies, that if I finish university or not [...]” and “[...] the uncertainty of the business future in addition to the academic calendar of the students.” The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent is also concerned about his professional career: “On the other hand, this is supposed to be my last year of university, and I am supposed to start work soon.”

Many students treated Erasmus as their unique chance and an extraordinary time in their lives. Therefore most of them were particularly disappointed and stressed because of the sudden end of this experience. The 21<sup>st</sup> respondent explained: “Finally, I feel stressed because of my Erasmus experience. I had to leave Wrocław 3 weeks after the start of my stay over there; in my case, I know that I can do Erasmus only once in my education. So I am afraid I can’t return to Wrocław to continue my great experience.” Respondent no. 28 complained: “I came here with a lot of dreams, but then this situation came out. I’m a little bit angry, sad, and stressed. I’m angry because this is a very unusual situation, and it’s come across my Erasmus journey.” The 29<sup>th</sup> respondent’s feelings were similar: “I came to Erasmus with dreams, would finish my period well and go back to my country by doing a European tour, but for now, I cannot predict what could happen in the future as everyone else.”

Some students had made travel plans and had to cancel them because of the pandemic. Moreover, it occurred to them that their vacation plans were at risk, too. The 7<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: “We can’t do anything without knowing when it will finish: can we already book a flight for our holidays this summer?” Respondent no. 10 gave details of his problems: “Furthermore, I had two trips planned (Ukraine and Italy). Both have been canceled, and this made me very angry because I think it was a unique opportunity, and I do not know when I will be able to go in the future. In addition, my family was going to visit me, but their flights have been canceled too. I feel especially bad for my mother; I think it is very unfair because she has not been able to travel so much during her life, and I really wanted her to visit Poland.”

Stress was also induced by many of the aspects which were mentioned above. Respondent no. 19 reported: “I returned to Spain on Tuesday 10th with the intention of spending a week with my family and going back to Wrocław. As the days go by here, the situation gets worse and worse, my flight was canceled, and it is impossible for me to return at this time. All this causes great uncertainty in me because I don’t know what will happen with the classes there, in Wrocław, if I will be able to go back to those classes or not since it is not known how long all this will last when I am able to go back to my Erasmus experience and studies, even when I will be able to go back to pick up all my belongings since I came to Spain with few clothes.”

Moreover, the students were able to predict the stress of other people, connected with their plans to go to University. Respondent no. 24 said: “That future university students are in doubt as to when or not they will take the university entrance exam.”

## 2.9 Economic situation

The potential deterioration of the economic situation, as the consequence of pandemic and lockdown, was perceived by the respondents as highly stressful. This was true, especially for the students from countries that suffered significantly from the economic crisis in 2007–2008, like Spain.

Respondent no. 10 worried: “However, I am very afraid of the economic consequences in Spain because of the virus. Nowadays, many economic activities are paralyzed by it, so I think there will be an economic crisis in my country.” Another Spaniard, among the things that are most stressful for him, states: “That the situation of the country, in this case, Spain, worsens so much that we return to an economic crisis. [...] That many small and medium-sized companies have to close due to this epidemic since they cannot maintain the company. In other words, companies do not obtain the expected benefits. [...] Whether or not the workers are going to fire you ... [...] That the currency (€) is devalued.”

### 2.10 The health

Health, in general, was a stressor for Erasmus students. Also, the possibility of being ill without the symptoms was scaring the respondents. Moreover, the risk that the world could have difficulties in managing the virus was causing the students stress.

Respondent no. 10 explained: "First of all, Stress during this infectious disease outbreak can include the fear and worry about our own health and the health of the people we love." Respondent no. 12 detailed: "I think that the situations that cause us to stress with the coronavirus are taking the virus and sticking it to the people around us, coughing, and then people look at us with fear, not wash our hands enough, talking to people on a small distance for scared, be controlled by the authorities." The 16<sup>th</sup> respondent stated: "The highly contagious aspect of the virus is a major stressor for those around me."

The consequences of the pandemic and influence on the whole population were also a stress source for the students. The 24<sup>th</sup> respondent wrote: "The high peak of mortality and the very low peak of birth."

### 2.11 Putting others into danger

Enormously high stress related to health was caused by anxiety that one could go through COVID without symptoms and infect other people without even knowing that, and even cause their death by that.

Respondent no. 7 said: "We don't know who is sick. Maybe me too. This is the primary source of stress. I don't want to spread the virus even more." The 23<sup>rd</sup> respondent explained: "It also creates a lot of stress that I can have the virus and before they raised the alarm and locked us in our houses, I could have transmitted it to someone. That situation would be one of the worst that could happen." The 2<sup>nd</sup> respondent confirmed that view: "Another situation that makes me feel really anxious is the fact that I may have a cold or the flu, but maybe I mistake the symptoms with the COVID, so I'm always worried that I might be infecting other people without knowing [...]"

### 2.12 Being stuck in a foreign country with a different healthcare system

For many students being far away from home in the situation of the pandemic was a stress-inducing factor. The stress was heightened by the fact of differences in the language and healthcare system between the student's home country and the host country.

The impossibility of getting back to their homelands was a significant stressor for the students. The 25<sup>th</sup> respondent describing her stress added: "and the uncertainty of both not knowing when foreign people like me will be able to come back to their home countries and not knowing when the problem will be solved." The 27<sup>th</sup> respondent confirmed:

"It was really scary and serious because I am in a country that I have just come and I am alone going through all this."

The feeling of being alone was increased by the fact of the impossibility to go back and reunite with the family. The 27<sup>th</sup> respondent described her situation in the following manner: "We decided to go back to Turkey before things get out of control and we bought the tickets, but two days before the flight Poland closed all the borders, and we had to stay here. I was really terrified because we were stuck here, and deaths really started to increase, and it was everywhere. We had to move out of the other dormitory because ours closed to turn into a hospital. And we did. I am not alone here, and I know that young people do not have this Coronavirus heavily, but my family is in Turkey, and the situation there is getting serious, and if something happens, we will be apart."

Moreover, the language and healthcare system differences were defined as stress-inducing problems by the students. Respondent no. 6 explained: "The fact that this pandemic crisis became bigger during our Erasmus has made the situation even more stressful. Actually, living abroad in a country where we don't know and where the language is completely different from my mother's language can cause many troubles." This opinion was confirmed by the 11<sup>th</sup> respondent: "Also, it is stressful to be in a foreign country in such a situation because the healthcare system is different, we have to speak English, and not our native language so misunderstandings can happen."

### 2.13 Uncertainty and unpredictability

The uncertainty at a personal and global level also was declared as a big stressor. Students perceived that things were totally out of control. Moreover, some of them were anxious that the whole world was unable to change the situation. So there were two components – internal and external lack of control over the situation.

The situation was difficult to manage even for international authorities or the government of even highly well-developed countries. As the 15<sup>th</sup> respondent observed: R 15: "To begin with, this situation is so hard to manage for all world." The 25<sup>th</sup> respondent commented: "And furthermore, it can cause serious stress problems, especially thinking that if Italy was not able to manage the virus, other countries may not." Especially stressful was the knowledge that the world had not managed to produce a vaccine or a proper cure for the Coronavirus. The respondent no. 20 wrote: "Another stressful situation is the knowledge that there is no vaccine to stop the number of people infected." The 16<sup>th</sup> respondent's view was similar: "The duration of the epidemic can be a source of serious stress. Several articles talk about the pandemic, which can last several years."

The unpredictability of the situation and impossibility to control anything on the local and personal levels; were also significant sources of stress. The 15<sup>th</sup> respond-

ent complained: “In this short period my emotional situation changes a lot because everything changes quickly, so I couldn’t control anything.” The 16<sup>th</sup> respondent observed: “The streets, the parks are empty. There is an atmosphere of chaos.”

### 2.14 Severe restrictions

Most of the students faced limitations that were extremely severe for the first time in their lives. The restrictions made the respondents feel uneasy and frustrated. It was especially difficult for the students from countries which valued freedom a lot, like France, and the students from the nationalities that are accustomed to leading an active social life outside their home, like Spaniards. Nevertheless, for young, active people, the restrictions were a huge stress source for most of the students.

The students reacted very badly to the impossibility of going out. Respondent no.12 wrote: “Another of the situations that create stress for us is to stay locked up at home, to leave our lives, we are used to not stopping doing.” The 2<sup>nd</sup> respondent explained: “My stress situation would be that we can’t go out of our rooms, just to go to the supermarket or the pharmacy. That stresses me out a lot because I need to be thinking about what to do during the day so I don’t feel incarcerated in my room.” The 20<sup>th</sup> respondent added: “For people who have a very active life outside their homes, it is also great stress to not be able to go out, go to work, go to a bar or play sports.” Respondent no. 21 complained: “Moreover, this confinement generates another stress: the one of being locked up in the same place during an indefinite period. I am lucky to be in my parent’s house with a garden, but I usually don’t like to stay in the same place for several hours. It’s going to be a hard exercise for me.” The 22<sup>nd</sup> respondent supported that view: “If we’re used to leaving our homes and go to the University, take public transport, go to the shopping center, meet with our friends, go to the gym, etc. It has gone from that to leave or home only for exceptional things such as go to the supermarket or to the pharmacy.”

The restrictions themselves could be very stress-inducing when perceived as limitation on freedom. The respondent no. 16 complained: “The global pandemic is causing health restrictions that I have never experienced in my life. Many of my freedoms are taken away, which is something new, and it takes me out of my comfort zone.”

### 2.15 Facing irresponsible or peculiar behavior of others

Another problem that made the respondents stressed was the irresponsible or strange behavior of other people. And, as the peculiar behavior was often stress-induced, it was a closed-circle situation.

The problem with the weird behavior was that it happened not only in public spaces, like shops but also in the nearest surroundings of the students. Respondent no. 26 de-

scribed the following situation: “The day where University closed, I came back home, and all my flatmates were very stressed on their computer trying to find a flight ticket the fastest possible, a girl was even running everywhere and almost screaming because of the stress. I tried to calm people, and I didn’t really get the point of being so stressed.” Respondent no. 29 complained: “I couldn’t even figure out if I could make a healthy decision because, within a week, everyone around me was extremely panicked, and that also affected me a lot.”

The peculiar actions were usually observed in shops. The 16<sup>th</sup> respondent noticed: “The reaction of people in supermarkets can be a source of stress. Different videos seen on networks show crazy reactions from people in supermarkets.”

The irresponsible behavior of many people, or of the population as a whole, was also strongly stress-inducing. The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent described his emotions in the following manner: “I am also very angry with the people who empty the shelves in the supermarket because it is just selfish in such a situation to behave like this.” The 24<sup>th</sup> respondent stated that his concern was “That the population goes crazy and does not allow people to buy the primary products to live.”

## 3. STRESS-INDUCED REACTIONS

The students set out different symptoms of stress, mostly of physiological and behavioral type. Many respondents noticed their stress by noticing the reaction of their body.

The whole COVID-19 related situation increased students’ anxiety and decreased their enthusiasm. The 24<sup>th</sup> respondent wrote: “The isolation in your house can generate Stress or anxiety since you cannot go out for air.” The respondent no. 27 complained: “It affected all lives of course and for me too. It brought anxiety, stress, lack of sleep, mental tiredness, and lack of enthusiasm to do anything.”

The lack of sleep and the headache were also many common stress symptoms. The 27<sup>th</sup> respondent explained: “It is very exhausting thinking what might happen and causes mental and physical effects such as always worrying, fictioning the scenarios, waking up middle of the night, headaches and nausea.” The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent added: “The situation makes me think too much about my problems, because I have a lot of time, and this gives me a headache almost every day, so I am really exhausted. Moreover, I am using my mobile phone or computer all day, which I do not think is good.” The respondent no. 4 wrote: “I slept only a few hours during those nights, and didn’t eat a lot.”

Also, fewer and sweating were frequent reactions to stress. The 4<sup>th</sup> respondent “was sweating a lot; my heart was beating very fast. I was very distracted and had difficulty focusing on anything.” Respondent no. 26 described hers and her friends’ stress reactions in the following manner: “Be-

cause of the stress, we became really hot, and even though we had a fever.”

Moreover, behavioral reactions emerged. The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent wrote: “When the University was closed, and I spontaneously went home (Berlin), I didn’t know that the borders would be closed two days later.”

Moreover, the students also observed the stress reactions of other people. Respondent no. 3 reported, “*Compulsive purchase of products* [...] There is considerable apprehension, and there is a tendency to hoard whatever is necessary. This is what is happening in supermarkets, even though we have the guarantee that there will be enough products.”

Moreover, some students noticed that the reactions ceased with the end of the most intense stress, e.g., after the journey home. Respondent no. 26 observed: “The moment where I put a foot on the Belgium floor, I wasn’t hot anymore, no headache and no sore throat anymore. With this experience, I was able to understand that even if I thought I wasn’t really stressed, my body showed me some symptoms of stress.”

#### 4. STRESS MANAGEMENT METHODS

##### 4.1 Obeying authorities

The most common stress-management methods were to obey the authorities, follow their instructions, and comply with restrictions. It referred to authorities such as state and local level governments, as well as University officials and, of course, doctors.

Most of the students mention the role of the central government. Respondent no. 8 declared: “We citizens can only comply with the rules imposed by the government to contribute to solving this situation as soon as possible. The government is the only one with powers to deal with the situation. Only the government can decree measures and impose them. We can only wait and calm, complying with the obligations imposed.” The 14<sup>th</sup> respondent agreed: “At the moment there is no other option than following the guidelines of your government and authorities – even though that’s difficult as well!” The 21<sup>st</sup> respondent confirmed: “So, we just have to obey the government, stay in our houses and wait for some new information.” Respondent no. 1 noticed: “I am actually very relaxed with the situation, try to follow the instructions of my government and stay at home.”

The students also stated the importance of obeying doctors. The respondent no. 23 said: “With a pandemic like this that spreads so easily, we have to follow what doctors and police officers tell us.”

Moreover, the students listened to the representatives of their countries. The 28<sup>th</sup> respondent explained: “We talked with our country’s ambassador. They say it’s very dangerous, and staying in Poland is healthier than travel. I listen to

this and think about it. They were right. Traveling is the most dangerous thing right now. Not only for the traveler also for the other people”.

##### 4.2 Planning and scheduling

After the pandemic had broken out, the students faced the problems of canceled plans, limitations, and the impossibility of doing performing the activities which they were accustomed to. They found it necessary to implement a new daily schedule and to establish a new routine.

The students prepared new plans, including there the actions which had a positive effect on their state of mind. The 3<sup>rd</sup> respondent advised: “It is important to establish some type of routine as soon as possible that, if possible, is satisfactory. It is also convenient to carry out pleasant activities such as listening to music, reading, watching television, or spending time to improve communication with the people with whom we live. The longer we are busy, the less time we will be concerned.” The respondent no. 22 reported: “And to make it easier this time which we’re quarantined, with people I live every day we’ve though that is a good idea to make a schedule with things to do every day, do exercise at home, read books, watch series/films, etc. And above all, take care of ourselves.”

##### 4.3 Physical exercises

Physical exercises are a very common stress-reducer. It was also applied by the students. The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent said: “R1 “in order to keep the stress as low as possible, I decided to: [...] Take care of my body. Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate.” Respondent no 8 relates: “What I do to combat my stress is to do physical exercise (workouts) at home and distract myself by watching series or movies to maintain mental balance.”

##### 4.4 Limiting media access

The stress related to SARS-Cov-2 was induced not only by the pandemic itself but also by excessive, emotionally-shaped information. Therefore one of the stress management methods implemented by the students was limiting information access and trying not to be overwhelmed by the news.

The news on social media seemed to be especially stress-inducing. Therefore the students stopped or restrained their usage. Respondent no. 10 advised: “I think one strategy to cope with this stress and anxiety is to set limits around news and social media. It is understandable to want to keep informed, especially if you or your loved ones are affected. At the same time, constantly reading, watching, or listening to upsetting media coverage can unnecessarily intensify worry and agitation. I think everyone needs to take a break from the news or social media, especially if there is no new information.” The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent wrote: “in order

to keep the stress as low as possible, I decided to: [...] Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media” Moreover, the students decided not to trust every source and the news emitted by it. Respondent no. 27 commented: “All I can do is to be careful and not to believe everything I see or else it would make me do more stress than I already am.” The 1<sup>st</sup> respondent wrote: “in order to keep the stress as low as possible, I decided to: [...] Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media”.

#### 4.5 Positive thinking, humor, and obsession avoidance

The students decided to think positively and not let themselves be obsessed. Some of them found that constant negative thinking related to the Coronavirus could worsen their stress symptoms. The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent observed: “I think if we are constantly thinking about this virus and its symptoms, we will have anxiety, frustration, irritability or anger. In fact, symptoms may intensify or may appear even if you do not get sick, so it is very important not to be obsessed with the disease.” The 8<sup>th</sup> respondent agreed: “So, I can only control my mind and assume that this is all temporary. I was always thinking positive.” This opinion was backed by the respondent no. 13: “Other than that, I try to stay positive and hope the situation goes back to normal soon.” The same opinion was shared by the 28<sup>th</sup> respondent: “I’m staying positive for my family and me. That’s all I can do.” The 26<sup>th</sup> respondent was very optimistic about the future: “Now, I really hope everything will evolve in a good way and that I will be able to come back in Wrocław very soon!”

The students also used their sense of humor in order to ease the stress symptoms. Respondent no 3 commented: “especially in Mediterranean countries like my country, Spain, is used a lot to combat something that causes us discomfort. Making jokes or jokes, ultimately, can serve to minimize that discomfort.”

#### 4.6 Following reason, not emotions

The students tried to stay as reasonable as possible. Therefore they tried to put their emotions aside. The main decision was to act responsibly and not to follow “the voice of the heart”, nor the crowd. Respondent no 4 reported: “Last week, when University closed, my three other Belgian friends and I have tried to be as responsible as we could. We have tried not to see any foreigners in our flat anymore, not going out, etc.” This calm reaction was to the advantage of the person who was not behaving in an emotional manner, and also helped other people to calm down. The 26<sup>th</sup> respondent related: “I tried to calm people, and I didn’t really get the point of being so stressed. People calmed a bit down after the discussion.” Despite the severe situation the students decided to follow their minds. The 26<sup>th</sup> respondent said: “I decided to follow reason and safety in place of my heart.”

#### 4.7 Doing and learning new activities

The students decided to take advantage of the situation and reduce their stress by learning new activities, which were possible to undertake despite the restrictions. Respondent no. 14 reported: “I try to distract myself with some new activities like learning guitar, doing fitness in my garden and trying new cooking-recipes.”

#### 4.8 Proper information

The students, apart from being stressed by their own problems, were stressed by the stress of their own families, who worried about the situation of their children, grandchildren, and siblings staying in Poland. In order to reduce this stress, proper information seemed to be a good solution. The students informed their families about the situation in Poland, which was actually better than in most of the native countries of the students. The 22<sup>nd</sup> respondent reported: “Regarding the stress of my family, I explained to them how Poland was acting with respect to Spain, and they were more relaxed because they have been very predictable. That is, they advised me to stay in Poland because in Spain the situation is much more serious than here, and even my friends told me it is not worth going back because it is much worse there.” Respondent no. 28 explained: “In the day I’m going outside and have fresh air with my friends. I’m glad about having them. We’re supporting and giving moral to each other in this situation. Also, my family gets relax about that when they see I’m not alone, and I have supporting ones in here.”

#### 4.9 Prevention – natural cures, vitamins, hygiene

The students seem to trust medicine, and therefore they try to take necessary precautions, like not going to crowded places, keeping maximum hygiene like frequent hand washing, and taking natural remedies and vitamins in order to avoid any infection. Respondent no 7 underlined: “But I reassure myself by saying that we have to trust medicine and that all of this is just a bad time to go.” Respondent no. 2 explained her method: “[...] I’m now taking a lot of natural remedies, so I don’t get any sign of a cold or flu.” The 28<sup>th</sup> respondent reported: “I’m washing my hands often and try not to be in crowded and close spaces.” The 26<sup>th</sup> respondent related: “I decided to not be stressed, to not make food provisions but just to buy some vitamins and follow safety rules.”

#### 4.10 Methods linked to stressors

Most of the given methods were quite general. However, one of the students (the 9<sup>th</sup> respondent) linked her methods of stress-fighting with the stress-inducing factors. Table 2 presents the COVID-19 related stress sources and relevant methods of stress reduction.

Table 2 Methods addressing different COVID-19 stress sources elaborated by the 9th respondent

Stress related to Coronavirus	Reaction to the stress
How to get to my home country before borders close	Reacting in time and not booking bus/plane ticket at the last minute
Worrying about grandparents and older family members	Telling them to stay home and supplying them with food and everything they need
If we are able to still go to the supermarket/will have enough food etc. at home.	Stocking some food and things we will need in the next weeks/days
Financial situation without earning money at the moment and in the next weeks	Cutting down costs on things which are not urgent
How everything will continue with the Erasmus semester	Talking to coordinators at the University
If online classes will work	Looking in the system ahead of classes to make sure that everything works
How to handle so much free time	Looking for a new hobby/playing out old hobbies
Parties of birthdays and other events which have been canceled	Finding a new time/date for it
If summer vacation will take place or not	Cancel bookings and see what will happen

Table 2 includes most of the problems and worries of Erasmus students after the pandemic breakout, e.g., concerning travel restrictions, the health of elderly family members, study continuation, etc. It proves that both general and specific actions can be taken in order to reduce stress in the time of the pandemic.

**5. POSITIVE ASPECTS**

Despite the severity of the situation, the students were able to see positive aspects of it. Particularly, they could manage a very stressful situation. Apart from that, they started to appreciate “normal times.” They also saw that people were getting closer to each other and appreciate their interpersonal relations. They even were able to see the bright side of all the limitations and the impossibility of traveling. Respondent no 15 explained that in the following manner: “I am so tired but also I am happy to stay here because if I travel by plane I have to visit lots of airports and maybe because of this I might be sick.” Respondent no. 17 commented: “Within this chaos, not everything is bad. This situation is helping us to connect with ourselves; we are more human. The whole country has come together; people are staying at home to avoid more infections and collapse in hospitals. Many people offer to look after the children of their neighbors; they offer to do the shopping for old people. People are being aware of the need for human contact, giving a hug, going for a walk, things so simple that we cannot do now. Despite being a stressful situation being at home all day, we know it is for

a good cause. This situation will help us to grow as people, to know how to value the simplest things, and to see that anything has a solution.”

**6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

The research proves that Erasmus students did not take the COVID-19 situation one-dimensionally. They were able to define their stress in terms of stressors and responses. Moreover, they elaborated on some effective stress-management methods.

Some of the stress patterns were general for most respondents. In their descriptions, the stress related to the health of their families, information, and being stuck in a foreign country prevailed. Also, most of them complained that they were in a situation in which social support was reduced significantly. Anyway, some worries or concerns were typical for the nationality, like most of the Spanish respondents were stressed by the lack of social life and were worried about the economic future of the country, the German students were stressed by the cancellation of their plans, esp. relating to their studies, the Turkish people were stressed by the fact that they couldn’t go back to their countries and had to stay in Poland without their families for the undefined period, and the French were stressed by the fact that their freedoms were taken away.

The stress responses described by the students were exhibited by themselves or observed. Some of those reactions were behavioral, like strange behavior or screaming, but usually, these stress responses were observed by the respondents. The respondents themselves depicted many physical stress symptoms, such as flu, headache, sweating. Also, they mentioned the thoughts, which consisted of thinking about different scenarios of what could happen. Anyway, most of them tried to be rational and find the best solutions for the disadvantageous situation.

The students tried to manage their stress and developed many useful methods for that. They decided to stop excessive media use, not to believe everything they hear, think positively, obey the doctors and authorities, take vitamins and natural cures. Some of them went home spontaneously, some of them did that after discussion with family and friends or as a result of the advice of their University or ambassador, and some did it because they were convinced that their country’s health system is better than the Polish one. The respondents also tried to establish a new daily schedule and started doing new things, e.g., learning to play an instrument, etc.

The study presented in this paper is mostly in accordance with other studies treating similar subjects related to SARS-Cov-2. The studies of Nelson et al. (2020) and Hamel et al. (2020) show the health threat posed by the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes COVID-19, and concerns about

its effects on family, friends, and colleagues, represents a substantive source of Stress itself. This was also true for the students, but actually they were not stressed by the threat to their own lives, but only by the risk for their families.

Shanafelt, Ripp & Trockel (2020) found that Governmental “lockdown” measures aimed at minimizing virus transmission, including “stay at home” orders, closure of businesses and places of congregation, and travel restrictions, have had a substantive societal impact that permeates almost every facet of daily life. For the students, two “lockdown” effects were most severe: travel restrictions, as they had problems coming back home, and the closure of places where they led their social life, like bars, pubs, and the discos, because it limited the interpersonal relations and social support.

The studies by van Lancker & Parolin (2020) and Yilmazkuday (2020) proved that economic uncertainty represents a source of stress, particularly in vulnerable groups. This was especially true for Spanish students, who already faced a severe economic crisis and were aware of the coming problems on the labor market. As young people without much job professional experience, they are one of the groups most highly endangered by unemployment.

The study by Cai et al. (2020) related to the COVID-19 stress of healthcare workers showed that one of the factors that could influence perceived stress is having children, as healthcare workers could be afraid of infecting their family and for the respondents of this study, the situation was actually the opposite. They were worried about their family members who were in the risk groups, including members working in the hospital.

European Society for Traumatic stress stated (Javakhishvili et al., 2020):

Europe faces major challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, and protecting public mental health is one of these. Existing evidence suggests there may be an increase in mental health problems and psychotrauma-related reactions and conditions among affected populations. To minimize these grave consequences, it is crucial to put in place trauma-informed policies, strategies, and interventions as well as to promote evidence-based methods of trauma-specific care tailored to the new circumstances.

I can argue that the Erasmus students who were respondents of my study, elaborated their own methods tailored to the new circumstances. Although intuitive, most of the methods apparently worked.

The methods used by the students were kind of intuitive, but they are coherent with the advice of psychologists. Social media activities can serve as an example. The cyber psychologist's recommendations, elaborated in order to face COVID-19 stress, are the following:

- Take the time to look at how you are using social media.
- Be critical of what you see and post.

- Be on the alert for cybercrime.
- Use hashtags and follow wisely.
- Look for the positives (BPS News, 2020).

Therefore, the students, although they do not possess professional psychological knowledge, applied a lot of the above mentioned methods, especially they used social media wisely, and they were aware that not everything that they read was true or accurate. So there was a lot of critical thinking at their side. Moreover, they did not let themselves be controlled by or obsessed with the messages transmitted via different media. Moreover, the respondents underline the importance of positive thinking and a “follow reason, not emotion” attitude.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER STUDIES

Of course, the present study is not free from limitations. The first is connected with the local range of research, namely the respondents studied only at one University, located in one Polish city, which, of course, could influence their stress. The relative closeness to the Czech and German borders can be an example, and of course, it could affect the stress level (for German and Czech students, it was relatively easy to go back to their homeland). Also, the number of nationalities of respondents is limited. However, it includes nations whose countries then were facing the most serious problems like Spain, Germany, and France. Moreover, the findings, because of their qualitative character and the number of respondents, which is less than 30, cannot be generalized. Moreover, the research was conducted at a certain point in time. Therefore the different aspects of the situation are not the same. Although today we do not face a lack of knowledge about COVID-19, the peril connected with the virus is even higher, as it mutates, and it seems that people get infected more easily.

Anyway, the limitations can always be seen as further research possibilities. The repetition of the study can give the answer to whether the stress sources and stress reaction connected with global pandemic change or stay the same. Research conducted on other groups of students may provide information on the stress of people of different nationalities. Moreover, new aspects, such as long-term health and, possibility of social and economic crisis, can be explored. Therefore my intention is to continue the research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. It is motivated not only by the limitations of the present study but also by the importance of the subject.

Since the research presented above, many scientists have worked on COVID-related problems. In reference to the subject of the present paper, special significance should be attributed to the development of various measurement tools, including scales estimating COVID-19 impact on mental health. (Chandu, Marella, Panga, Pachava, & Vadapalli, 2020). Therefore it would be interesting to verify how the

Erasmus students scored on after the experience of being stuck in a foreign country during the pandemic breakout.

The research by B. R. Whitehead (2020) proved that the older adults' expectations about COVID-19 at the early point in the pandemic at which this survey was taken were significantly associated with the amount of perceived stress they were experiencing at the time, which in turn was associated with their level of negative affect. Further research could continue this study and combine it with the present paper's topic by conducting congruent research examining the students.

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