

UiO  **Faculty of Medicine**
SHE – Centre for Healthcare Education
University of Oslo

Prudence Atukunda

**PhD research fellow, Institute of Basic Medical Sciences,
Department of Nutrition**

SHE scholarship reflection note



**CENTRE FOR
EXCELLENCE
IN EDUCATION**

JUNE 6TH 2020

Coping strategies, adjusting my life and advices based on self-experiences during Covid-19 Lockdown 2020 Oslo Norway.

Preamble

The day began like a normal PhD life day, upon opening my email “*cheii cheii*” (African exclamation sounds) the reality had set it “The university closed from 12 March 2020 at 6 pm, this was an email from Universitetsdirektøren, received on Thu 12/03/2020 19:56”. This was after the Norwegian government had introduced strict measures to prevent infection from the corona virus. Thus, measures included universities and colleges closure from 12th March at 6 pm until further notice. The faculty of medicine being at the center of hospitals was such a scary announcement to me. This was because I was working hard to progress with my PhD thesis writing. This meant that the buildings for both students and staff in the period leading up to Easter were no longer open for student work and all meetings would be online. This meant that I had to have a self-adjustment and coping plan in all this while promoting my mental state, health and well-being. Moreover, concerning my decision on living calmly despite the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic lockdown life, I can say that I am satisfied with my subjective well-being.

Goal for my coping strategy

The overall goal of my coping plan and strategy aimed at promoting my feeling of happiness and life satisfaction as well as progress on my PhD program. In addition, I looked at this as an opportunity to explore the Norwegian beauty of forests, hiking trails, rivers, lakes, learning the Norwegian life and part of the culture.

Introduction

Coping strategy is an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one’s reaction to such a situation¹. These coping strategies involve a conscious and direct approach to problems, in contrast to defense mechanisms. These actions also include positive coping behaviors (i.e., adaptive), for example, taking time to meditate or exercise in the middle of a hectic day¹. Thus, in the situation of abrupt lockdown because of Covid-19 pandemic, I chose to walk on this road of coping to harmoniously proceed with my education.

Novelty and ambition for my coping

The Covid-19's lockdown occurrence offered me an opportunity to see the glass half-full. This was a time to put to practice positivism regarding coping strategies in a reality experience. My ambition was to be more attentive to my personal mental healthcare when it comes to lockdown. In addition, this was aimed at being extremely satisfactory adjustment facet, such that I progress on with my thesis writing process.

1. State of the art for the coping plan

My context on the coping strategies involved the aspects of social, cultural and economic factors, which all together influence my life as an international student in Norway. I had to put to practice all my abilities to adjust to different contexts of the Covid-19 pandemic effectively. In this case, everything surrounding me was colored with how to make the best out of the situation at hand. It is commonly said that, "*if life offers one lemons, then make lemonade out of the bitter lemons*". This guided me on how to approach the moment of lockdown during Covid-19 pandemic strange situation. Thus, I had to diversity and embrace different Norwegian cultural and natural beauty that would be a pacifier in this situation. On this part, I had to test out my competence, and therefore adjustment in a diverse setting.

1.1.1. Students in particular are at risk of imbalance priorities during emergency disruptions

Balancing priorities in an emergency is a great coping mechanism, specifically with home, work, school, recreation, and / or family. This was a challenge with an ongoing Covid-19 lockdown.

I am a student and at the same time, I set aside time for working on PhD thesis after quota funding expired. Thus, I had to study and take care of my mental health appropriately. I also needed enough time for having friends during outdoor recreation activities. This was not going to be possible with the limited resources at my disposal worsened by loss of part-time job with a special needs child was also over. To this effect, I had to have an effective work-life balance that could adequately enable me to follow my daily schedule to meet the expected planned deadlines for my study.

In this case, I ensured that I give attention to my most pressing need of study and demands at home, mental health and even recreation. Specifically, I gave more attention to school PhD progress since this was a fundamental priority to my prospective career stability. However, each day I had to devote my free time to various recreation activities that Norway had to offer during this global pandemic challenge in order to keep physically and mentally fit.

1.2 Developing Identity while coping during Covid-19 pandemic

I developed my identity along with establishing a unique self-concept that enabled me to stand out as an international student in Norway to effectively thrive during the pandemic despite financial challenges. In review, I developed a positive attitude towards the self, whereby; it reflected on my subjective emotional evaluation of my worth during this pandemic and how to enhance it to keep upfront. In addition, I developed a self-concept aimed at being distinct and separate from others as well as the persistency of the self-care during this pandemic. I have fully understood myself concept of having my own unique way of doing things while having a memorable experience of Norway as an international student locked up. I came out with thought provoking ideas that included the Norwegian way and perception of life that could develop my self-concept and improve self-care.

1.3 Coping with stress during the pandemic

According to Tummers, stress is a reaction to a stimulus that distracts an individual's physical or mental equilibrium^{2,3}. In this situation, as students the closure of the university was the stimulus that affected several students' physical and mental health. I had to cope with stress during the lockdown by engaging in relaxing activities, practicing calming techniques, which would help me to manage my stress and improve my overall coping. In addition, my coping strategies included; being proactive, following my interests, and seeking out peer support from colleagues to improve my social skills in asking for help, and always learning to get the best out of the situation.

When all was planned and done, I embarked on a more optimistic outlook on life but not over exaggerated. I have been able to develop effective practice of the identified coping strategies and resources in my reach in Norway. I give the details of the copying strategies and activities I engaged in harmoniously in Norway below.

1.3.1 Yoga and mindfulness meditation

The beauty of mindfulness training is that it transcends beyond yoga styles. I needed to have skills that would help me get motivated to continue despite the lockdown. I taught myself the basics of the practice and how to apply them in this Covid-19 lockdown. This coping strategy can be learnt by anyone who is interested. The beauty with this is that meditation brings calm and focused attention to the endless stream of thoughts floating through in one's mind. This strategy enabled me to have reduced stress, strengthened immune system since I have not had severe allergic reactions due to weather changes, and increased productivity in everyday life. I discovered a greater sense of overall well-being and "purpose" in life. Mindfulness meditation helped me gain a peaceful and stable mind, which improved most areas of my life eg: Mental, emotional, and even spiritual.

1.3.2 Writing Poetry

During this time of Covid-19, I chose to also dedicate each day to write a poem. Since the March 30th to 11th May 2020, I have daily written down a poem. My poems have featured different topics including, the pandemic, weather, trees, birds, the Oslo fjord, the immune system to name but a few. Writing poems is known to have several benefits, which include improved cognitive function, learning new words, finding new ways to articulate thoughts and good feelings for the brain. In addition, it also helps heal emotional pain, express love, affection, leads us to greater self-awareness, and provides a gift of inspiration and or education to others.

I used poetry writing as a deeply therapeutic practice. In fact, therapeutic benefits from my personal experience included a broad range of emotional and intellectual benefits that were useful for my personal growth. Moreover, I greatly experienced self-improvement, emotional or psychological coping and developing relationships furthering my career — including careers outside of the writing field.

1.3.3 Vårrengjøring av hytte(cabin cleaning)

Shortly after the university had just closed, and before restrictions to visit the cabin were issued, I had a chance of learning about the Norwegian "hytte" life. I got in contact with one of my research colleagues who has a "hytte" in Nordmarka. I learnt that "*When an English prince took his new love on a romantic getaway; he chose a cabin holiday in Norway. He's*

not the only one, Norwegians flock to the mountains and more new cabins are being built than ever before”.

Thus, I got intrigued into looking at Covid-19 lockdown as an opportunity to find new love and gateway into the Norwegian mountain cabins used as a symbol of the simple life outside the town (“*byer*”) life. In this experience, I learnt about how to clean the *hytte*, which was a wonderful activity that made me not to worry so much on the idea at hand. I also learnt how nature has always played a greater role in Norway. I was introduced to the Norwegians particularly keen interest in ski, hiking, kayaking and cycling. In addition, their love to fish, hunt and camp out in the wilderness. This explains why owning a “*hytte*” is therefore an easy way to be in the middle of this beloved, wild and untouched environment as well as the best way to forget the stressing city life and all the worries that come with it. Fascinatingly, this was the right time to enjoy the “*hytte*” life when the Covid-19 closure had just started. That meant that during these days, I was sure of having food courtesy of my colleague that I was helping to clean and fix the “*hytte*”.

1.3.4 Kong Olav's V Løype

Importantly, writing about this warms my heart; see not all was hopeless or grim despite the lockdown. At least the beautiful nature was freely given with access to all places my legs could afford to take me. During my childhood, I was often referred to as “*Kazenga kamaguru*” translated as ever moving, well this was the best time to catch up on my old habits of ever moving that had been severely grounded by “*PhD sit-down*” and work life haha. Who would have imagined that, this African girl from far away Kabale district in South Western Uganda could have an opportunity to walk along the Norwegian King Olav's trail? Specifically, King Olav's trail, ski track at the Frognerseteren starts from Skistua via Nikulpmyra to Øvresetertjern. It is named after **King Olav V**, the only child of **King Haakon VII** of Norway and Maud of Wales who often skied here. At the entrance of the trail, was a signpost that described King Olav's (1903-1991) steady skiing in Nordmarka. On this signpost, it mentioned that King Olav often had the opportunity to get excited wearing skis and having a dog troll. This was the one track he followed often, was officially opened by King Harald V on February 21st 2000 under the Oslo 1000th Anniversary. The trail is flat, with trees, calming air characterised with fresh breath and 9.7 km long. While walking on this trail, I was full of *swaggering* “walking in a very confident way” well knowing that my footsteps have mingled with the Kings footsteps. Moreover, I felt an overwhelming

experience of peace, tranquillity and freedom of access to use the same special facility that the King of the Norge often used. This is not so very common in many countries that anyone gets to use such facilities. When I walked this trip, it was still snow covered and raining, so I did 3 km, this walk was worth it and I highly recommend it to any student since it has easy accessibility.

1.3.5. Forest to fjord nature walk in Oslo,

In this lockdown time, a lifetime opportunity presented itself to get out to the Oslo fjord. Instead of getting myself consumed up during Covid-19 pandemic, I chose to interact with the wilderness of Oslo. It was such an amazing get-away from the city, in search of peace and quiet. I walked from one amazing view point to another, ending at forest lakes perfect for a swim though I could not swim since there were almost frozen. My first stop for the hike was the Holmenkollen ski jump, commonly referred to as “*the spiritual home to Nordic winter sports*”. It is one of the most popular and best-rated sites in Oslo for a reason, the scale of the jump and the views thereof stunned me.

I came across a monument of Fridtjof Wedel-Jarlsberg Nansen, a famous Norwegian explorer, scientist, diplomat, humanitarian and a Nobel peace Prize laureate. Actually, the reason why his statue was at the ski jump was not coincidental but rather, during his youth he was a champion skier and ice skater. I was inspired by his achievements including leading the team that made first crossing of the Greenland interior in 1888. This was a rich history, which I could have not known had it not been my initiative of getting to move around Oslo during the pandemic lockdown.

From here marked the start of my hiking adventures in the famous “marka”, climbing through the dense forest with a couple of kilometres of hiking paths. In my short hike of about 30 minutes, I arrived at Frognerstøen a historic collection of 19th century wooden buildings, which I guess highlight a typical Norwegian rural architecture. I caught myself getting curious to have a peep of the interior of the building. Guess what, I did this several times and was really mesmerised with the details considered in a Norwegian interior works. Well thank God, “*I was never arrested for peeping without permission haha*”. My longest forest walk was from a 25 kilometers away from Holmekollen passing through Bærum Kommune. It was on this specific journey that I was able to have a chance to see the Fossekalven Norges nasjonalfugl. I was told this was a golden chance since this bird is generally shy in nature.

Thus, few people have had a chance to see it. Notably, this was a once in life time may be experience courtesy of making me have a good memory of the pandemic lockdown.

Next stop was Vettakollen hike, this was characterised by dirt paths, rocky passages and deep forest during the hike. This was a very exciting trip towards the viewpoint of, a "locals only" destination that offers various views of Oslo. I had ably prepared for this hike with a mat pack to offer myself a splendid panoramic view lunch together with coffee. Luckily enough on the day I under took this trip, the weather was fantastic with sun and warm wind. I got a chance to visit, a newly constructed modern cabin "*Fuglemyrhytta*" by Den Norske Turustforening Oslo.

1.3.6. Lakes and rivers walks around Oslo fjord

It is through these forest walks that I had to see several lakes in Oslo and Bærum. My nature walks through the forest led me until the shores of *Sognsvann*, one of Oslo's prettiest lakes and perfect place for a swim. Unfortunately, during this time of the year swimming was not possible. Nevertheless, since I am in love with swimming in this lake, I am optimistic that soon I will go for that dive into the freshness of this lake.

Another lake I visited was *Nøklevann* in Østmarka in Oslo, Norway. This lake drains through Ljanselva to Bunnefjorden. I was informed that it is a former drinking water supply for Oslo.

Eye catching was *Tryvann*, a small lake in Nordmarka, near the Holmenkollen ski jump. Of interest was a cabin called Tryvannstua, in which there is a café open regularly during both summer and winter but was then closed due to the pandemic. On a hill above the lake was the television tower Tryvannstårnet ("The Tryvann tower"), visible from most of Oslo. I got to know that Tryvann is the entry and beginning of Nordmarka that is used all year around. The key purpose of this area in the winter is skiing and cross-country skiing, whereas in the summer it is more commonly used for walks in the forest and biking. Tryvann is mostly referred to as the Tryvann vinterpark.

Bogstadvannet is a lake between the city of Oslo and Bærum municipality. It is part of Sørkedalsvassdraget, which in turn is part of Oslomarkvassdraget⁴. The original name of the lake was Få (d) vannet after an earlier name for Lysakerelven, and today the lake is named after the Bogstad estate and manor, on the east shore of the lake. In addition to the manor, is

Norway's first 18-hole golf course (from 1924) owned and operated by Oslo Golfklubb on the south shore and a large camping ground (Bogstad Camping) on the east shore south of the manor. Bogstadvannet commercial development was largely by the works of the Bogstad estate. The Leucht family, succeeded by the Anker family, built a significant forestry enterprise in the area, and the lake served as part of the waterway for floating lumber to mills along Lysakerelven. The lake is a popular destination for swimming and sunbathing in the summer. It is also a venue for “Christiania Roklub” a rowing club. The lake is shallow with significant flow; algae growth is not significant which I think is not ideal for good bathing conditions. My research colleague told this story on one of the trips we made together at this lake. This colleague was interested in getting to know my experience of hiking and the therapy it offered me during this coronavirus pandemic lockdown. It is through these forest walks that I was able to see these fascinating lakes.

1.3.7. Deep water fish

Through the hiking trips, I made friends at Holmekollen area that became my family. This family introduced me to eating deep-water fish. Thus several days, I was invited for dinner made of fish at their home. I ate and tasted several fish from northern Norway like; *Uer*, the fish that popping eyes out of socket when got out water, *Lusuer* and *Breiflabb*. This provided me with insight into the Norwegian fish culinary. Moreover, during these dinners it meant that I had saved on my struggling economy since I got free dinner meals at this home.

1.3.8. Birds and their sounds

Norway is gifted with beautiful birds, this I got to experience through my hiking trips. I saw almost all colours of birds. I learnt to identify birds' gender i.e. male and female through colour. This is a skill I acquired through interacting with persons experienced in bird watching. In fact, this experience made me see rare birds like the Norwegian national bird called the *Cinclus Cinclus* ie Fossekalen (White-Throated Dipper), wood peckers, little grebe, common divers, pigeons, gulls etc.

1.3.9. Dog walking

During the lockdown, I requested my “host family” research colleague to teach me how to dog walk. The lovely hunting boy called *Miki* who I got so friends with and helped me conquer my phobia for dogs. Therefore, I would walk him some days a week and this was

voluntary walk. However, the couple knowing my situation at hand chose to be getting me lovely dinners everyday, which was memorable. This helped me to have meals all the time and thus the statement we often mentioned to one another “*we are still alive*”. Thus, my walking Miki was fun filled especially getting to learn how to walk, communicate as well as learn dog behaviour. During this time, all my meals were guaranteed and other home use essentials. Thus, I was not starving and in addition getting to dog behaviour which in fact also provided me with stress relief. I had a memorable Easter holiday at this home and was one of the best Easter celebrations in Norway. Indeed, walking Miki has made my love for dogs incredible so when I get the SHE scholarship, I will use some of it to buy a puppy in Uganda that will always remind me about my coping in Norway during Covid -19 pandemic. Moreover, I will also train my dog to offer therapy to persons in challenging and stressful situations.

1.3.10. Spring and summer preparation activities

This was another activity in late April and early May I participated in. It included activities like washing the exterior of the house, garden chairs and tables. This was at my colleague’s home which I volunteered to do. In addition, I was introduced to planting flowers and this enabled me to learn different flower types and names. For example, the various margarita flowers, mixed fairly primrose, forget me not flowers (scorpion grass), purple heather the national flower of Norway. This crowned my coping strategies during the lockdown.

Just like the flower forget-me-not, I created memorable experiences that enabled me to cope with the pandemic. Even in the future, I will forget not Norway and its tranquillity til the last breath. The flowers painted a very great image of the strength that lies in the Norwegian society and the togetherness exhibited during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was through this coping strategy that I successfully wrote my thesis and delivered it to university.

To the student out there, getting out and finding out what one is surrounded with is worthwhile. It makes life a little easier and less crowded on one situation. To those in student villages they can reach out to their Norwegian colleagues and participate in some activities. There are Facebook groups that have very useful information on several outdoor activities. While at Kringsjø student village, I always identified groups to do outdoor activities with and this helped my mental health at the time when PhD was stressful.

Therefore, the given SHE scholarship is an opportunity to have some of my expenses paid during the remaining months as I await the pandemic of Covid-19 to reduce so that I can travel back to Uganda. Currently, there are no international travel options for me to go to Uganda, which means I have to be here until the world gets back to normality. Thus, this scholarship, will be a way of having the basic needs met taken care of and thus ease on my economic challenges. This will create a good story ending of how I chose to cope in once upon time world lockdown that found me in beautiful Norway.

References

- 1 Association, D.-A. P. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. *Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing* (2013).
- 2 Tummers, L., Bekkers, V., Vink, E. & Musheno, M. Handling stress during policy implementation: Developing a classification of “coping” by frontline workers based on a systematic review. (2013).
- 3 Tummers, N. E. *Stress management: A wellness approach*. (Human Kinetics, 2013).
- 4 Hanssen, R., ed. (1987). *Oslos byselskapet* (in Norwegian). Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget and Selskabet for Oslo Byes Vel. p. 100. ISBN 82-573-0228-7.