

navigator*

FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Update:
Friday, March 26

Navigating The First 100 Days:
Women Essential Workers



Methodology

On March 23, 2021, GBAO conducted three focus groups online with women working in varying categories of essential work across the country. Women could have worked in these industries over the past year, and several worked multiple jobs across industries. Women varied across demographics—party identification, age, education, and race/ethnicity.



Health care workers
in North Carolina



Service industry employees
in Wisconsin



Educators
in Arizona

Key Takeaways:

- In these focus groups, participants reveal the deep personal impact of COVID, one year on. Many speak openly about anxiety, depression, and loss. All respondents take COVID seriously in their personal and work lives.
- Nonetheless, many try to remain positive, practicing gratitude and trying new tools like mindfulness, puzzles, exercise, and therapy. Some also see the upside in a slower paced, less crowded life.
- Even when called “a hero,” work pressures have increased. And those in retail can face confrontations.
- All told, most expect “a new normal” rather than “back to normal.”

Despite Some Silver Linings, Many Feel Uneasy Or Anxious

What's one word or phrase to describe how things are going in the country right now?

Hopeful **Okay** **A hard time to be alive**
Anxious **Uncertain** **Uneasy** **Better**
Divided **Discouraged** **Sad**
Unsure **Frustrated**

For Many Women, COVID Brought Familiarity With A “Dark Place” And A Drive To Move Beyond It

Quite a few mention depression and anxiety, or a loss of jobs, family members, travel, connection, and hugs.

*“Just because this past year was just so hard on so many levels and I'm generally a fairly pessimistic person and that got me into a really dark place this last year. With some health issues and with losing my job with COVID... I had a hard brain reset last summer and early fall, where I'm just like, ‘I **can't be in this dark place anymore.**’ I'm just definitely trying to focus more on being positive and looking on the upside of things.”*



WI woman



AZ woman

*“A lot of people have lost jobs. I lost my second job. It was a small family restaurant and it closed. One of my sons also worked there. **So I had two job losses in my house, due directly to COVID.** And my other two sons... their jobs closed.”*

For Many Women, COVID Brought Familiarity With A “Dark Place” And A Drive To Move Beyond It

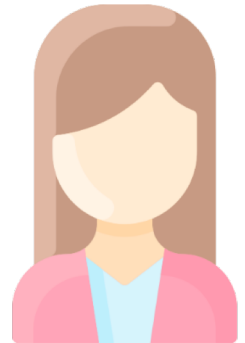
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NC woman

“I lost my mom to COVID. My dad got COVID. He recovered... He's still got a lot of lingering effects and that really sucks. He's just, he's lost oomph.”

“I was sad just because I wasn't able to see my babies [students]. So I literally would cry sometimes...on the Zoom because it was like, just you miss them... And you can't hug them. I literally thrived and lived off of my hugs every single day... Even if we did like certain supply pickups and they would want to hug and I'm like, 'I'm sorry, I can't hug you.’”



WI women

Participants Take COVID Very Seriously, Even At The Expense Of Family Relationships

*"And then with just the pandemic happening, and then a lot of politics that they hear outside of school, it's very overwhelming for them for an eight-year-old to really take in all that. **I have a lot of kids that have lost parents and grandparents from COVID.** So it does make you feel really uneasy, not only for their education, but their personal lives as well, just with everything going on. It's so chaotic for them." – AZ woman*

*"There's people who have been comfortable going out and doing things this entire time. And while I personally don't think that **was the right decision, people did it,** and for a lot of people, it was fine and it worked out and that's what they're going to keep doing." – WI woman*



NC women

*"I have a very large family. Their beliefs in COVID and mask wearing just wasn't aligned. **With my anxiety and my panic attacks, we just basically couldn't go visit.** There was a period that I didn't see them and that was very hard because we were used to visiting them all the time."*

*"I feel like everybody kind of struggled with depression and anxiety, but now it does seem like, kind of getting used to it, it has been a year. So as for family, it definitely **caused a lot of strain for me and mine.** I've always been [in a] very different mindset than them as it was, **but they know I'm in healthcare and they still don't believe in COVID.**"*

Many Try To Remain Positive, Practicing Gratitude And Trying New Coping Tools



"I appreciate things more now. There's so much negativity this past year and so much deaths and pain and trauma that I have learned to appreciate the little things more. **I'm starting to go to therapy**, which is helping me a lot more, my mental health. I'm focusing more on being healthy and realizing that not a lot of people had the opportunity to fully live out their life.... I'm lucky enough to even have one job out of the three." – AZ woman



"I've actually been more mindful. Because a lot of times as a teacher, we just go, go, go, go, go.... Now I'm more slowing it down, **being mindful**, enjoying things, doing yoga. Things that I probably wouldn't have done if it was normal.... **I need to eat healthier. I need to drink more water.** I need to do that because I need to stay healthy and strong." – AZ woman



"I'm just really trying to focus on the good that's happening, the good that's hopefully coming just around the corner, the good that's happened in the last few months, even, and just trying to focus on that going forward. I'm definitely just okay. I don't think it's great. I don't think we're in the darkest days anymore. But **I'm just trying to stay level and go up, not down.**" – WI woman



"Well, for me personally, it's going okay....I **decided to focus, not just on eating all the comfort food. I've been exercising and eating better, and I've lost some weight. Maybe I'm Suzy Cream Cheese,** but I try to have a good, positive attitude. And I feel like this has taught us a lot, this pandemic." – AZ woman

"There is so much negativity that the more negativity I encounter, it's weird, but the more positive I am. I think I'm trying to counteract that.... **I've been extremely blessed.**" – AZ woman

A “Slow Down” Of Family Life Can Be Welcome

*“It was very difficult. I think luckily we walked through it very gracefully as a family.... It did bring us closer together. We got to spend more time together. **We started doing stuff like playing board games, doing puzzles, where we were sitting around the kitchen table, actually communicating.**”*
– WI woman



*“I'm hopeful that we may return to some ways that we did before, **but some of us have actually enjoyed the slow down.** We've been able to experience things that we didn't prior to us being crazy and hectic and busy... We came up with some new creative ideas on ways to spend our time and get out of the house. I think we adapted really well... **We've experimented with new recipes and things that you can do at home.**”* – NC woman

Others See Some Benefit From Fewer Connections



AZ woman

*"On the personal side, I'm doing great. This has made me realize **I might be a little bit more introverted than I thought**, which is weird. Because I always thought of myself as an extrovert. But at this point, I'm finding that I don't really want to leave my house. I'm completely satisfied and happy with staying at home. Everyone's like, 'It's so hard to stay at home.' And I'm like, 'I don't know about you, but it's fine with me.' So I'm finding that out about myself."*

*"I think there's going to be a mix of people excited to get back out there **and people excited to stay home....For a lot of people, the year reset in a good way.** And for a lot of people, it was a bad way."*



WI woman

For Many, Work Seemed To Get Much Harder

*"I feel like a lot of women, even if they didn't have some of the burdens of their husband, they're having to freaking manage their husband or manage their kids. Men have different views on that. I saw a lot of women that couldn't go back to work. **They had to choose to resign from their job because somebody had to be able to homeschool** if they didn't have other situations."*

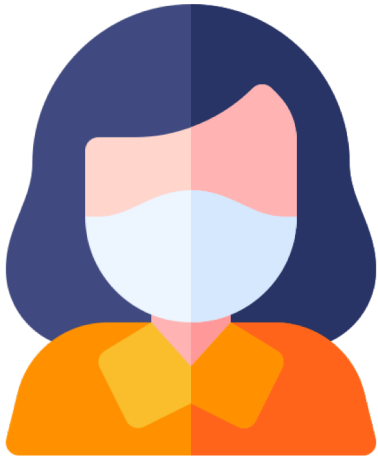
*"I work at a large facility and system-wide in all areas of nursing, just a mass Exodus, burnout in general.... I had **multiple nurses resign from my unit because their children had to be homeschooled** and they had no choice."*

*"My job, we have lost a lot of nurses. COVID has made this field very, very competitive. When I say businesses are putting out the money, I mean the agency staffing ... That is booming right now and **nurses are leaving my facility left and right.**"*



NC women

Teachers Share Unique Challenges Of The Job



AZ women

*"I can't have the kids work in groups. I can't have them share supplies. So, whereas in the past I may have only had to buy eight items for my eight tables, now I have to buy 30 items because they each have to have their own. **So, not only has that come with more job responsibility, that's come with an added personal expense to me as well.**"*

*"I have 90-minute blocks for my kiddos, and I clean after they leave. All the high touch places I clean, so now I feel like the custodian afterwards because I'm making sure everything's clean. ... **I'm more afraid of the chemicals now than the actual COVID...** Along with that, a lot of the kids, if they're sick they're out for two weeks. So, now I actually have to have a package or work for them for home for two weeks."*

Teachers Appreciate The Gratitude They Receive From Parents

"I think that people value teachers way more than they did. Which is like finally, that we're valued for all the hard work that we do and the efforts and what we have to go through every single day. Because I think people thought we were just like high paid babysitters at one point. And now that they see all the work and effort we go through to take care of these kids. So I am very, very appreciative that I think that people are now going to value teachers way more than they did previously." – NC woman

"It's just frustrating to try to explain to them [students] that life is going to go back to normal. You're going to get to college. You've got to keep pushing ahead. I've had parents email me and thank me." – AZ woman

*"I got a lot of calls and emails from parents saying, 'I **appreciate you a lot more now that I have my kids here all day.** And I listen to you, you know, trying your best to get their attention.'" – AZ woman*



For Healthcare Workers, Being Called A “Hero” Has Been Mostly Rewarding Even If It Can Elicit Complicated Reactions



“Since the pandemic, everybody that I tell that I’m a nurse is, ‘Thank you for all that you’re doing.’ They’re very appreciative.... I just felt like I was doing my job. So for people to call me a hero, it honestly made me a little uncomfortable.” – NC woman

*“Nobody’s ever said that before and I knew what we were doing is important... but at the same time, it just felt a little like it wasn’t as deserving as the doctors or the nurses or anything like that. It was nice every once in a while....**We got a lot of free food.... But then at the same time I would get so angry and bitter when I would see just crowds of people doing stuff without masks and being like, ‘So then what’s the point?’**” – WI woman*

Service Workers Can Be Called Heroes For Spreading Happiness During Dark Times

"I'm talking about the taco shop and it was mostly in jest. But when we opened, we had regulars and people who weren't regulars that were so happy that we were open and all of a sudden the taco shop that was their favorite, that they didn't get to go to for a couple of months became just sentimental and special and valuable. So it was in jest, we are just talking about tacos. But just the emotional triggers that would happen when people would come in and it felt good and I'm happy to make people happy with tacos." – WI woman



Customer-Facing Women Recount Confrontations

*"These people get in my car without a mask and I have a sign on the passenger back seat facing them that says, 'No mask, no ride. Must cover your nose, must cover your mouth.' **We're over a year into this and I'm arguing with grown people** and they're men, it's the men usually. And yeah, get out."*



WI woman

Customer-Facing Women Recount Confrontations



AZ woman

*"I ended up getting a job at Starbucks. And it's a lot harder to deal with people now. A lot harder. I've had a lot of kids that had gotten a job at Starbucks who are 16, 17, go in the back and have a mental breakdown crying because of how people are treating them and talking to us. It's hard. ... **I've had a lot of people throw drinks at me because I've asked them to put on their mask or wear a mask.** We offer masks, we give them out.... A lot of people are not happy that they can't come in. And it's just a lot of negativity. I don't feel appreciated working as a food service worker at all. And they're the ones that are dealing with a lot and not getting paid enough."*

Teachers Find Social Media Criticism Disheartening

*"I feel from the public posts that I see, anytime something is posted about...the schools are opening or the schools are closing, whatever the case is, **the stuff that I see posted on there, it's terrible sometimes. It really is hurtful**, because you look at it and you go, 'I'm working.' ... It's frustrating how we were the national heroes for a minute in March and April of last year. Everyone was, 'Teachers should get paid a million dollars a year because I don't know how they do this.' **It went from that to, 'They don't even work. They just want to stay at home because they just want to sit on their butts all day and watch TV.'**"*



AZ woman

Most Expect A “New Normal” Not “Back To Normal”

“It was just a lot of trauma that we dealt with. So it's just that healing process. Like she says, she went to therapy. Our country would need to go through a therapy session for us to get some place better.”



AZ woman



NC woman

*“I don't think we're going to be back to normal. The reason I say that is because those of us that experienced 9/11 ... **We never went back to a pre-9/11 situation** where we could go to the airport with our families and see them at the gate. That's long gone.”*

In A “New Normal,” Respondents Hope We Are Kinder To Ourselves And Each Other



WI women

“I don't think it's going to be back to normal. If I'm being optimistic, whenever that happens, I don't know if it's going to be next year. But one thing that I'm hoping for is the new normal will include us all having permission to take better care of ourselves, and have respect for each other. I think it'll be easier to call into work, without having guilt and anxiety. I think that wearing masks will be acceptable.... So yeah, that's one component that's not going to be normal, but I can kind of see that happening, and I'm hopeful for it.”

“Hopefully, [there are] more people who realize that we need a big mind shift, both for ourselves personally, like you were saying to take better care of yourself and not feel bad about calling in sick... and help to take care of others. And I'm hoping that taking that little bit more kindness towards ourselves and towards others will eventually help to make the country just a better, kinder place.”

Many Predict New Social And Hygiene Norms

"I feel like it's made me very aware of how close people get to you. Like even now at the grocery store, and they're right behind me, but I'm like, 'Hey, get back. I don't want you close to me.' I was always a little non-social, not really, but it's just made me not want to be around a lot of people at all. So I don't know if it'll ever, for me, be back to normal." – WI woman

"I wouldn't mind it [mask-wearing] being a thing, especially later on when we eventually don't have to wear masks anymore, the whole, 'When I'm sick I'm gonna wear a mask because it's gonna prevent whatever I have from spreading even more to other people.'" – AZ woman

*"For me, working at the health department and just handling hundreds of specimens every day that are just live virus. Our N-95s, the straps breaking and us having to staple them, and wearing two lab coats and just all of that. **For all of us it just brought us a huge sense of relief at work. But outside of work for us, I'm still wearing a mask. I'm still using hand sanitizer.** I still have no intention of going to a restaurant anytime soon. But, from a work standpoint, it was just much more of a relief. And, even just being around a small group of very close friends, who I would trust, regardless, just being vaccinated, even if they are, or aren't, I feel a tiny bit better. But I mean, my day to day isn't going to change much." – WI woman*

"I still wash my groceries....I think I will always drive around with hand sanitizer in my car." – NC woman





About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Andrea Purse, progressive strategist; Arkadi Gerney, The Hub Project; Joel Payne, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Delvone Michael, Working Families; Felicia Wong, Roosevelt Institute; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

About the Study

GBAO conducted online focus groups on March 23, 2021 with women in three areas: Raleigh-Durham, NC (healthcare industry, excluding doctors), Milwaukee, WI (service industry within the past year), and Phoenix, AZ (educators). Women could have multiple jobs across industries. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

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