



A Study on Student Mental Health in Higher Education During the Covid - 19

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ABSTRACT

Student mental health in higher education has been growing concern. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has brought this exposed population into rehabilitated focus. This study aims to conduct a timely assessment of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Education college students. The researcher conducted interview surveys with 195 students at a large public university in the south Gujarat to understand the effects of the pandemic on their mental health and well-being. The data were analyzed through quantitative and qualitative methods. Of the 195 students, 138 (71%) indicated increased stress and anxiety due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Multiple stressors were identified that contributed to the increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts among students. These included fear and worry about their own health and of their loved ones (177/195, 91% reported negative impacts of the pandemic), difficulty in concentrating (173/195, 89%), disruptions to sleeping patterns (168/195, 86%), decreased social interactions due to physical distancing (167/195, 86%), and increased concerns on academic performance (159/195, 82%). To cope with stress and anxiety, participants have sought support from others and helped themselves by adopting either negative or positive coping mechanisms. Due to the long-lasting pandemic situation and onerous measures such as lockdown and stay-at-home orders, the COVID-19 pandemic brings negative impacts on higher education. The findings of our study highlight the urgent need to develop interventions and preventive strategies to address the mental health of college students.

Key Word : COVID-19, Pandemic, College Student, Mental Health, Stress, Anxiety, Self-Management

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Introduction

Mental health issues are the foremost impediment to academic success. Mental illness can affect students' motivation, concentration, and social interactions — crucial factors for students to succeed in higher education. The 2019 Annual Report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health reported that anxiety continues to be the most common problem (62.7% of 82,685 respondents) among students who completed the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms, with clinicians also reporting that anxiety continues to be the most common diagnosis of the students that seek services at university counseling centers. Consistent with the national trend, Texas A&M University has seen a rise in the number of students seeking services for anxiety disorders over the past 8 years. In 2018, slightly over 50% of students reported anxiety as the main reason for seeking services. Despite the increasing need for mental health care services at postsecondary institutions, alarmingly, only a small portion of students committing suicide contact their institution counseling centers, perhaps due to the stigma associated with mental health. Such negative stigma surrounding mental health diagnosis and care has been found to correlate with a reduction in adherence to treatment and even early termination of treatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the mental health of various affected populations. It is known that the prevalence of epidemics accentuates or creates new stressors including fear and worry for oneself or loved ones, constraints on physical movement and social activities due to quarantine, and sudden and radical lifestyle changes. A recent review of virus outbreaks and pandemics documented stressors such as infection fears, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, inadequate information, financial loss, and stigma. Much of the current literature on psychological impacts of COVID-19 has emerged from the earliest hot spots in China. Although several studies have assessed mental health issues during epidemics, most have focused on health workers, patients, children, and the general population. For example, a recent poll by The Kaiser Family Foundation showed that 47% of those sheltering in place

reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to COVID-19. Nelson et al have found elevated levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among general population samples in North America and Europe. However, with the exception of a few studies, notably from China, there is sparse evidence of the psychological or mental health effects of the current pandemic on college students, who are known to be a vulnerable population. Although the findings from these studies thus far converge on the uptick of mental health issues among college students, the contributing factors may not necessarily be generalizable to populations in other countries. As highlighted in multiple recent correspondences, there is an urgent need to assess effects of the current pandemic on the mental health and well-being of college students.

The aim of this study is to identify major stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and to understand their effects on college students' mental health. The present paper documents the findings from an online interview surveys conducted in affiliated colleges of veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat.

Research Design

A semi-structured interview survey was designed with the purpose of assessing the mental health status of college students both quantitatively and qualitatively. In addition, the interview aimed to capture the ways that students have been coping with the stress associated with the pandemic situation. First, this study assesses participants' general stress levels using the **Perceived Stress Scale-10** (PSS). PSS is a widely used instrument to measure overall stress. Second, participants were asked if their own and peers' (two separate questions) stress and anxiety increased, decreased, or remained the same due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who indicated increased stress and anxiety during the pandemic, researcher questioned their stress coping strategies and use of available mental health counseling services. Researcher then elicited pandemic-specific stressors and their manifestations across 12 academic-, health-, and lifestyle-related categories of outcomes such as effects on own or loved ones' health, sleeping habits, eating habits, financial situation, changes to their living environment, academic workload, and social relations. Students were also asked about the impact of COVID-19 on depressive and suicidal thoughts. These constructs were derived from existing literature identifying prominent factors affecting college students' mental health. Feedback on the rigorousness of COVID-19's impact on these aspects were produced using a 4 - point scale: 4-point scale: 0 (none), 1 (mild), 2 (moderate), and 3 (severe). Participants were asked to elaborate on each response. Third, participants were guided to describe stressors, coping strategies, and

barriers to mental health treatment during a typical semester without associating with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although multiple analyses of the collected data are currently under progress, PSS results and the COVID-19–related findings are presented in this paper.

Participants

Participants were selected from the student population of an affiliated education colleges of veer Narmad south Gujarat university Surat. This particular university closed all their campuses and affiliated colleges on March 23, 2020, and held all its classes virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the state government issued a stay-at-home order. Most interviews were conducted about 3 months after the stay-at-home order. Participants were selected by researcher through email, text messaging, and snowball sampling. The only inclusion criteria for participation were that participants should have been enrolled as B.Ed. students in the affiliated colleges of university at the time of the interviews.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted by 10 Ph.D. researchers trained in qualitative methods and the use of the interview survey guide described above. Not a single interview conducted by the researcher. All interviews were conducted via Google Meet and were audio recorded. Prior to the interview, participants were provided an information document about the study. Upon verbal consent, participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire about their demographic information such as age, gender, year of college, and program of study before completing the interview. Participation was voluntary and participants were not compensated.

Data Analysis

Firstly, the descriptive statistics were compiled to describe participants' demographics (eg, age, gender, academic year) and the distribution of the ratings on PSS-10 survey items. A total PSS score per participant was calculated by first reversing the scores of the positive items (4-7, 9, and 10) and then adding all the ten scores. A mean (SD) PSS score was computed to evaluate the overall level of stress and anxiety among the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, participants' answers to 12 academic-, health-, and lifestyle-related questions were analyzed to understand relative impacts of the pandemic on various aspects of college students' mental health. Percentages of participants who indicated negative ratings (ie, none, moderate, or severe influence) on these questions were calculated and ranked in a descending order.

Qualitative answers to the 12 stressors and coping strategies were analyzed using thematic analysis similar to the deductive coding step in the grounded theory method.

Results

Participants

From the education colleges of Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat all the trainee teacher were participated from different location in the present survey. There were graduate and post graduate students doing B.Ed., and data from 195 participants were used in the analysis. The average age was 23 years, and there were more female students (111/195, 57%) than male students (84/195, 43%). Approximately 70% of the participants were junior and senior students. The mean PSS score for the 195 participants was 18.8 (SD 4.9), indicating moderate perceived stress in the month prior to the interview.

Challenges of Mental Health of college student's During COVID-19

Out of 195 participants, 138 (71%) indicated that their stress and anxiety had increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 39 (20%) indicated it remained the same and 18 (9%) mentioned that the stress and anxiety had actually decreased. Among those who perceived increased stress and anxiety, only 10 (5%) used mental health counseling services. A vast majority of the participants (n=189, 97%) presumed that other students were experiencing similar stress and anxiety because of COVID-19. As shown in [Figure 2](#), at least 54% (up to 91% for some categories) of participants indicated negative impacts (either mild, moderate, or severe) of COVID-19 on academic-, health-, and lifestyle-related outcomes. The qualitative analysis yielded two to five themes for each category of outcomes.

Difficulty With Concentration

A vast majority of participants (173/195, 89%) indicated difficulty in concentrating on academic work due to various sources of distraction. Nearly half of them (79/173, 46%) mentioned that their home is a distractive environment and a more suitable place to relax rather than to study. Participants mentioned that they were more prone to be interrupted by their family members and household chores at home. Other factors affecting students' concentration were lack of accountability (21/173, 12%) and social media, internet, and video games (19/173, 11%). Some (18/173, 10%) stated that online classes were subject to distraction due to lack of interactions and prolonged attention to a computer screen. Additionally, monotonous life patterns were mentioned by some to negatively affect concentration on academic work (5/173, 3%).

Disruption to Sleep Patterns

A majority of participants (168/195, 86%) reported disruptions to their sleep patterns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with over one-third (38%) reporting such disruptions as severe. Half of students who reported some disruption (84/168, 50%) stated that they tended to stay up later or wake up later than they did before the COVID-19 outbreak. Another disruptive impact brought by the pandemic was irregular sleep patterns such as inconsistent time to go to bed and to wake up from day to day (28/168, 17%). Some (12/168, 7%) reported increased hours of sleep, while others (10/168, 6%) had poor sleep quality.

Increased Social Isolation

A majority of participants answered that the pandemic has increased the level of social isolation (167/195, 86%). Over half of these students (91/167, 54%) indicated that their overall interactions with other people such as friends had decreased significantly. In particular, about one-third (52/167, 31%) shared their worries about a lack of in-person interactions such as face-to-face meetings. Others (9/167, 5%) stated that disruptions to their outdoor activities (eg, jogging, hiking) have affected their mental health.

Concerns About Academic Performance

A majority of participants (159/195, 82%) showed concerns about their academic performance being impacted by the pandemic. The biggest perceived challenge was the transition to online classes (61/159, 38%). In particular, participants stated their concerns about sudden changes in the syllabus, the quality of the classes, technical issues with online applications, and the difficulty of learning online. Many participants (36/159, 23%) were worried about progress in research and class projects because of restrictions put in place to keep social distancing and the lack of physical interactions with other students. Some participants (23/159, 14%) mentioned the uncertainty about their grades under the online learning environment to be a major stressor. Others (12/159, 8%) indicated their reduced motivation to learn and tendency to procrastinate.

Disruptions to Eating Patterns

COVID-19 has also negatively impacted a large portion of participants' dietary patterns (137/195, 70%). Many (35/137, 26%) stated that the amount of eating has increased, including having more snacks since healthy dietary options were reduced, and others (27/137, 20%) addressed that their eating patterns have become inconsistent because of COVID-19, for example, irregular times of eating and skipping meals. Some students (16/137, 12%) reported decreased appetite, whereas others (7/137, 5%) were experiencing emotional eating or a tendency to eat when bored. On the

other hand, some students (28/195, 14%) reported that they were having healthier diets, as they were cooking at home and not eating out as much as they used to.

Changes in the Living Environment

A large portion of the participants (130/195, 67%) described that the pandemic has resulted in significant changes in their living conditions. A majority of these students (89/130, 68%) referred to living with family members as being less independent and the environment to be more distracting. For those who stayed in their residence either on- or off-campus (18/130, 14%), a main change in their living environment was reduced personal interactions with roommates. Some (9/130, 7%) mentioned that staying inside longer due to self-quarantine or shelter-in-place orders was a primary change in their living circumstances.

Financial Difficulties

More than half of the participants (115/195, 59%) expressed their concerns about their financial situations being impacted by COVID-19. Many (44/115, 38%) noted that COVID-19 has impacted or is likely to impact their own current and future employment opportunities such as part-time jobs and internships. Some (21/115, 18%) revealed the financial difficulties of their family members, mostly parents, getting laid off or receiving pay cuts in the wake of COVID-19.

Increased Class Workload

The effect of COVID-19 on class workload among the college students was not conclusive. Although slightly over half of participants (106/195, 54%) indicated their academic workload has increased due to COVID-19, the rest stated the workload has remained the same (70/195, 36%) or rather decreased (19/195, 10%). For those who were experiencing increased workloads, nearly half (51/106, 48%) thought they needed to increase their own efforts to catch up with online classes and class projects given the lack of in-person support from instructors or teaching assistants. About one-third of the participants (33/106, 31%) perceived that assignments had increased or became harder to do. Some (6/106, 6%) found that covering the remainder of coursework as the classes resumed after the 2-week break to be challenging.

Depressive Thoughts

When asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on depressive thoughts, 44% (86/195) mentioned that they were experiencing some depressive thoughts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Major contributors to such depressive thoughts were loneliness (28/86, 33%), insecurity or uncertainty (10/86, 12%), powerlessness or hopelessness (9/86, 10%), concerns about academic performance (7/86, 8%), and overthinking (4/86, 5%).

Suicidal Thoughts

Out of 195 participants, 16 (8%) stated that the pandemic has led to some suicidal thoughts with 5% (10/16) reporting these thoughts as mild and 3% (6/16) as moderate. There were 6 participants (38%) that attributed their suicidal thoughts to the presence of depressive thoughts. Other reasons were related to academic performance (1/16, 6%), problems with family as they returned home (1/16, 6%), and fear from insecurity and uncertainty (1/16, 6%).

Coping Mechanism During COVID-19

To cope with stress and anxiety imposed by COVID-19, college students reported seeking support from others but were mainly using various self-management methods.

Self-Management

The majority of the participants (105/138, 76%) with increased stress due to the outbreak of COVID-19 explained that they were using various means to help themselves cope with stress and anxiety during the pandemic. Some (24/105, 23%) relied on negative coping methods such as ignoring the news about COVID-19 (10/105), sleeping longer (7/105), distracting themselves by doing other tasks (5/105), and drinking or smoking (2/105). Approximately one-third (30/105, 29%) used positive coping methods such as meditation and breathing exercises (18/105), spiritual measures (7/105), keeping routines (4/105), and positive reframing (2/105). A majority of the participants (73/105, 70%) who used self-management mentioned doing relaxing hobbies including physical exercise (31/105), enjoying streaming services and social media (22/105), playing with pets (7/105), journaling (5/105), listening to music (4/105), reading (2/105), and drawing (2/105). Finally, some participants (15/105, 14%) stated that they were planning activities (eg, drafting to-do lists) for academic work and personal matters as a self-distraction method.

Seeking Support From Others

Approximately one-third of the participants (47/138, 34%) mentioned that communicating with their families and friends was a primary way to deal with stress and anxiety during COVID-19. Some explicitly stated that they were using a virtual meeting application such as Zoom frequently to connect to friends and family. Only 1 participant claimed to be receiving support from a professional therapist, and another participant was using Sanvello, a mobile mental health service app provided by the university.

Barriers to Seeking Professional Support During COVID-19

Despite the availability of tele-counseling and widespread promotion of such services by the university, a vast majority of participants who indicated an increase in stress and anxiety (128/138,

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93%) claimed that they had not used school counseling services during the pandemic. Reasons for such low use included the condition not being perceived as severe enough to seek the services (4/128, 3%), not comfortable interacting with unfamiliar people (1/128, 0.8%), not comfortable talking about mental health issues over the phone (1/128, 0.8%), and lack of trust in the counseling services (1/128, 0.8%).

Conclusion

College students comprise a population that is considered particularly vulnerable to mental health concerns. The findings of this study bring into focus the effects of pandemic-related transitions on the mental health and well-being of this specific population. Our findings suggest a considerable negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a variety of academic-, health-, and lifestyle-related outcomes. By conducting online survey interviews in the midst of the pandemic, we found that a majority of the participants were experiencing increased stress and anxiety due to COVID-19. Among the effects of the pandemic identified, the most prominent was worries about one's own health and the health of loved ones, followed by difficulty concentrating. These findings are in line with recent studies in China that also found concerns relating to health of oneself and of family members being highly prevalent among the general population during the pandemic. Difficulty in concentrating, frequently expressed by our participants, has previously been shown to adversely affect students' confidence in themselves, which has known correlations to increased stress and mental health. In comparison with stress and anxiety in college students' general life, it appears that countermeasures put in place against COVID-19, such as shelter-in-place orders and social distancing practices, may have underpinned significant changes in students' lives. For example, a vast majority of the participants noted changes in social relationships, largely due to limited physical interactions with their families and friends. This is similar to recent findings of deteriorated mental health status among Chinese students and increased internet search queries on negative thoughts in the United States. The findings on the impact of the pandemic on sleeping and eating habits are also a cause for concern, as these variables have known correlations with depressive symptoms and anxiety.

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