

Mental Health Education for College Students under the Pandemic of the COVID-19

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Received: July 25, 2021; Revised: November 16, 2021; Accepted: November 30, 2021

ABSTRACT

College students are a vulnerable group that battles mental health disorders due to the demand they face to succeed in their academic life, financial constraints, the pressures of finding a successful career path. The COVID-19 pandemic has served to exacerbate their levels of anxiety, depression, suicide ideation, eating disorders and even alcohol and substance abuse. The burden of the pandemic has increased stressors in their lives, such as financial stress, loneliness, social isolation, increased class workload that impede their mental health. The objective of this academic paper was to explore these challenges, their solutions and the role of education and awareness as a mitigating strategy and intervention for building resilience and promoting mental well-being.

Key Words: COVID-19 pandemic, mental health education, College students, Stressors

Introduction

College students from all over the world have marked over one year of disruption in their studies since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. These students have been dealing with uncertainty regarding opening of school campuses and their futures (Anderson, 2020). Research has shown that college students have been experiencing a rising rate of depression and anxiety. College students are said to worry about themselves, their loved ones, academic life, future careers and even the economy (Browning, et al.,

2021). As a result of the pandemic, these students have been restrained physically due to social distancing restrictions and also have been denied social interactions that are a hallmark for majority of young people during this age. Earlier in 2020, 50% of students were optimistic about their futures and the end of the pandemic. However, as the pandemic soured in its third wave, 61% of these college students expressed feeling anxious, fear, worry, irritability, boredom, stigma, economic restraints, unmotivated and stressed about their studies, performance, loved ones, current and future economic and

social status (Keasberry, et al., 2020). Others also note that they are experiencing loneliness due to social isolation measures. Mental health illness is a serious issue that has been found to negatively affect students' academic performance. COVID-19 has highlighted this challenge showing that college students' performances are likely to suffer as a result. It is important that universities and colleges understand this challenge of mental health, its risk factors and possible effective interventions to ensure that they can educate their students and relevant stakeholders as well as take the necessary measures to create a healthy and safe environment (Dennon, 2020). This paper explored the challenge of mental health disorders experienced by college students as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and the importance of creating awareness to mitigate the risks of these stressor.

The Challenge of COVID-19 Pandemic

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic took over the world, college students were already battling psychological challenges due to their experiences in school as well as other risk factors such as age and socioeconomic status (Mekonen, Workneh, Ali, & Muluneh, 2021). College students from the UK, US and other developed countries have been reported to struggle with depression, anxiety, stress and even suicide due to the increasing workload, financial stress and in some cases isolation and loneliness once they begin their college careers (Ghazawy, et al., 2020). In most cases, the college experience is a strange and unique experience and students struggle with adjusting to new environments, figuring out who they are, understanding their direction in school and

future careers, struggling with classes and new independence as well as financial constraints. Therefore, the beginning of the pandemic has exacerbated the situation and worsened mental health conditions of many college students around the world (Oleniaczhttps, 2021).

Several studies conducted in 2020 published results showing how a majority of college students were experiencing mental health issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new routines and environments (Keasberry, et al., 2020). One of the factors that increased stress and anxiety were fear for their loved ones' and their own health and lives. Medical reports indicated that there were some members of society who are more vulnerable to the pandemic. These included; the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions. Therefore, college students found themselves worrying about their grandparents, family friends and relatives who had conditions that increased their vulnerabilities such as pregnancy and diabetes (Gupta, 2021). Some of the students also had parents or relatives working in vulnerable occupations such as health workers and therefore experienced anxiety and stress at the increased risks experienced by loved ones. Other students were also worried about their own health and their risk of contracting the disease (Wenjun, et al., 2020).

Secondly, college students have been experiencing mental stress due to lack of concentration in their academic studies. Most students have had to study from home virtually since the break out of the pandemic and closure of schools (Lai, et al., 2020). Even while other colleges opened temporarily, most of them closed again or

remain closed after the third wave of the pandemic was reported to be more aggressive. Most students noted that the home environment has not been a conducive environment for studying to high levels of distraction from technological devices, house chores and other family members who were also home due the social distancing restrictions (Anderson, 2020). Students were contending with the challenge of ensuring a high academic performance in an environment that is unstable and disruptive. Technological distractions comes from social media, TV and media devices and video games. Students also found it hard to concentrate on virtual classes due to those distractions and copious amount of time spent on computer screens. The monotony of everyday life in the home also made it difficult to concentrate on online learning (Browning, et al., 2021).

College students are also experiencing disruption of sleeping and eating patterns due to inability to maintain a consistent sleep and eating routine. Most of these students report going to sleep later and waking up later than before. Many others reported that their sleep quality has been compromised (Keasberry, et al., 2020). When it comes to diets, some students reported increasing the meals taken including more snacks while other students reported skipping meals leading to poor nutrition. Moreover, with the shutting down of many businesses, it has been difficult for many of them to access healthy meal options. Other individuals were also caught emotionally eating due to boredom and stress (Ghazawy, et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of access to physical activity was further damaging their health,

consequently having negative effects on their mental health (Oleniaczhttps, 2021).

For the first time in history, college students had to contend with the challenge of social isolation and inability to participate in the usual social activities within college like they were used to (Oleniaczhttps, 2021). Most individuals going into college were usually excited about the social life experience of college life. However, the pandemic shifted and changed expectations of many college students. Many of them have been isolated from their friends for months and the toll of this isolation was negatively impacting their mental health. They were unable to have face to face interactions with their friends, go to parties, participate in sporting events or even engage in physical activities such as running and jogging (Mekonen, Workneh, Ali, & Muluneh, 2021). The condition has been exacerbated by their loss of independence since most of them have had to move back home. When in the college campus, students were usually used to having their freedom and independence. However, living back home means that they were answerable to their parents or guardians (Browning, et al., 2021). The change of primary living environment has also increased their levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

Research conducted showed that a majority of students have increased worry about their academic performance. Many of them have found it challenging to transition from traditional classes to online classrooms where they cannot physically engage with their instructors or fellow classmates (Son, Hegde, Smith, Wang, & Sasangohar, 2020).

Online classrooms posed unique challenges such as internet or Wifi challenges, lower quality of syllabus and inability to engage with others. Some of these challenges have forced students to feel unmotivated or even procrastinate on their daily school assignments. Other students with classes that required practical participation in projects were unsure how those classes would be completed and therefore experienced anxiety (Ghazawy, et al., 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have delayed graduations, internships and even career searches for many of the students. Therefore, some of them feel stress stemming from the uncertainty and increasing financial burden from late graduation and limited job opportunities (Browning, et al., 2021). Also, some of their parents have been laid off or received pay-cuts and the students are feeling the financial burden of their parents.

College students are said to be driven by a sense of possibility in life, therefore the pandemic creating uncertainty in their lives, overhauls their sense of purpose and drive in life. The stressors developed by the pandemic such as financial constraints, depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness and isolation have made college students lose hope while they question whether normalcy will return to their lives (Browning, et al., 2021). In 2020, students in the United States were under extreme stress worrying about climate change, election, pandemic and pending economic recession that would deter their future financial prospects and delay their careers or employment opportunities (Anderson, 2020). The situation was made worse by the fact that they had to struggle with these thoughts on their own while

isolated. Furthermore, the internet and social media did not help the situation with the spread of propaganda and fear mongering by some media networks and individuals. Consequently, some students chose to withdraw further from their social circles, further worsening their mental health status (Keasberry, et al., 2020).

Many students are facing the risk of financial uncertainty. Minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who depend on aid from the government or other third parties as well as international students are experiencing increased risks due to the pandemic (Wenjun, et al., 2020). Financial uncertainty increases mental health challenges as the pandemic rails on. Many students have parents who have lost their income or had it reduced and are therefore struggling to take care of their basic needs as well as worry about their tuition fees. Since the pandemic negatively affected the retail and hospitality industry the most, it has been difficult for these students to secure part-time jobs to help at home. Students who had previously been able to secure work in their college campuses are also struggling to make ends meet as they lost their source of income (Son et al., 2020). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are unfairly disadvantaged because they are unable to secure the most efficient technological devices and faster wifi to enable them to quickly access their classes online or stream them. Some of them have had to lose exams and other important opportunities hence negatively affecting their academic performance and future prospects (Salimi et al., 2021).

International students tend to face mental health challenges due to the issues they encounter while studying in foreign countries. However, the pandemic has worsened their challenges as well. A study was conducted to check the mental health of international college students during the pandemic (Lai, et al., 2020). The study found out that at least 80% of these students were experiencing moderate to high level of stress (Son et al., 2020). Those who stayed in the foreign country expressed high levels of stress due to isolation and lack of support than those who returned to their countries. Female international students were also found to be more stressed than their male counterparts because of lower levels of resilience and higher rates of worry over the academic work. In this particular study, the researchers found that positive thinking and resilience were two factors that lowered the risk of the negative psychological impact of COVID-19 (Oleniaczhttps, 2021). Some of the unique challenges that these students faced included inability to acquire tickets back to their home country at affordable prices, travel risks and strict guidelines as well as the difficult quarantine process once they arrived home. Those staying in the foreign countries had to find ways of getting employment to help with living expenses which was a daunting process as the economy goes through a recession (Lai, et al., 2020). There were also differences between returnees and those who stayed with the latter experiencing higher levels of stress. This meant that the lack of social support from loved ones worsened the situation for those students who chose to stay in their institutional country (Browning, et al., 2021).

Research studies conducted in the United States showed that the levels of stress, anxiety, worry and depression differ from one ethnicity to another with Asians experiencing the highest rates of mental health disorders (Dennon, 2020). Findings from these studies showed that Asians have experienced online bullying during the pandemic due to the fact the virus originated from China (Keasberry, et al., 2020). Asian college students were not only at the receiving end of ignorant remarks by other students but were also unlikely to seek help from mental health professionals. Their inability to defend themselves has continued to increase the level of discrimination against different Asian ethnicities in the US and across other countries (Lai, et al., 2020).

Risk Factors for Development of Mental Health Disorders

A study was conducted across seven universities in the United States and showed that there were risk factors that increased the likelihood of development of mental health issues from the COVID-19 pandemic amongst the students (Browning, et al., 2021). These risk factors included age, gender, time spent on screen or online, academic status, socioeconomic status and academic level. The study showed that women were more likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic than men (Gupta, 2021). Those younger in the academic level, Asian students, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as students who spent a lot of time on their screens were more likely to develop worry, fears, stress, anxiety and depression. Younger students falling in the age bracket of

18-24 years were more likely to experience these negative emotions and hence young, female students who were also Asian were more predisposed to experiencing poor mental health from the pandemic (Browning, et al., 2021). Furthermore, those from a poor socioeconomic background who spent an average of 8 hours a day online also were at a higher risk of a negative psychological impact. Researchers of this study concluded that the findings could inform education or strategies for education or interventions that addressed mental health issues of college students at universities (Anderson, 2020).

A CDC report published in 2020 stated that the rates of suicide ideation amongst students between the ages of 18-24 has increased tremendously (Ghazawy, et al., 2020). Twenty five percent of those interviewed stated that they had considered suicide at least once in the last month. These statistics were alarming and frightening for stakeholders involved including parents and college administrators. Aside from the fact that mental health issues were rising amongst this demographic (Lai, et al., 2020). Most students reported that the pandemic has decreased access to mental health care from professionals. Due to restrictions on physical interactions, most mental health care professionals have taken their practice on the virtual platform also making it difficult to provide adequate and appropriate interventions that would enhance their health and well-being (Salimi et al., 2021). Mental health advocacy groups have also stated that the pandemic has made it increasingly difficult to access students and provide the right materials and provide the needed support.

The Challenge of Access to Mental Health

Another big challenge in colleges is that most of these institutions of higher learning are ill-equipped to handle this mental health crisis that is developing and increasing (Wenjun, et al., 2020). Universities and colleges around the world have not built the right structures to be able to adequately support students undergoing a mental health crisis. As the demand rises, many of these institutions might be facing challenges of being understaffed and long waiting times causing some of them to go without accessing the help they need (Son et al., 2020). The pandemic has created a problem which might have detrimental future effects. Therefore, colleges will need to increase allocation of resources to mental health departments and start providing help virtually while they prepare to open schools once the pandemic is over (Anderson, 2020).

The demand for mental health care has helped reduce the stigma that surrounds it amongst college students. However, it seems that most students seeking help during the pandemic for their anxiety and depression are choosing to ignore their need for help since their universities are not well-equipped to handle their challenges in large numbers (Keasberry, et al., 2020). Most of these counselling centers are also struggling with issues such as licenses to be able to provide virtual mental healthcare in the form of telepsychiatry or teletherapy especially across state lines. Counselors need to have the appropriate licenses and adhere to specific state regulations when providing mental health care to patients in different states. As students are currently at home,

these regulations need to be met before mental health care can be provided virtually (Gupta, 2021). In some states, the regulations were relaxed to accommodate the current situation. However, not all states have followed suit. However, since colleges are also experiencing economic challenges, their mental health clinics are struggling with small budgets which mean that they lack adequate resources and staff to fully help students struggling with mental health challenges (Lai, et al., 2020). Additionally, with our traditional physical therapy, there were gatekeepers that aided with helping students get to the school counselor's office but these gatekeepers lack the virtual platform and therefore there is another challenge that presents itself. Many counselors are worried that students might lack the initiative to individually seek help without being nudged by others such as friends or their professors (Oleniaczhttps, 2021).

Solutions

1. Mental Health Awareness

There is need for mental health education amongst educators and students to help mitigate the risks of the psychological burden of the pandemic that students are currently facing. Creating awareness through different strategies will help build resilience and help students be able to self-protect as well as help others safely transition during this difficult time (Mekonen et al., 2021). A mental health awareness campaign will therefore help empower students and educators with skills to cope. Researchers and other experts state that campaigns need to be holistic and inclusive of the relevant stakeholders to

ensure that it is effective (Gupta, 2021). Due to social restrictions, such potential campaigns need to be conducted online and cover several areas such as family relationships, self, use of technology, physical and mental exercise as well as management of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicide ideation (Browning, et al., 2021).

The first aspect that awareness needs to cover is self-management during the pandemic. Some of the coping mechanisms that students are currently using are not only ineffective but damaging (Lai, et al., 2020). Reports have shown that students are using food, alcohol, drugs, social media, sex, sleep and sometimes even ignoring the news as a way to cope with the chaos surrounding their lives. All these mechanisms are not well-suited to addressing the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic and serves to delay the problem rather than solve it. Therefore, through teletherapy and a mental health campaign, students need to be educated to use healthy techniques such as speaking to a mental health professional, speaking to loved ones, exercise, yoga, meditation and breathing exercises (Ghazawy, et al., 2020). Additionally, employing spirituality and religion as well as a healthy routine in their everyday lives will help with self-management. Other activities that are healthy would include reading, drawing, playing with pets, and journaling (Mekonen et al., 2021).

In the Chinese school context, more awareness is needed to promote mental health recognition to facilitate not only the identification of these challenges but also help with training teachers and other faculty

members to empower them with the right tools to curb this challenge (Li, et al., 2021). Mental health awareness training is beneficial for students, teachers and even parents. Students also need to be empowered with knowledge and skills such as coping and mindfulness strategies. These skills will be able to give the students a sense of control over their lives and hence limit their development of depression and anxiety during crises like pandemic (Xiong, et al., 2021). Lastly, students also need to be informed to help them identify fake and real news on social media and therefore control what they read and what influences them.

2. Promoting Online Communication

Both international and domestic students need social support during the pandemic. Social support from friends, loved ones and family is important in helping build resilience amongst college students (Anderson, 2020). Continuous communication with family members and other loved ones helps with management of anxiety, depression and stress as it helps with providing assurance and reinforcing love and care. Asian students who are more likely to experience these challenges can benefit from support from their families to fight against discrimination and stigma during the pandemic (Lai, et al., 2020). Students are now living in close quarters with their families and therefore family functioning is imperative in the process of building resilience. Furthermore, support from a mental health professional through teletherapy is also helpful in helping students build their resilience (Dennon, 2020).

3. Virtual Mental Health Care

Additionally, barriers to seeking mental health care virtually from universities or third party counselors need to be eliminated (Oleniacz, 2021). There are students who feel less inclined to seek help virtually and there are also barriers of limited resources to cater to the rising demand (Browning, et al., 2021). Governments and interest groups need to provide financial support to mental health care clinics within schools to ensure that they can dispense the needed care to their students. Education and awareness in this area is important to help students realize the importance of mental health and get comfortable with speaking to unfamiliar but professional people online. Institutions need to continue advocating for teletherapy services for their students. Effective transfers to local mental health care providers can be facilitated by counselors from school clinics to ensure continuity of care and that students are still receiving care from trusted professionals (Lai, et al., 2020).

4. Management of Spread of Propaganda and Misinformation

Governments also need to control propaganda and misinformation concerning reports on the virus and the discrimination and hate that is perpetuated towards Asian people across the globe. The wrong information shared across social media and other platforms lead to distress and anguish further damaging students' mental health conditions (Browning, et al., 2021). Furthermore, international students in foreign countries rely on factual information to learn about the health and well-being of their family and loved ones back home. There

needs to be cooperation between governments, institutions and the media to foster accurate dissemination of information that is clear and easy to understand (Oleniacz, 2021).

5. Fostering Parental Care at Home

Parents and educators also need to pay close attention to college students during personal interactions. They can learn ways to identify changes in moods, behavior and attitudes to see how detrimental these mental health disorders are in their lives (Lai et al. 2020). College students who suddenly shift from conducting their normal routines, change their behavior and moods or alienate themselves from family and friends need to be paid attention to ensure that depression is not leading to suicide ideation or worse, causes suicide. Educators and parents need to be at the forefront of ensuring students have access to mental health care resources they need and that they are also able to build healthy social connections online to help with their new environments and guard against loneliness and depression (Gupta, 2021). Despite social guidelines that limit physical connections, researchers opine that social connections are instrumental to people's mental health and well-being and therefore students need to be educated and encouraged to turn away from screens and build these connections at home and hence they can build social support that helps them even after the pandemic is over.

Conclusion

This article explores the challenge of mental health amongst college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and solutions that need

to be advocated for to ensure students' health and well-being being maintained. Through the analysis of several studies conducted in 2020, it was found out that there are risk factors that increase the susceptibility to mental health challenges for students. They include; gender, race and ethnicity, time spent on social media, socioeconomic backgrounds and presence of social support. The pandemic has been found to increase stressors such as economic constraints, loneliness and isolation consequently leading to mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicide ideation. International students and female Asians students were found to bear the worst brunt of the psychological burden that is not being effectively handled by universities and colleges around the world. The paper suggests the promotion of awareness to ensure that students and educators are well equipped. Students need to have the proper tools and knowledge to self-manage their emotional and psychological health as well as build resilience. Institutions also need the right resources to be able to help their students and meet the rising demand for mental health care. Educators have a significant role to play to ensure that they manage mental health risks and meet the needs of their students.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Dr. Nathara Mhunpiew of the Assumption University of Thailand, who offers valuable help and support in writing this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Senhao Wang is currently a university lecturer and teacher of ideological and political education in Taiyuan Institute of Technology. He has ten years of teaching experience. His main research interest is mental health education for college students.

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