


## Chapter 2

# State of Mental Health of Students in Universities

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter presents the state of mental health of students in higher education institutions, help seeking behaviors, and available mental health support. Mental health problems have a profound impact on all aspects of the student's life at the individual, interpersonal, and even institutional level. The chapter also presents factors that have been associated with seeking help, including the social environment within the college/university. Colleges and universities offer a unique setting to address mental health problems among students, and therefore should develop programmes for mental health promotion and disease prevention for their students before they grow in severity and cause long-term problems.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Globally, mental health problems are increasingly becoming common and are associated with impaired level of functioning accompanied with reduced quality of life (Kessler, et al., 2011). Mental health is paramount for student's adjustment and coping during their academic journey. Mental health problems may on the other hand have a serious impact on a student's life, affecting capacity to organize highly demanding study hours, socialize, and perform academically (Pacheco, et al., 2017). Many students have been shown to experience the first onset of mental health problems or an exacerbation of these symptoms during their college life. This is related to coping with academic pressure, having to deal with the stressful tasks of separation and individuation from family while some students may have to attend to numerous work and family responsibilities (Pedrelli et al., 2015). Students in higher education are also passing through critical developmental period in their lives where they transit from late adolescents to early adulthood therefore the need to understand the state of their mental health. Further, Lipson et al., (2022) affirms that colleges and universities have many unique opportunities for identifying risks and

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delivering prevention and intervention to students in need making higher education an ideal setting to address mental health during a psychosocially significant period of life.

## **BACKGROUND**

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well, and contribute to their community. Mental health is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Further, it is a basic human right and is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development. Patel et al. (2018) affirms that mental health exists on a complex continuum with experiences ranging from an optimal state of well-being to debilitating states of great suffering and emotional pain and is therefore not defined by the presence or absence of a mental disorder. Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders and is experienced differently from one person to the next at varying degrees of difficulty and distress (WHO, 2022). Mental health means that one is able to connect, function, cope and thrive in whichever situation or surrounding environment and it is as important as one's physical health (WHO, 2022). In our context, mental health therefore enables the student to connect with those in their environment, function academically, cope with the ever changing circumstances and thrive holistically as a student.

Despite its importance, it is only of recent that mental health was included in the world's global agenda. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) omitted mental health, this saw global leaders championing for its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 which targets by 2030 to reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases and promote mental health and well-being (Votruba et al., 2016). A study on Global Burden of Disease done in 2013 found that mental and substance use disorders had increased over the preceding 3 years to account for 11% of Daily-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) compared with 7.8% in 2010, and these disorders alone accounted for 21.2% of Years Lived with Disability (YLDs) worldwide. This makes mental illness a major challenge and a key developmental issue for both low, middle and high-income countries (Votruba et al., 2016). The World Mental Health Report by WHO (2022) indicates that mental disorders are the leading cause of years lived with disability, accounting for one in every six YLDs globally. Mental health also enables one to develop relationships, perform activities of daily living and adjust to situations, any impairment and lack of access to appropriate support may result to mental health conditions. The mental health conditions lead to disturbance in thoughts and feelings, changes in behaviours, compromise physical health and disruption of relationships, school drop outs or interference with livelihoods. Studies done in the United States of America (USA), Canada, Australia, Turkey and other countries have shown an increase in issues affecting mental health of students in higher education (Okoro et al., 2022). Mental health of students is a key area of focus for all stakeholders particularly towards identifying risks and appropriate preventive strategies.

## **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

An increase in issues affecting mental health of students in higher education institutions has been documented and linked to different factors including transitioning at a young age to higher education institu-

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