

Chapter 5


Risk Factors of Mental Health of Students in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Students' mental well-being plays an important role in academic achievement in higher educational institutions. A good mental state enables us to fully enjoy and appreciate our environment and the people around us. We can resist stress better and tackle daily life challenges with a positive frame of mind. Good mental health also allows one to be productive and to use one's mental abilities to the full. However, being a student brings about a number of events that can lead to stress, such as living away from home, giving up a good job to be a student, and organising your finances, deadlines and exams, to name just a few. The content of this chapter can be used by division of student support affairs in higher education institutions worldwide to develop targeted interventions and strategies for alleviating the risk factors of concern to the mental health of students in higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Good mental health allows students to be productive academically and use their mental abilities to the full while appreciating their environment and the people around them. Mental health-related problems have become a significant point of concern, gaining attention and interest from the healthcare and higher education institutions and organisations (Limone & Toto, 2022). Existing evidence has shown that the prevalence of mental health problems, including self-harm and suicides within higher education

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institutions (universities and college students), is rapidly increasing (Campbell et al., 2022). Moreover, institutions have implemented protocols for ensuring that mental issues among the public are dealt with legitimately to achieve high standards of mental health among students (Limone & Toto, 2022). The majority of the current population who fall victim to mental illnesses in the academic environment comprise college and university students (Larson et al., 2022). Although most colleges and universities have campus services available, majority of students who might get to benefit from mental health services do not sustain the care; almost half of students who presents positive for depression, for example, do not receive treatment (Lattie et al., 2022).

An extensive international survey of about 14,000 students across 19 universities in eight countries found that 35% of students met the diagnostic category for at least one general mental health condition (Auerbach et al., 2016). Hence, the rise in depression levels among university students is reported to be 12.9% higher than among the general public (Lim et al., 2018). The symptoms of mental ill-health predominantly emerge in adolescence and young adulthood (Auerbach et al., 2018; Bhatia et al., 2020). There is a rise in need for appropriate professional interventions to support students' mental health across all global higher education institutions. However, there is limited research on mental health focusing on the risk factors that predispose students to mental health illness in higher education institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this book chapter is to provide an overview of the risk factors for students' mental health in higher education institutions with specific emphasis on effective strategies that may be devised to mitigate these factors.

BACKGROUND

There is an urgent need to contextualise the concept of mental health, as it remains one of the fundamental standards in human evolution. Despite this, the concept mental health means to the entire aspects of human evolution is an exclusive notion prime to it (Wren-Lewis & Alexandrova, 2021). Mental health is a multidimensional concept that refers to both physical and psychological health because both the body and the mind contribute to illness and health (Acutt & Hattingh, 2016). Therefore, a narrow definition of mental health is that mental health refers to an absence of cognitive illness (Wren-Lewis & Alexandrova, 2021). In addition, an important mental health definition refers to the state of extensive good health in social and individual daily living situations (Wren-Lewis & Alexandrova, 2021). Additionally, mental health can be described as an individual's state of well-being. Such an individual has insight into their own abilities and limitations and can cope with daily stress in life, can work productively and has the ability to contribute fruitfully to the well-being of fellow workers, family and community (Acutt & Hattingh, 2016).

Younger students studying in higher educational institutions are largely at risk of developing mental illness, which may reoccur throughout their entire lifespan (O'Keeffe et al., 2023). Therefore, the stress that students encounter due to the academic pressure of their studies can place them at risk of developing a mental illness (O'Keeffe et al., 2023). Hence, various risk factors have been recognised as predisposing them to mental illness. Financial problems or distress is one of the major triggers of mental illness among students (Kandasamy et al., 2020). Moreover, financial problems are triggered by a shortage of capital or money which involves individual, family, and other kinds of financial issues, as cited in Kandasamy et al. (2020). Financial problems are linked to pedagogical and financial freedom, and risk handling, as students in higher education institutions are helpless when it comes to accessing various options to obtain adequate financial help which would support their expenses (Daud et al. 2018). As a result, dealing

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