

Chapter 8

Mental Health Crisis at Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Mental health of students in higher education is a public concern and its impacts have heightened awareness of this issue. A conceptual review has been carried out to address the central question of this chapter—what are the mental health disorders that affect students in higher education institutions? Improved knowledge of aspects associated with mental health crises and also those that increase the mental well-being of students can provide a foundation for designing plans and specific interventions that can prevent poor mental health and ensure targeted support is available for students at increased risk. Therefore, the chapter recommends that universities adopt a proactive approach and implement innovative programs that can preempt students' misery

INTRODUCTION

Concerns about the mental health of university students have spread throughout the world even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies that looked into students' mental health found common mental disorders such as addiction and substance use disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, depression, suicide, self-injury, and sleeping disorders (Liu et al., 2019; Reddy et al., 2018; Saleh et al., 2017; Pedrelli et al., 2015). Indeed, many mental health disorders, including depression and substance abuse disorder, tobacco usage, emotional abuse, unwanted sexual encounters, academic performance stress, relationships, and financial, emotional, and social issues begin during the period of transition to university. Other authors Manwell et al. (2015) and Patel et al. (2013) reported that a substantial number of students experienced negative emotions such as fear and grief as well as tension and suicidal ideation. Similarly, McPhillips (2023) confirmed that

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mental health struggles triggered more university students to consider dropping out and terminating study programmes prematurely. The students who partake in the McPhillips study cited personal mental health as the reason for feeling overwhelmed, far more often than others like financial considerations and difficulty of coursework. The National College Health Assessment (NCHA) (2015); however, states that 18-25 ages are disproportionately affected. Barrable et al. (2018) found that 80% of respondents had experienced stress, 70% had experienced a lack of energy or motivation, and 55% reported feelings of anxiety. Causes for such negative feelings can be found mainly in academic responsibilities, such as course deadlines (65%), and exam pressures (54%). An overview of the most prevalent mental health issues among university students, including anxiety and depression, suicide, and emotional stress are provided in this chapter, with an emphasis on their effects and associated factors. The next section discusses the background of the study.

BACKGROUND

Over the years, there has been a common agreement among scholars that there is a health crisis in university settings resulting from an increased number of students suffering from mental illness (Porru et al., 2022; Asif et al., 2020; Enwefa et al., 2020; Auerbach et al., 2018 & Larcombe et al. (2016). For this chapter, a student is defined as a person registered at a higher education (HE) institution who reports to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and who follows a course that leads to the award of a qualification. From the analysis of the literature, several risk factors emerge that are involved in the development of mental problems in students. These factors are financial problems, chronic disease, severe or long-term stress, long-term physical health condition, experiencing discrimination and stigma, including racism, childhood abuse, trauma, or neglect and social relations are the main factors of mental illness (Kandasamy et al., 2020). In particular, to classify the main factors in: academic factors, social factors, psychological risk factors, lifestyle factors and physiological factors. It is further revealed that the mental health problem is not only specific to higher education students in certain countries but also a challenge to other higher education students across the globe. For instance, based on studies from countries like Australia (Baik, et al., 2019), the United States (Eisenberg et al., 2013) and the United Kingdom (Kerr, 2013), tertiary students have a higher incidence of mental health issues. Using Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASA) to survey more than 5000 students at a major Australian university, Larcombe et al. (2016) found that 13% of students reported severe or extremely severe depressive symptoms and 18% reported severe or extremely severe anxiety symptoms, whereas only 5% of Australian population samples reported such levels. The studies of Auerbach et al. (2018) and Asif et al. (2020) show how common mental health issues are among university students, with depression accounting for 76% of cases, anxiety for 88.4%, stress for 84.4%, and other mental disorders for 45.5%. Further, Enwefa et al. (2020) and Porru et al. (2022) claim that approximately half of the diseases among university students are caused by mental health conditions. As a result, some university students experience increased stress and mental health issues like anxiety, depression, substance abuse, aggression, sleep problems, suicidal ideation, and other behavioural issues.

In Nigeria, Idowu's (2020) study found students more prone than the general population to feel lonely, experience anxiety, and feel depressed; whereas in Ireland, social isolation, despair, anxiety, depression and an increase in maladaptive behaviour were among the negative mental health outcomes that adolescents encountered (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Once more, some anxiety was observed among

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