

## Chapter 12

# Gender Differences in Stress Among Students of Higher Education During the COVID–19 Pandemic: A Textual Narrative Meta–Synthesis

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### ABSTRACT

*The impact of the stress during COVID-19 pandemic among students of different genders is clear. However, there is lack of review on the extent of how students of various genders were affected, and the strategies used during COVID-19 pandemic within higher education setting. Using a textual narrative synthesis, this chapter searched databases for primary articles to explore the extent to which students of different genders were affected and the strategies used to cope during COVID-19 pandemic. The review used a priori tool for inclusion and exclusion criteria. Out of the total of 16,308 citations, 11 were identified from six different countries in the final review.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Mental well-being is increasingly receiving researchers' attention, with a wide range of studies claiming that higher education students are suffering from stress and other mental health conditions (Gao et al., 2020; Johnson, & Lester, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of university students, who generally fall within the age range of 18 to 25 and are considered young or emerging adults. These students are experiencing increased levels of psychological distress, poor sleep quality, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety when compared to older individuals (Findlay & Arim, 2020; Casagrande et al., 2020). The sudden closure of universities introduced a sense of uncertainty and worry among students, as they faced challenges regarding their academic prospects, social isolation, and the absence of support systems. This situation contributed to heightened levels of stress, anxiety and depression due to the demanding nature of academic pursuits, the need to navigate through social interactions, and the personal pressures associated with higher education (Prowse et al., 2021).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The examination of psychological distress in relation to gender has been a prominent area of research for quite some time. Previous epidemiological studies have consistently indicated that, in general, females experience a higher prevalence of mental health issues compared to males (Gao et al., 2020). This disparity can be attributed to two primary factors, the first one being the inherent physiological distinctions between females and males, such as genetic vulnerability and variations in cortisol hormonal levels, which may manifest as emotional and behavioural challenges. The second factor is the attitudes and behaviours towards life experiences, as influenced by individuals' self-perceptions of traditional masculinity and femininity (Berke et al., 2021; McCreary, 2021).

The stressors among students come from various sources, including academic pressure, feelings of isolation, the search for employment opportunities, familial obligations, aspirations in life, societal expectations, and physiological factors (Karaman, et al., 2019). Research has shown that students were susceptible to mental health issues even before the onset of the pandemic as a result of academic difficulties and diverse personal and psychosocial stressors (Auerbach et al., 2018). These stressors encompass factors such as transitioning away from the family home, establishing new social connections, effectively managing their time and juggling multiple responsibilities, adapting to unfamiliar social and geographic surroundings, and seeking appropriate financial resources (Jehi et al., 2022). Conversely, the levels of academic stress among students are also influenced by cognitive and biological factors, wherein female students tend to experience higher levels of both academic and general stress in comparison to their male counterparts (Hyde & Mezulis, 2020).

Initial findings suggest that remote learning had an adverse effect on students' overall well-being, with them reporting higher levels of stress, feelings of isolation, and a negative mood during online learning in comparison to the traditional face-to-face format (Hassan, et al., 2022). Some university students were reported as becoming dependent on substance use in an effort to cope with their social and academic stress (American College Health Association, 2019), however other

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