

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of students in Higher Education

*Sunishtha, *Preeti Dahiya,

**Govind Singh

Abstract

Although the COVID-19 disaster is first and foremost a physical health catastrophe, it also has the potential to become a severe mental health crisis unless no measures are implemented. At the present time, good mental health is essential to society's functioning. It must be at the forefront of every country's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. This catastrophe has had a significant influence on the mental health and well-being of entire societies, and it is a priority that must be fixed immediately. There is a lot of psychological anguish in the people. Many people are worried about the virus's acute health effects and the implications of physical confinement.

Furthermore, COVID-19-related psychological suffering is prevalent in some population groups. Healthcare professionals on the front lines and first responders have been exposed to a variety of stressors, and protecting their mental health is a vital component of maintaining COVID-19 assessment, response, and recovery. Many older persons and others with pre-existing health concerns are afraid and isolated in every community. Family issues, feelings of isolation, and increasing maltreatment, as well as interrupted education and anxiety about their futures, can worsen emotional challenges in children and adolescents during important times in their lives. Women face higher levels of tension at home, as well as excessive impacts in overall. In addition, those caught in humanitarian and crisis situations risk having their mental health needs completely ignored.

Efforts to support those in distress and to assure treatment for people with mental health disorders have been launched in recent months. Innovative approaches to providing mental health care have been implemented, as well as measures to improve psychosocial support. Despite this, the vast majority of mental health requirements go unsatisfied due to the magnitude of the problem. The lack of investment in promoting mental health, protection, and care before to the epidemic has impeded the response. This historic underinvestment in mental health must be rectified as soon as possible to alleviate extreme suffering throughout millions of individuals and to minimize long-term economic and social costs. Our study's primary goal is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of students in higher education.

Keywords: Anxiety, COVID-19, depression, higher education, impact, mental health, psychology, students.

Introduction

Infectious diseases such HIV, severe acute respiratory syndrome, ebola in 1970s, and most recently COVID-19, continuing for being disastrous for public health, putting growing strain on individuals all over the globe. After the "microbe scare" of the twentieth century, COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a "viral panic" in twenty-first century. To prevent the spread of disease, global health measures such as physical separation, quarantine, wearing face masks in public areas, and hand cleanliness are being implemented around the world. While these methods are effective in containing the pandemic, they may be harmful to people's mental health (Nikopoulou *et al.*, 2020).

In India, the propagation of COVID-19 cases began to pick up in the second week of March 2020. To prevent group spread of the virus, India's government introduced a complete lockdown on March 25, 2020, limiting the mobility of the country's 1.38 billion people; the lockdown was originally intended to last 3 weeks but it was gradually expanded to May 31, 2020, with a conditional relaxation beginning May 3, 2020 (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2020). Throughout this time, all schools and colleges were closed completely, and beginning in December, all academic institutions gradually reopened in order to maintain ordinary education.

University students have been proven to be more vulnerable to the negative impacts of the quarantine than the general public (Wathelet *et al.*, 2020). Mental health illnesses are usually a source of concern among youngsters, and their prevalence has been steadily rising around the world. According to a survey issued by the World Health Organization in 2008, one out of every five persons had experienced mental health difficulties in the previous year (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, resulted in an even more rapid rise in mental problems among individuals.

Even after a quarantine of less than 9 days, the impacts on people's mental health were scary, according to a research published in The Lancet in February 2020 (Brooks *et al.*, 2019), and these effects might linger for up to 3 years. The unusually long period of social isolation experienced by people in India throughout this current pandemic is unquestionably dangerous, and mental health of individual may be harmed during this period (Pietrabissa *et al.*, 2020).

Anxiety and depressive symptoms, sadness, and sleep issues are all common symptoms of COVID-19 pandemic, according to recent studies. Zhang *et al* (2020) discovered that in the first wave of COVID-19, 38 percent of the Chinese population had anxiety, with 16 percent having anxiety issues; also, 49 percent of people had depression symptoms, with 14 percent experiencing severe depression symptoms. Moreover, Wang *et al* (2020)

discovered that the Chinese population suffers from moderate to severe anxiety, depression, and stress. The phobia of COVID-19 and, more particularly, the worry about becoming infected, as well as the loneliness due to social isolation, are important factors for such elevations in depression and anxiety (Tzur Bitan *et al.*, 2020).

These research shows that COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative influence on people's mental health; consequently, it is critical to investigate the magnitude and origin of that kind of impact. As a result, our study's primary goal is to determine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of different population group. The study's secondary goal is to study required and effective actions to quell the impact of COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of students

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has impacted students across the world by keeping them away from their peers, cutting down physical activity, and making them miss key aspects of their growing up. Here's how the lockdown impacted the mental health of students.

Paying attention to the mental health of students is the need of the hour. According to a study published in the Asian Journal of Psychiatry, over 53% of Indian university students suffer from moderate to extremely severe depression. According to our own studies, 74% of Indian students suffer from high to severe stress.

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown haven't been kind to our student population. They are amongst the worst hit emotionally -- 58% of Indian college students experienced a significant increase in their stress levels and severe deterioration in their emotions of anger, anxiety, loneliness, hopelessness, and happiness (Bohlken *et al.*, 2020).

Top two causes of mental health issues faced by students

When we dig into the top complaints we have received from Indian students in these times, we found the top two issues to be:

1. Low confidence and self-esteem

Many were left anxious and worried about the impact the pandemic would have on their career prospects and placements. There was of course the ever-present anxiety of them or a loved one contracting Covid-19. Many fought feelings of loneliness and isolation brought on by lockdown and strict social distancing. All these directly led to fall in their self-esteem and confidence (Nutbeam *et al.*, 2020).

2. Loss of work-life balance

Many students found themselves either not focusing enough on their academic work or focusing so much that it seemed to consume other aspects of their lives (Radu *et al.*, 2020).

How to protect the mental health of students and youth at three levels

It is pertinent that we must all come together as a country and as a community to really protect our youth, at 3 levels.

1. Individual level:

We need to empower our youth and help them become more resilient individuals. There are many ways to facilitate this.

For this, institutions must introduce stress management training, physical activity programmes, and e-courses for self-help, and of course, professional therapy support.

2. Community level:

These consist of communities like academic course batches, etc. academic institutes must make it mandatory for their respective communities including students to undergo training in psychological first aid and suicide gatekeeping. The goal here is to build peer support and a caring community culture (Cosic *et al.*, 2020).

3. Organizational level:

Whether it be at the academic institutional level, or at the governmental level, we need to make sure that youth mental health is the agenda at the leadership level.

How can students beat mental health problems on their own?

While we cannot expect younger students to understand or tackle their own mental health issues, this is something that students should be made aware of.

The more aware they are about how they can take care of themselves, the less susceptible they will be to factors that can cause anxiety and raise their mental health problems.

Here are a few quick tips by for students to take care of their own mental health:

- Eat well.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Stay connected with friends and family.
- Talk to family if you feel any mood swings, sudden sleep changes etc.
- Be creative and spend time on productive tasks.

- Focus on self-compassion and learn coping strategies.
- Get involved in household work and connect with your parents.
- Limit screen time. Select offline and no screen activities.
- Be aware of online bullying and be safe.

Few other tips for students during the pandemic have also been given, as below:

1. When feeling stressed, reach out to family, and catch up with your friends over video call.
2. Distract yourself from the monotonous Covid-19 lockdown life, by rewarding yourself for completing difficult tasks.
3. Manage your time and balance your responsibilities by creating to-do lists and prioritizing tasks.
4. Empower our students to be resilient well-rounded adults (Heitzman *et al.*, 2020).

References

Bitan DT, Grossman-Giron A, Bloch Y, Mayer Y, Shiffman N, Mendlovic S. Fear of COVID-19 scale: Psychometric characteristics, reliability and validity in the Israeli population. *Psychiatry Research*. 2020 ;289:113100.

Bohlken J, Schömig F, Lemke MR, Pumberger M, Riedel-Heller SG. COVID-19 pandemic: stress experience of healthcare workers-a short current review. *Psychiatrische Praxis*. 2020 ;47(4):190-7.

Brooks SK, Webster RK, Smith LE, Woodland L, Wessely S, Greenberg N, i Rubin, GJ. The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*. 2020;395(10227)

Chakraborty K, Chatterjee M. Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic on general population in West Bengal: A cross-sectional study. *Indian journal of psychiatry*. 2020, 266.

Cuiyan W, Riyu P, Xiaoyang W, Yilin T, Linkang X, McIntyre Roger S, Choo Faith N, Tran Bach, Ho Roger, Sharma Vijay K, Ho Cyrus. A longitudinal study on the mental health of general population during the COVID-19 epidemic in China. *Brain Behav Immun*. 2020 ;87:40-8.

Heitzman J. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. *Psychiatr Pol*. 2020;54(2):187-98.

Mirzaei M, Ardekani SM, Mirzaei M, Dehghani A. Prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress among adult population: results of yazd health study. *Iranian journal of psychiatry*. 2019 (2):137.

Nikopoulou VA, Holeva V, Parlapani E, Karamouzi P, Voitsidis P, Porfyri GN, Blekas A, Papigkioti K, Patsiala S, Diakogiannis I. Mental health screening for COVID-19: a proposed cutoff score for the Greek version of the fear of COVID-19 scale (FCV-19S). *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. 2020:1-4.

Nutbeam D. COVID-19: lessons in risk communication and public trust. *Public Health Res Pract.* 2020;30(2):3022006.

Pietrabissa G, Simpson SG. Psychological consequences of social isolation during COVID-19 outbreak. *Frontiers in Psychology.* 2020

Radu MC, Schnakovszky C, Herghelegiu E, Ciubotariu VA, Cristea I. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of educational process: A student survey. *International journal of environmental research and public health.* 2020(21):7770.

Wathelet M, Duhem S, Vaiva G, Baubet T, Habran E, Veerapa E, Debien C, Molenda S, Horn M, Grandgenèvre P, Notredame CE. Factors associated with mental health disorders among university students in France confined during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA network open.* 2020;3(10):e2025591.

Zhang J, Lu H, Zeng H, Zhang S, Du Q, Jiang T, Du B. The differential psychological distress of populations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Brain, behavior, and immunity.* 2020;87:49.