

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Psychosocial and Mental Well-Being of College Students

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected college students' lifestyles in numerous respects. To observe the implications of said pandemic, a literature search was conducted in July 2021 using various databases and filtering through key words such as COVID-19, mental health, depression, anxiety, substance use, student, and university. The information from the relevant literature was gathered and assessed in order to find the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychosocial and mental well-being of college students. Across the sources, there has remained an implication that social isolation impacts cognition and also results in behavioral abnormalities, particularly among college-aged students. Moreover, there has been substantial evidence pointing to an overall decline in the wellbeing of students, observed in forms such as anxiety, depression, substance use, and increase in suicide ideation. Both male and female students have been affected, but current studies suggest that female students are more drastically affected. From observing the alarming mental health decline among college students, it is clear that higher level educational institutions must be proactive in identifying and supporting vulnerable students by providing access to extra resources such as mental health and drug and alcohol services. Furthermore, addressing social issues by supporting for employment, providing financial support, and promotion of social connectedness could help to increase students' psychosocial wellbeing and counter the alarming trends that are currently apparent.

Keywords: COVID-19; College; Psychological; Poor Coping; Mental Health, Social; Student; University; Wellbeing

Introduction

Psychosocial well-being is a superordinate construct that includes emotional or psychological well-being, as well as social and collective well-being [1]. An individual's quality of life is also correlated to psychosocial well-being as it involves social, emotional, and physical components. College and university students typically experience numerous challenges, such as adaptation in an unfamiliar environment, living situation and culture, initiating relationships, financial issues, study pressure, and time management issues [2]. These challenges are further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected more than 1.57 billion students in 191 countries around the world [3]. Therefore, university and college-aged students are among a unique social group whose lives have been significantly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic [4]. The collateral effects of the unprecedented state of emergency include limited social interaction and increased

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stress levels, and these effects directly contribute to an overall decline in students' well-being in various aspects [4]. These effects can then potentially translate negatively into the students' lives in forms such as mental illness, substance abuse, and suicidality [5].

Method

An exhaustive coverage strategy was employed to search through the existing literature. A search was conducted in July 2021 using key words – COVID-19, pandemic, college, psychological, social, psychosocial wellbeing, poor coping, mental health, depression, anxiety, substance use, student, and university. A number of databases such as Ovid Medline, Ovid Embase, Ovid Psych INFO, Cochrane CENTRAL (Wiley), Google Scholar, Social Science, and Gray Literature were used to reference existing publications. Information and data of coverage was not restricted and there was a language limit to English. The information from the relevant literature was then assessed in order to find the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on psychosocial and mental well-being of College and University students.

Impact of social isolation

Humans have been known to be social creatures. Unfortunately, the attempts to minimize the spread of the coronavirus have halted these habitual tendencies. Since the initial lockdown periods, individuals have been isolated from the outside world both literally and metaphorically [7]. For college students specifically, it has been found that socialization is directly related to cognition. That is, decreased socialization seems to be tied to decreased cognitive ability [8]. This finding is particularly of interest now, seeing as though these traditional social interactions are advised against by health authorities. Without the ability to have personal contact with their peers, it is believed that students are unable to properly manage their stress, leading to a declined state of psychosocial well-being [9]. Apart from mental health-related consequences, social deprivation can also have significant neuro-developmental effects in young adults. Studies suggest that the pattern of social deprivation leading to socially inappropriate engagement that is known to occur in children is also apparent in adults [10]. The aftermath of COVID-related social isolation may mimic that of a study on the behavioral effects of social isolation on mice. In past studies, there has been evidence to suggest that mice that were subjected to prolonged social isolation exhibited pattern behavioral dysfunction. The findings were consistent with the understanding that isolation disrupts monoamine systems and neuronal signaling, and this, in turn, leads to behavioral abnormalities [10]. Though more research is needed to understand the effects on humans, the available animal-based studies are seen to be somewhat representative of the potential behavioral effects of quarantine post-pandemic.

Mental health impact

Mental health is a major component of one's well-being, which is why it is critical to maintain it so as to mitigate mental disorders. Unfortunately, mental issues are often inevitable, particularly among young adults. Extensive research in the matter strongly suggests that the age group consisting of typical college students (18 - 25) is especially prone to mental health issues [11]. Considering the added stress of pandemic-related issues on top of this, it is evident that students are experiencing an elevated level of distress, thereby worsening their mental health [5,12,13]. Potential reasoning for this may lie in the fact that this age group was faced with the effects of job loss, financial constraints, accommodation issues, limitations in social contact and support system, and other effects while also learning to navigate life on their own for the first time [4]. Studies also found that individuals with low level of social support were more vulnerable to mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, than those having a good social support system [14]. Moreover, individuals with prior mental health problems were also prone to relapse or develop anxiety and/or depressive symptoms. Numerous studies among college and university students around the world pointed out high level of anxiety symptoms secondary to the COVID-19 pandemic and/or lockdown [5-7,9,14-30]. A study at an American University revealed approximately three fourths of undergraduate students having a high risk of acute stress [12]. The risk was found to be higher to those who stayed in quarantine for the first two weeks, having inadequate access to supplies and fear of infection. In fact, a study from India post phase-2 lockdown pointed out a high level of stress and anxiety

among college students as compared to the general population [31]. Similarly, depressive symptoms have been found by numerous studies among college and university students and the prevalence rate appeared to be consistent in both developing and developed countries [6,14,16,20,22,25,26,32-36]. A separate meta-analysis containing a sample of approximately 90,000 college students explored significant mental health issues among college students during the pandemic [5]. The study findings revealed the presence in these young adults of 39.4% anxiety, 31.2% depression, 26.0% stress, and 29.8% post-traumatic stress disorder. The study also found that the rates of anxiety rose from 22.1% to 39.4% and that of depression nearly doubled from 19.7% to 31.2% since the pandemic came into extensive public awareness [5]. These results were also observed across numerous other independent studies. For example, a large cross-sectional study among 821,218 students in China during the Covid-19 outbreak found very high rates of mental health problems [14]. This study revealed approximately 45% of the participants had mental health problems, with the most common being acute stress (35.9%), depressive (21.1%), and anxiety-related symptoms (11%). Another study among Russian medical, psychology, and social work students revealed a strong association of COVID-19 with higher fear values among those who were surveyed [37]. The issue of pandemic-induced anxiety and depression also seems to surpass just mental distress and carry over to a physiological form. One such way involves a shift in an individual's eating habits. A study found that pandemic-induced anxiety was correlated to higher rates of eating disorders among its participant group of undergraduate and graduate students above the age of 18 [38]. This concept is not new, as the implications have long been observed. However, the pandemic has definitely extended these effects to a wider pool of individuals. More specifically, the fear of entering the external world to purchase grocery items has led many individuals to restrict daily intake, thereby preventing them from acquiring the nutrients needed for proper functionality [39]. Current studies are therefore suggesting that the pandemic has had an impact on many aspects of young adults' lives that are being more and more commonly observed from early 2020 and onward.

Poor coping strategies and substance use

The temporary relief provided by drugs and related substances has made them an increasingly popular coping mechanism, especially among teens and young adults. According to the American Addiction Centers, an alarming 1 in 7 young adults possessed a substance use disorder in past years [40]. It is only reasonable to assume that this has become an even bigger issue since the outbreak of COVID-19, given the ever-widening mental health crisis. In fact, individuals aged 18 - 24 years were found to be more likely to use substances to cope with COVID-19 related stress than any other age group [41]. A majority of college and university students fall in this age group and the initiation or increase of substance use to cope with psychosocial stressors related to COVID-19 pandemic negatively impact the quality of life and academic performance of this population. A study among 366 participants revealed 17.5% university students using substance as a coping strategy to deal with COVID-19 related stress [42]. The study found use of cannabis, alcohol and vaping that negatively impacted their mental health and academic performance. Many theories have been presented to explain the correlation between stress and substance abuse. One theory is the stress-coping model of addiction, which suggests that substance abuse reduces negative affect while simultaneously increasing positive affect via brain reward pathways. This, in turn, suggests that addictive substances can be utilized for pain relief and as a maladaptive coping mechanism [43]. With the newfound stressors from the pandemic, it is no surprise that substance use trends have risen dramatically [40]. One study found that 1 in 10 participants reported to have begun or increased substance usage due to the pandemic [41]. The correlation between these rates and the pandemic lies in the fact that isolation tends to lower dopamine levels, which is then sought after in the form of readily accessible replacements- drugs. This trend is especially harmful to those who are at risk of relapse, because they may go into primal action to acquire the high levels of dopamine that they were adjusting their bodies to handle with substance use [41]. Apart from common substance use, the pandemic seems to have also collided with the pre-existing opioid crisis. In fact, from the beginning of the pandemic, opioid related treatments in one of the center of America rose from 1133 pre-COVID to 1323, representing an astonishing 17% increase [44]. Moreover, the reported number of opioid overdose runs involving death at the scene increased by 50% [44,41]. The result from these studies may serve to foreshadow the more drastic collisions between the opioid crisis and the current state and aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic.

Increase in suicidality

Over the years, suicide rates have significantly increased among college-aged adults. In fact, it has been reported that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 18 to 24-year-old individuals [45]. The COVID-19 outbreak has since worsened this issue, with a reported 10.7% of surveyed individuals of varying age groups admitting to have been contemplating suicide within 30 days of completing the survey [41]. Evidently, the majority of those individuals (25.5%) happened to be college-aged students. With the increased pressures placed upon young adults during such a crisis, it is unsurprising that the suicide rates in this age group have risen. These findings emphasize the need for individuals to seek alternative methods of dealing with stress, such as working with a therapist. Unfortunately, therapy and other intervention methods have been highly stigmatized throughout history, resulting in the resorting to maladaptive behaviors to serve as a convenient alternative for dealing with their stress and anxieties. It is reported that approximately 70% of individuals who have one or more mental illnesses do not receive medical treatment [46]. This so-called 'treatment gap' could be due to a variety of reasons- financial constraints, physical inaccessibility, etc., but one of the major reasons seems to be the stigma placed around mental illness. One of the common consequences of this treatment gap is the development or furtherment of suicide ideation. A study conducted by Rasmussen, *et al.* looked into these trends among young men, among whom are the most prone to suicidal action [47]. Their study found that among those who ended up committing suicide after struggling with mental illness, a majority of them avoided seeking external professional help beforehand, presumably out of shame or a fear of societal perception. A cross-sectional study found that risk factors for suicide ideation include smoking and drinking, and protective factors against suicide include exercise and therapeutic conversations with any trusted individual [48]. The overall consensus from current studies is that COVID-19 has increased the emotional instability often seen in young adults, and this is apparent in increases in suicide ideation rates and maladaptive coping mechanisms. However, these studies maintain that these risks can be minimized in part by introducing healthy intervention mechanisms.

Psychological impact and gender differences

Regarding the current findings on the gender differences in psychosocial impact of COVID-19, it appears that current studies present inconclusive findings. As can be inferred, both male and female college and university students are being drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in particularly negative manners. However, there has been variation in the rate of impact in different studies with regard to gender differences. The majority of current studies revealed that females were seemingly more vulnerable to mental health effects and they were therefore seen to be more psychologically impacted by COVID-19 [5,49-52]. Researcher Batra and his colleagues found a significant gender gap in psychological morbidities, with females showing significantly higher levels of anxiety (34.6%) and depression (32.4%) than males [5]. The previous findings were consistent with this study's results [49,51,52]. On the other hand, one study reported the psychological symptoms and their drasticity revealed no significant difference on the basis of gender [53]. The higher rate of psychological impact among the female population may be generalized down to hormone-related imbalances, lower threshold for traumatic events, and higher help-seeking tendency than males [47,52,54]. Ultimately, the inconsistent findings and limited literature on the subject matter prevent the correlation between gender and psychosocial implication from being further assessed for the time being.

Conclusion and Future Direction

As indicated by the current literature, COVID-19 has had substantial effects on college and university students' lives. This group, which was already characterized by their declining mental health state, has only been pushed further into psychological distress since the beginning of the pandemic. This, in turn, seems to be tied to increases in negative coping mechanisms and manners to alleviate the pain. The research for this age of individuals points to the need to conduct further analysis of the impacts on varying levels of affluence. The financial constraint on less wealthy individuals has surely impacted their well-being, so it would be interesting to gain insight on whether these statistics remain fairly consistent regardless of financial differences. Additionally, the research has made clear the importance for

individuals to find healthy ways to cope with their pain so as to minimize their potential to partake in unhealthy coping mechanisms. The stigma surrounding mental health must be overcome to fully enable individuals to understand its significance on their overall well-being. Since much of the mental health concerns are seen in college-aged students, it is perhaps time for colleges and universities to implement new methods of intervention to properly manage the issues before they get out of hand. Early identification of these psychosocial impacts helps to prevent and address them in a timely manner. Higher level educational institutions need to be proactive in identifying and supporting vulnerable students by providing access to extra resources such as mental health and drug and alcohol services. Use of telehealth and expanding telehealth service during a pandemic period would not only provide physical safety and reassurance to students but also increase easy remote access to receive mental health service from a psychologist and/or psychiatrist. The information and access to suicide hotline service and drug and alcohol service would likely help to decrease the risk suicide and substance use. Economic support such as provision of employment at college or university, low interest student loans, financial support, and promotion of social connectedness could help to increase students' psychosocial wellbeing and counter the alarming trends that are currently apparent.

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