



International Journal of Nursing and Health Care Science

Research Article

Korie M, et al. J Int J Nurs & Healt Car Scie 01: 2021-91

The Mental Health of College Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mabel Korie[#], Janice Bloomfield-Alves, Tonia Grant

Department of Nursing, School of Science Health and Technology, City University of New York - Medgar Evers College, New York, USA

[#]**Corresponding author:** Mabel Korie, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing, Department of Nursing, School of Science Health and Technology, City University of New York - Medgar Evers College, 1638 Bedford Ave Brooklyn, New York 11225, USA

Submission Date: 21 October, 2021

Accepted Date: 24 December, 2021

Published Online: 30 December, 2021

How to cite this article: Korie M, Bloomfield-Alves J, Grant T (2021) The Mental Health of College Students and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Int J Nurs & Healt Car Scie 01(17): 2021-91.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues, and one can only speculate about how the rising rates of mental health struggles will impact college students in the future. Many colleges were unprepared to serve their student population during the transition to online classes. One of the reasons American college students' mental health is continually threatened is because of the stigma surrounding mental illness. The pandemic presents a novel opportunity for colleges to play a more active role in preventing mental health breakdowns in their student populations. Furthermore, more should be done to overcome existing stigma and help at-risk students.

Keywords: Anxiety; College students; COVID-19; Mental health; Pandemic; Psychological

Introduction

Mental health issues are quite common in the United States collegiate population, across all demographics. College students experience new levels of stress related to being out of their parents' homes for the first time. Other problems are financial challenges, social pressures, fear of the future, and managing the pressures of college goals. Many college students experience the onset of mental health symptoms upon entering college, while many other students find pre-existing mental health issues exacerbated by the pressures of college [1-6].

While the mental health of college students has been a concern for some time, the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the incidence of mental health problems in this population [6-9].

Methods

All research articles and supporting content were extracted from online databases such as CINAHL, EBSCO, JSTOR, PubMed, and Medline. The research studies included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches. The studies were conducted in the United States, Asia, and Europe. The studies consist of both male and female participants from different racial/ethnic groups, gender, and socio-economic background.

Mental Health before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Traditional students are those who enter college just after graduating from high school. They are young, most of them are experiencing family separation for the first time, are still financially dependent on their parents, and do not work. Non-traditional students are older, are often required to work full-time, may provide for multiple dependents, and have various levels of history related to stress and education [10].

Both traditional and non-traditional students face a host of mental health challenges during their college experience. The differences in the needs, experiences, and approach to treating these two populations must be understood by college counselors. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health issues in college students were on the rise. There was an increase in severe psychological problems over the previous 5 years, including learning disabilities, self-injury incidents, eating disorders, substance use, and sexual assault [5,11-13]. The mental health of college students before COVID-19 was in a crisis state because of increasing trends in generalized anxiety, depression, social anxiety, family problems, and academic distress [14].

Research has shown that most individuals (75%) who experience mental health disorders will experience an onset of symptoms before age 25 [5]. According to Perdrell, “Among traditional students, the significant disruptions associated with attending college may exacerbate current psychopathology that first manifested in childhood and/or trigger its first onset.” In the case of nontraditional students, the stresses related to college life may bring on or exacerbate negative mental health symptoms. The most common mental health issue college students report is anxiety. Before the pandemic 11.9% of college students on average experience anxiety [5,15]. Nearly 60% of participants in another study assessing mental illness reported moderate levels of mental distress [16].

One of the reasons American college students’ mental health is continually threatened is because of the stigma surrounding mental illness and its treatment. In Eisenberg [17], and Cheng [18], the authors stressed the need for assistance for individuals with mental illness to reduce their depression and increase help-seeking behaviors. Vogel, et al. [19] supported that stigma is one of the factors why students do not seek psychological services. On average, up to 36% of college students experience a form of serious psychological distress, but only a third of these students will ever seek help [20].

Apart from stigma, another big barrier to care is the lack of adequate health care coverage that makes psychological counseling financially infeasible. College students most in need of mental health treatment are those who are most likely unable to afford counseling. Untreated mental health distress contributes to heightened risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, suicidal ideation, self-harm, less likely to complete college, and difficulty making and sustaining relationships [20]. Student peer groups in college play a major role in helping students uncover, acknowledge, and overcome stigmas associated with mental illness. Due to the limitations of COVID-19, without peer groups, students are more likely to leave their mental illness untreated. Social and family support were assessed to play a critical role in academic success. Because learning can be hindered by students’ unstable mental health, it is imperative that attention is paid to the students’ psychological state [21].

Mental Health during the Initial Surge of COVID-19 Pandemic

While college students have some of the lowest risks for getting seriously ill with COVID-19, the stress of the pandemic has resulted in college students experiencing higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality [22,23]. The CDC reported that during the pandemic, one in four people between 18 and 24 seriously considered suicide [24,25]. Students who may have never suffered from mental health challenges before are now reporting that the stress of the pandemic has them worried about their mental health [25,26].

Research has shown that 95% of college students say that the pandemic has brought harmful mental health symptoms. Half of this population admits the symptoms have negatively impacted their education. One of the most common symptoms reported and leading to increased anxiety, depression, and suicidality, are feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Students were forced to continue education online during the quarantine and suffered from a lack of in-person connection. As a result of this stress, 40% of students are experiencing sleep loss, 39% reported negative changes in diet and lack of exercise, and 32% admitted feeling hopeless and cut off from social networks [22,27,28]. In a study investigating the mental status of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, 23.19% of the students reported anxiety, while 21.16% reported depression [29]. Mental health issues in college students are becoming even more severe [8,30].

During the pandemic, researchers combined mobile phone sensing with self-reporting data on college students’ mental health to analyze changes [31]. During the Winter 2020 semester, 217 undergraduates participated in this study to analyze two key research questions: (1) how has the pandemic impacted mental health, and (2) how does news coverage of the pandemic in the media impact mental health? Researchers found that students became more sedentary during quarantine, which led to increased depression and anxiety overall [31]. Also found was, “phone usage, number of locations visited, and week of the term were strongly associated with an increased amount of COVID-19-related news....[and] both anxiety and depression were significantly associated with COVID-19-related news” [31]. These findings emphasize the need to unplug and take direct action over one’s attention during the pandemic to lessen obsession, worry, and the feelings of helplessness that contribute to anxiety and depression.

However, not only in-school social life has been impacted by the pandemic, but nearly all college students (97%) surveyed said their lives outside of school had been negatively impacted. Finding it harder to make friends, meet and engage with classmates, and see people without fear of contamination has escalated mental health symptoms. This is because friends, family, even casual acquaintances go a long way to create and sustain the social support system many rely on unconsciously for emotional support. In a recent survey, college students admit they are more likely to rely on friends for social support than their parents. When cut off from friends and the networks that sustain them, college students are left feeling adrift in an uncaring world [22].

During the pandemic, many college students (one in five) experienced the death of a friend or family member, this may or may not be due to COVID-19. The pandemic has heightened awareness of personal health and illness challenges on a societal scale. A study in NYC found that 17% of college students reported the loss of a loved one or friend from COVID-19. This report emphasized that students are experiencing significant psychological distress [32].

Many colleges were not equipped to provide the support their students' felt they needed from their institution. A college is seen as a haven from the difficulties of purely adult life. For example, "The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing campus issues, including college hunger, and students want more support...45% of college students felt their schools should continue providing services like food pantries and housing assistance beyond the pandemic" [22]. College students are often in a place of emotional vulnerability with the many changes they are experiencing. Once they have lost trust in their college, it is difficult to regain. Lacking confidence in one's college can lead to dropping out, as college is often treated as a secondary parental support system that is psychologically employed during the transition to adulthood [33].

Many colleges were unprepared with the necessary resources to serve their student population with the transition to online classes. When forced to make this transition due to quarantine, many students were confronted with the technology divide. The technology (tech) divide refers to students who do not have high-speed internet and/or computer access necessary to maintain their college work [34]. When the pandemic struck, students who lacked the necessary access were forced out of college, sometimes with no tuition refund. The tech divide created heightened anxiety, stress, and depression in students who were forced to put their education on hold at a critical time in their lives. This lack of self-actualization and powerlessness increases fears concerning the future and financial frustrations.

Research also showed that many college students' diets worsened during the quarantine period of the pandemic. Eating patterns became disrupted, food insecurity caused stress, and overall, students ate less healthily and exercised less [34]. These types of dietary changes mixed with less physical activity exacerbate existing mental health issues and lead to higher rates of depression. Students reported increased overeating when bored, skipping meals, and eating irregularly. However, 14% of students said that since they were being forced to stay at home and cook for themselves, they were eating better [34].

Mental Health after the Initial Surge of the COVID-19 Pandemic

After the stresses and disruption due to the initial surge of the pandemic, negative mental health in college students has been on a dramatic rise. Colleges have been busy surveying students to uncover what works and what the future may hold. A study conducted by Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse [35] found that students are extremely ambivalent about their college life after COVID-19. Results from the study found that college students' responses varied across the board.

Negative mental health continues to rise, and the confusion of understanding students' experiences is not helping institutions weather the storm. For example, Ezarik [35] found that one in three college students indicated that they do not want to take another class using Zoom. Half of the students surveyed admitted that while some aspects of remote learning worked, they are ready to engage in in-person learning. Some students expressed that even coming back to school did not always fill in what was missing. One respondent at a college in Washington State reported feeling extremely lonely; "I've been on campus two months and the only people I've talked to for more than a minute are staff at doctor's appointments" [35]. These and other related findings emphasize that life is not returning to normal, and this plays a big role in the continuing decline in mental health [36].

Before the pandemic, students were feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and unsure about their future. These feelings have only increased in intensity since the pandemic [12]. According to Diep [37], "There are no safety zones anymore. All of us are simultaneously experiencing and grieving during this disaster, therefore our emotional bandwidths are stressed and limited."

Studying the impact of the changes forced on college students due to the pandemic, researchers have isolated the most pertinent themes for today. Students report safety, mental health issues, finance, instability, uncertainty about the future, and relationships as the main themes [23,38]. Researchers found that if students were forced to leave behind valued possessions during quarantine, they were more prone to anxiety [39]. Also, general sadness has become more pronounced [28]. These themes are mostly the same as pre-pandemic times, but the awareness of the need for maintaining mental health has taken a forefront perspective in students' minds. This may be a positive development from the pandemic, as it helps students reevaluate their stigmas and embrace new values. This is one of the benefits of stress, as it allows for major shifts of consciousness. However, this is countered by the frustration and anxiety students feel about their education being paused [40].

Researchers studying first-year college students found that students who were able to move back in with their parents during quarantine and had financial stability were guarded against anxiety and depression [41]. Researchers emphasize, "If school is tracking health symptoms, and most are, they also should take the opportunity to track emotional health; and if they have detailed protocols for supporting physical health, similar protocols should be in place to support mental health" [41]. Wang, et al. [23], studied more than 1700 Chinese participants. Approximately 29% of the participants reported moderate-to-severe anxiety while 16% had moderate-to-severe depression symptoms. It is important to follow related research to adequately prepare for this ongoing pandemic.

The pandemic presents a novel opportunity for colleges to play a more active role in preventing mental health breakdowns in their student population. However, more needs to be done to overcome existing stigma and to help keep at-risk students engaged with counselors, and peers in times of crisis.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, and one can only speculate about how the rising rates of mental health struggles will impact college students in the future. Stress may be escalating globally, as populations grow and economies change. A longitudinal study conducted by Davide, et al. [36], stated that mental health management may need to become a life course for every person to learn how to successfully navigate the challenges of the day. According to Morin [42], this is the time for individuals to re-prioritize. While stress can help promote adaptation strategies, too much stress can inhibit growth. Each person must find a healthy balance of stress management that enables their mental health and success. There is a clear and pressing need for organized systematic approaches to providing mental health services for our college students.

References

1. Auerbach RP, Alonso J, Axinn WG, et al. (2016) Mental disorders among college students in the World Health Organization World Mental Health Surveys. *Psychol. Med* 46: 2955-2970.
2. Choi B, Kim H, Huh-Yoo J (2021) Seeking Mental Health Support Among College Students in Video-Based Social Media: Content and Statistical Analysis of YouTube Videos. *JMIR Form Res* 5: e31944.
3. Batra K, Sharma M, Batra R, et al. (2021) Assessing the Psychological Impact of COVID-19 among College Students: An Evidence of 15 Countries. *Healthcare* 9: 222.
4. Davis JR (2014) A Little Goes a Long Way: Pressure for College Students to Succeed. *The Journal of Undergraduate Research* 12 (Article 2).
5. Pedrelli P, Nyer M, Yeung A, et al. (2015) College students: mental health problems and treatment considerations. *Academic Psychiatry* 39: 503-511.
6. Wasil AR, Malhotra T, Nandakumar N, et al. (2021) Improving Mental Health on College Campuses: Perspectives of Indian College Students. *Behavior Therapy* ISSN 0005-7894.
7. Auerbach RP, Mortier P, Bruffaerts R, et al. (2018) WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 127: 623-638.
8. Fruehwirth JC, Biswas S, Perreira KM (2021) The Covid-19 pandemic and mental health of first-year college students: Examining the effect of Covid-19 stressors using longitudinal data. *PloS one* 16: e0247999.
9. Zhu J, Racine N, Xie EB, et al. (2021) Post-secondary Student Mental Health During COVID-19: A Meta-Analysis. *Front. Psychiatry* 12: 777251.
10. Forbus P, Newbold JJ, Mehta SS (2011) A study of non-traditional and traditional students in terms of their time management behaviors, stress factors, and coping strategies. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal* 15: 109.
11. Biber DD, Melton B, Czech DR (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on college anxiety, optimism, gratitude, and course satisfaction. *J Am College Health* 1-6.
12. Miller AE, Mehak A, Trolino V, et al. (2021) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological health of individuals with mental health conditions: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 1-19.
13. Pierce M, Hope H, Ford T, et al. (2020) Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 7: 883-892.
14. Xiao H, Carney DM, Youn SJ, et al. (2017) Are we in crisis? National mental health and treatment trends in college counseling centers. *Psychological Services* 14 : 407-415.
15. Ettman CK, Abdalla SM, Cohen GH, et al. (2020) Prevalence of depression symptoms in US adults before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Network Open* 3: e2019686.
16. Knowlden AP, Hackman CL, Sharma M (2016) Lifestyle and mental health correlates of psychological distress in college students. *Health Education Journal* 75: 370-382.
17. Eisenberg D, Downs MF, Golberstein E, et al. (2009) Stigma and help seeking for mental health among college students. *Medical Care Research and Review* 66: 522-541.
18. Cheng HL, Kwan KKL, Sevig T (2013) Racial and ethnic minority college students' stigma associated with seeking psychological help: Examining psychocultural correlates. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 60: 98-111.
19. Vogel DL, Strass HA, Heath PJ, et al. (2017) Stigma of Seeking Psychological Services: Examining College Students Across Ten Countries/Regions. *The Counseling Psychologist* 45: 170-192.
20. Sontag-Padilla L, Dunbar MS, Ye F, et al. (2018) Strengthening college students' mental health knowledge, awareness, and helping behaviors: the impact of active minds, a peer mental health organization. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 57: 500-507.
21. VanderLind R (2017) Effects of Mental Health on Student Learning. *The Learning Assistance Review* 22: 39-58.
22. Dennon A (2021) Over 9 in 10 College Students Report Mental Health Impacts From COVID-19.
23. Wang X, Hegde S, Son C, et al. (2020) Investigating mental health of US college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional survey study. *J Med Internet Res* 22: e22817.

24. Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. (2020) Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic - United States, *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020 69: 1049-1057.
25. Dennon A (2020) The Altered Reality of College Life During COVID-19.
26. Liu CH, Pinder-Amaker S, Hyeouk H, et al. (2020) Priorities for addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health. *Journal of American College Health*.
27. Chang J, Ji Y, Li Y, et al. (2021) Prevalence of anxiety symptom and depressive symptom among college students during COVID-19 pandemic: a meta-analysis. *J Affect Disord* 292: 242-254.
28. Kleiman EM, Yeager AL, Grove JL, et al. (2020) Real-time mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students: Ecological Momentary Assessment Study. *JMIR Mental Health* 7: e24815.
29. Chang J, Yuan Y, Wang D (2020) Mental health status and its influencing factors among college students during the epidemic of COVID-19. *Nan Fang Yi Ke Da Xue Xue Bao* 40: 171-176.
30. Dhar BK, Ayitney FK, Sarkar SM (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on psychology among the university students. *Glob Challenges*. 2020:2000038.
31. Huckins JF, DaSilva AW, Wang W, et al. (2020) Mental health and behavior of college students during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic: Longitudinal smartphone and ecological momentary assessment study. *Journal of medical Internet research* 22: e20185.
32. López-Castro T, Brandt L, Anthonipillai NJ, et al. (2021) Experiences, impacts and mental health functioning during a COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown: Data from a diverse New York City sample of college students. *PloS one* 16: e0249768.
33. Nielsen K, Tanggaard L (2015) Dropping out and a crisis of trust. *Nordic Psychology* 67: 154-167.
34. Son C, Hegde S, Smith A, et al. (2020) Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of medical internet research* 22: e21279.
35. Ezarik M (2021) COVID-Era College: Are Students Satisfied?
36. Davide P, Andrea P, Martina O, et al. (2020) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on patients with OCD: Effects of contamination symptoms and remission state before the quarantine in a preliminary naturalistic study. *Psychiatry Research* 291: 113-213.
37. Diep H (2021) Disaster COVID-19 Coronavirus. Center for Disaster Philanthropy.
38. Hawley SR, Thirivikraman JK, Noveck N, et al. (2021) Concerns of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Thematic perspectives from the United States, Asia, and Europe. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching* 4.
39. Conrad RC, Koire A, Pinder-Amaker S, et al. (2021) College student mental health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications of campus relocation. *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 136: 117-126.
40. Tasso AF, Hisli-Sahin N, San Roman GJ (2021) COVID-19 disruption on college students: Academic and socioemotional implications. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 13: 9.
41. Copeland WE, McGinnis E, Bai Y, et al. (2021) Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health and wellness. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 60: 134-141.
42. Morin A (n.d) How the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Affecting Mental Health, According to Therapists.