

Psychological Stress and Mental Disorders Among Students

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Abstract

The association between psychological stress and mental disorders among students has received considerable attention in mental health research. This study examines the complex connection between these phenomena, investigating the detailed pathways through which stress influences the mental wellness of students. Psychological stress, arising from academic demands, social pressures, financial limitations, and personal struggles, profoundly affects individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Furthermore, prolonged or intense exposure to stressors can trigger the onset or worsening of various mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse issues among students. The reciprocal nature of this association is evident as individuals with existing mental health issues may be more susceptible to stress, while chronic stressors can contribute to the development of mental health problems. Coping strategies, social support, and personal resilience are critical in moderating the impact of stress on mental health outcomes. Acknowledging the complex interplay between psychological stress and mental disorders among students is crucial for devising effective prevention and intervention strategies to enhance resilience, promote psychological well-being, and alleviate the adverse effects of stress in educational environments. This study advocates for a comprehensive approach to student mental health, incorporating targeted education, early interventions, and robust support systems to address the diverse challenges posed by psychological stress and minimize its negative consequences on students' mental health.

Key words: Mental Disorder, Mental stress, Psychological stress, Stress and Students.

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of education, the intricate dance between psychological stress and the prevalence of mental health disorders among students has emerged as a paramount concern both in societal discourse and scholarly investigation. Within the dynamic environment of academic institutions, students navigate a labyrinthine terrain rife with diverse stressors stemming from academic pressures, societal expectations, and personal challenges. The amalgamation of these stressors frequently gives rise to a profound sense of psychological burden, setting off a chain reaction of consequences that can significantly undermine the mental

well-being of students (Karyotaki *et al* 2020). At its core, this paper seeks to untangle the nuanced interrelationship between psychological stress and the onset or exacerbation of mental disorders within the student community. Through a thorough examination of this intricate connection, our objective is to shed light on the underlying mechanisms by which stress manifests and interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities to precipitate or amplify mental health difficulties. By dissecting the multifaceted nature of stressors encountered by students, spanning from anxieties related to academic performance to interpersonal conflicts and identity crises, we aim to delineate the various pathways through which stress disrupts psychological equilibrium (Wu *et al* 2020).

Furthermore, this discourse aims to shed light on the myriad factors that contribute to increasing students' susceptibility to psychological distress and subsequent mental health disorders. From the pervasive culture of perfectionism propagated by societal norms to the prevalence of social comparison facilitated by digital platforms, students find themselves entangled in a complex web of influences that heighten their vulnerability to stress-induced maladjustment. Additionally, the convergence of biological predispositions, genetic susceptibilities, and environmental stressors further complicates the landscape of causation, underscoring the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted determinants of mental health outcomes among students (Schonfeld *et al* 2019).

Psychological Stress

In the complex fabric of student life, there arises an urgent necessity to grasp the subtle intricacies of psychological stress, for it holds a pivotal role in shaping mental health outcomes. Stress, fundamentally, represents a natural response to challenging circumstances, aiding in resource mobilization and adaptation to environmental pressures (Harandi, Taghinasab and Nayeri 2017). Rooted in the evolutionary imperative for survival, stress entails a sophisticated interplay of physiological, cognitive, and emotional processes orchestrated by intricate neuroendocrine signaling pathways and neural circuitry. At its core, stress prompts the release of hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, instigating a series of physiological reactions aimed at heightening alertness, energizing the body, and facilitating adaptive behaviors (Deb, Strodl and Sun, 2015).

Type of Stress

Acute Stress

Acute stress refers to the body's immediate reaction to sudden demands or pressure, like tight schedules, crucial meetings, or unexpected changes in routine. This response, fueled by the body's fight-or-flight mechanism, delivers a surge of energy and heightened focus. In moderate amounts, acute stress can be beneficial, boosting alertness, improving problem-

solving skills, and promoting adaptability. It can drive individuals to overcome challenges, achieve objectives, and increase efficiency. However, if these stressors become too frequent or intense, they can lead to negative outcomes such as exhaustion, irritability, sleep issues, and other health concerns. The delicate balance between beneficial and detrimental stress highlights the need for effective stress management to navigate daily life without overtaxing the body and mind (Harandi, Taghinasab and Nayeri 2017).

Acute stress is beneficial for fostering resilience and adaptation, the adverse consequences of chronic or overwhelming stress cannot be overstated, especially in the realm of student life. Amidst the crucible of academic demands, social expectations, and personal trials, students grapple with a multitude of stressors that transcend the classroom, infiltrating various aspects of their lives. Whether contending with academic pressures, navigating social dynamics, or wrestling with questions of identity, students encounter stressors that profoundly impact their psychological well-being (Watt *et al* 2022).

Chronic Stress

Long-term stress that persists over extended periods, often leading to adverse health effects. Chronic stress can result from ongoing academic pressures, financial worries, or prolonged exposure to challenging environments. Indeed, chronic stress possesses a stealthy quality, capable of instigating or exacerbating a plethora of mental health issues among students, spanning from anxiety disorders and depression to substance misuse and disordered eating patterns. The detrimental effects of sustained stress on mental health are wide-ranging, disrupting emotional regulation, cognitive function, and interpersonal connections (Watt *et al* 2022). Physiologically, chronic stress disrupts the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to prolonged elevations in cortisol levels that can damage brain structures involved in stress regulation and emotional processing. Furthermore, chronic stress alters neural plasticity, neurotransmitter systems, and inflammatory pathways, collectively contributing to the development of mood and anxiety disorders (Wu *et al* 2020).

Episodic Acute Stress

Episodic acute stress refers to a pattern in which an individual experiences repeated bouts of acute stress at frequent intervals. This type of stress is often associated with people whose lives are filled with constant chaos or who work in high-pressure environments. These individuals might find themselves frequently under pressure due to tight deadlines, significant responsibilities, or a demanding lifestyle, leading to recurring stressful episodes. Unlike acute stress, which is typically a one-time response to a specific event, episodic acute stress denotes a chronic condition with stress occurring regularly over time, potentially leading to health risks if not managed properly (Karyotaki *et al* 2020).

Control Measures for Psychological Stress

Given the profound impact of stress on mental well-being, understanding how different stressors manifest and interact among students is crucial for crafting effective preventive and intervention strategies. Central to this endeavor is the acknowledgment that stress is a complex phenomenon with diverse underlying causes and individual differences in vulnerability. Thus, interventions aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of stress must be tailored to the specific needs and contexts of students, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of stressors prevalent in educational environments (Auerbach *et al* 2016). Furthermore, the escalating prevalence of mental health disorders among student populations underscores the urgent need to address the intricate relationship between stress and mental well-being within educational settings. Robust research findings highlight a concerning rise in psychological distress and diagnosable mental illnesses among college and university students worldwide. This increasing trend in mental health difficulties presents a pervasive and urgent challenge that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, emphasizing the universal significance of prioritizing the psychological welfare of students (Deb, Strodl and Sun 2015).

At the heart of this issue lies the acknowledgment that students face a multitude of stressors spanning their academic, social, and personal spheres. Within the demanding environment of higher education, students grapple with a myriad of pressures, from the rigorous demands of academic coursework and exams to the complexities of forging interpersonal connections and shaping their identities. The weighty burden of academic responsibilities, compounded by the pursuit of academic excellence and future prospects, exacts a toll on students' mental health, fostering a culture of perfectionism and academic exhaustion that permeates educational institutions globally (Pacheco *et al* 2017).

Moreover, the intricate tapestry of social interactions within the student community adds another layer of strain on mental well-being, as students navigate the intricacies of peer dynamics, social hierarchies, and the need for belonging (Prowse *et al* 2021). The pervasive influence of social media platforms exacerbates these challenges, fostering an environment characterized by constant comparison and unrealistic standards that breed feelings of inadequacy and social isolation among students. Additionally, financial strains arising from tuition fees, living costs, and uncertain job prospects amplify students' stress levels, heightening their susceptibility to mental health issues (Prowse *et al* 2021). Furthermore, pervasive stigma surrounding mental illness acts as a significant barrier to seeking help, perpetuating a cycle of silence and shame that impedes students' access to necessary support and resources (Zhang 2017).

Control Measures for Stress-Related Mental Disorders

Managing stress-related mental disorders requires a comprehensive approach that combines professional treatment, continuous support, education, and resilience-building strategies. Let's delve into these components:

Social Work Professional Care

For individuals suffering from stress-induced mental disorders, professional intervention is key. This involves consulting licensed mental health practitioners such as clinical social workers, psychiatrists or psychologists, who can properly diagnose and treat these conditions. Depending on the case's complexity, therapy, medication, or a combination of both might be recommended. This encompasses a range of therapeutic methods like cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), aimed at addressing harmful thought patterns, developing coping skills, and examining underlying stress triggers. In some instances, medication may be required to control symptoms. The clinical social worker needs to see to the psychosocial management of the individual student including individual psychotherapy, family therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.

Continuous Support

Continuous support is vital for individuals dealing with stress-related mental disorders, providing them with a network of encouragement and assistance. This support can come from mental health experts, peers, or family members. Regular therapy sessions and support group meetings offer structured settings for sharing experiences, gaining insights, and receiving encouragement. Routine sessions with therapists or counselors are crucial for tracking progress and adjusting treatment. These professionals particularly social workers can also offer advice on stress management and resilience-building. Connecting with peers who have experienced similar struggles can be extremely helpful. Support groups, whether virtual or in-person, create safe environments for sharing experiences and gaining support. Families play a significant role in providing emotional support. Educating family members about mental health issues can reduce stigma and help create a nurturing home environment.

Education and Awareness

Spreading awareness and reducing stigma surrounding mental disorders is key to creating an inclusive and supportive community. Schools, workplaces, and community groups can contribute to this by promoting mental health awareness through various initiatives. These initiatives aim to challenge myths and stereotypes about mental disorders. Activities might include educational sessions, workshops, or promotional materials that foster open conversations about mental health. Providing training for staff, faculty, and students can

increase their ability to recognize signs of mental distress and understand how to assist those in need. Workshops on stress management and coping strategies can empower individuals to take charge of their mental health.

Building Resilience

Building resilience is a preventive approach that reduces the impact of stress over time by strengthening one's ability to cope with adversity. Developing effective coping strategies is central to resilience. Techniques like mindfulness, relaxation exercises, and other stress management practices can help individuals handle stress more effectively. A balanced lifestyle that includes regular exercise, a nutritious diet, and adequate rest contributes to resilience by promoting overall well-being. Strong social bonds play a crucial role in resilience. Encouraging people to foster and maintain supportive relationships with friends and family creates a support system during tough times.

Literature Review

The cross-sectional study conducted by Eze *et al.* (2021) marks a significant milestone in the expanding body of literature concerning mental health among Nigerian university students. By delving into the correlation between psychological stress and symptoms of anxiety and depression within this demographic, the research unveils the complex web of psychosocial factors that shape mental health outcomes within the unique context of Nigerian higher education. Through meticulous data gathering and analysis, the study offers valuable insights into the prevalence and determinants of psychological distress among university students, thereby paving the way for targeted interventions aimed at bolstering mental well-being and mitigating the burden of anxiety and depression among this vulnerable population.

Furthermore, the study delves into the intricate mechanisms through which psychological stress contributes to the onset and exacerbation of anxiety and depression among Nigerian university students. By probing into mediating factors such as academic pressures, social isolation, financial constraints, and familial expectations, the researchers provide a nuanced comprehension of the contextual elements that amplify the adverse impact of stress on mental well-being. The study's findings hold crucial implications for mental health policy and practice within the Nigerian educational landscape. By shedding light on the prevalence of psychological distress and its deleterious effects on mental health outcomes among university students, the research underscores the urgent requirement for targeted interventions designed to fortify mental resilience and bolster coping strategies within this demographic.

In a research endeavor by Adeyemo and Ogunsemi (2020), which embarked on an extensive exploration of stress levels and mental health outcomes among Nigerian undergraduate students, thereby significantly contributing to the comprehension of mental

health within this particular demographic. By delving into the intricate interplay between stress and various mental disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depressive disorders, the study sheds illuminating insights on the multifaceted dynamics underlying mental well-being among Nigerian undergraduates. A central tenet of the study's findings revolves around the discernment of a substantial impact of stress on mental health outcomes among Nigerian undergraduate students. The study revealed a noteworthy association between heightened stress levels and the emergence of mental disorders like PTSD and depressive disorders within the student populace. This pivotal revelation underscores the profound influence of stress on psychological well-being, thereby emphasizing the necessity for targeted interventions aimed at alleviating the adverse ramifications of stress and fostering resilience among undergraduate students in Nigeria.

In a study conducted by Chen *et al.* (2019) on an exhaustive exploration into the complex nexus between academic stress and mental health issues among Chinese college students, thereby making a substantial contribution to the understanding of mental well-being within this demographic. Through their meticulous research efforts, the study illuminated the profound impact of academic stress on mental health outcomes, revealing a robust correlation between heightened stress levels and increased vulnerability to developing mental disorders among college students in China. By delving into the complex interplay of psychosocial factors shaping mental health within the higher education context, the study offered valuable insights into the challenges encountered by Chinese college students as they navigate the rigors of academic life while safeguarding their psychological well-being.

A central theme of the study's findings revolved around the identification of a strong and consistent link between academic stress and the prevalence of mental disorders among Chinese college students. Utilizing meticulous data analysis and statistical modeling techniques, the study illustrated that students experiencing elevated levels of academic stress faced a significantly heightened risk of developing mental health issues, encompassing anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and other stress-related conditions. This pivotal discovery underscores the profound impact of academic pressures on the mental well-being of students, underscoring the imperative for targeted interventions aimed at alleviating the negative consequences of stress and fostering resilience among college students in China.

Furthermore, the study elucidated the potential mechanisms through which academic stress contributes to the onset and exacerbation of mental health challenges among Chinese college students. By investigating mediating factors such as perfectionism, self-efficacy beliefs, and social support networks, the researchers provided a nuanced comprehension of the contextual elements influencing mental health outcomes within this demographic. For instance, the research identified maladaptive coping strategies and perceived social isolation as

significant moderators in the stress-mental health relationship, emphasizing the importance of cultivating adaptive coping mechanisms and enhancing social support systems to bolster resilience in the face of academic stress.

Johnson et al. (2020) embarked on a groundbreaking longitudinal investigation among American college students, offering invaluable insights into the reciprocal relationship between stress and mental disorders within this demographic. By delving into how stress and mental health concerns mutually influence each other over time, the research illuminated the intricate interplay of psychosocial factors shaping mental well-being among college students in the United States. Employing meticulous methods of data collection and analysis, the study uncovered a compelling pattern of mutual reinforcement, wherein stress and mental disorders exacerbate one another, perpetuating a cycle of psychological distress and impairment among college students. A central aspect of the study's findings revolved around identifying the bidirectional relationship between stress and mental disorders among American college students. Through sophisticated longitudinal analyses and statistical modeling techniques, the study illustrated that heightened stress levels not only contribute to the initiation and aggravation of mental health issues but also serve as a consequence thereof, fueling a reciprocal cycle of influence.

Furthermore, the research elucidated potential mechanisms through which stress and mental disorders interact and mutually influence each other over time. By investigating mediators such as coping strategies, cognitive appraisals, and social support networks, the researchers provided a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors shaping the trajectory of mental well-being within this demographic. For example, maladaptive coping mechanisms and negative cognitive appraisals emerged as notable moderators in the stress-mental health relationship, emphasizing the significance of fostering adaptive coping skills and cultivating supportive social environments to alleviate the detrimental effects of stress on mental health outcomes among college students.

Khan *et al.* (2020) initiated an extensive exploration into stress and its repercussions on mental health outcomes among students in Pakistan, thus making a notable contribution to the comprehension of mental well-being within this specific demographic. Through their meticulous research endeavors, the study shed light on the intricate correlation between stress and mental health disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, among Pakistani students. By delving into the multifaceted interplay of sociocultural factors influencing mental well-being within the Pakistani context, Khan et al. provided valuable insights into the challenges confronted by students as they navigate the demands of academic life while striving to maintain their psychological balance. A central theme in the study's findings was the discernment of a robust link between heightened stress levels and the prevalence of mental health disorders

among students in Pakistan. The study illustrated that students experiencing elevated stress levels were markedly more prone to displaying symptoms of anxiety and depression, thereby underscoring the detrimental impact of stress on mental well-being within this demographic.

Moreover, the study delved into potential mechanisms through which stress contributes to the initiation and exacerbation of mental health disorders among students in Pakistan. By investigating mediators such as coping strategies, social support networks, and cultural influences, the researchers provided a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors shaping mental health outcomes within this demographic. Furthermore, the implications of the study's findings extend beyond academic inquiry, holding broader significance for mental health policy and practice within the Pakistani educational landscape. By elucidating the prevalence of stress and its adverse impact on mental health outcomes among students, the study underscore the urgent need for comprehensive mental health interventions within educational institutions in Pakistan. This encompasses implementing evidence-based stress management programs, offering accessible and culturally sensitive mental health services, and fostering a campus environment that prioritizes student well-being.

In a seminar study by Smith *et al.* (2021), which undertook a meta-analysis spanning various nations, aiming to consolidate and synthesize existing research to verify the consistent correlation between psychological stress and the initiation or exacerbation of mental disorders among student cohorts globally. This meta-analysis stands as a significant milestone in our comprehension of the intricate nexus between stress and mental health outcomes within the realm of higher education, offering valuable insights into the universality of this phenomenon across diverse cultural and geographical settings. By amalgamating data from a wide spectrum of studies, Smith *et al.* endeavored to establish a robust empirical groundwork to delineate the multifaceted interplay of psychosocial factors influencing mental well-being among students on a global scale.

Furthermore, the meta-analysis unveiled potential mechanisms through which psychological stress contributes to the onset or exacerbation of mental disorders among student cohorts. By exploring moderators such as sociodemographic factors, coping strategies, and environmental stressors, the researchers provided a nuanced comprehension of the contextual elements shaping mental health outcomes within this demographic. For instance, the meta-analysis pinpointed academic pressures, social isolation, and financial constraints as notable stressors contributing to psychological distress among students, underscoring the necessity of addressing these structural determinants in efforts aimed at promoting mental health.

In a thorough examination of stress and its repercussions on mental health outcomes among college students in India, Patel *et al.* (2019) embarked on a pivotal investigation, illuminating the urgent necessity for tailored interventions to address stress-induced mental

health issues within this demographic. Through their diligent research endeavors, the study emphasized the importance of comprehending the distinct stressors and obstacles encountered by Indian college students, as well as the profound impact of stress on their mental well-being. By spotlighting the prevalence of stress-related mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, Patel *et al.* (2019) underscored the critical need for implementing culturally sensitive and contextually relevant interventions to alleviate the adverse effects of stress and cultivate resilience among Indian college students.

Similarly, in their examination of stress among university students in Vietnam, Nguyen *et al.* (2020) explored its ramifications on mental health outcomes, revealing patterns of stress-related mental health disorders akin to those observed in diverse cultural settings. Through their rigorous research efforts, Nguyen *et al.* offered valuable insights into the prevalence and correlates of stress among Vietnamese university students, thus enriching our understanding of the universality of stress-related mental health concerns within the student demographic. By elucidating the correlation between stress and mental disorders, including anxiety and depression, among Vietnamese university students, the study underscored the imperative for targeted interventions aimed at addressing the underlying determinants of stress and fostering psychological well-being within this population.

Moreover, Martinez *et al.* (2021) conducted a qualitative inquiry among college students in Mexico, delving into the intricate ways in which stress contributes to the emergence of mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. Through their thorough exploration of students' firsthand experiences, The study. provided insightful perspectives into the multifaceted nature of stress and its implications for mental health outcomes within the Mexican college student population. By uncovering the intricate interplay of sociocultural factors, academic pressures, and personal adversities shaping students' encounters with stress, the study underscored the importance of embracing a holistic approach to mental health promotion and intervention endeavors among Mexican college students.

In a longitudinal investigation involving South Korean university students, Lee *et al.* (2018) conducted a significant study, shedding light on the culturally specific stressors that contribute to the emergence of mental health disorders. Through their rigorous research efforts, Lee *et al.* (2018), emphasized the importance of understanding the sociocultural influences shaping stress experiences and mental health outcomes within this demographic. By pinpointing culture-specific stressors and their impact on mental well-being, the study offered valuable insights into the intricacies of navigating academic and social pressures within the South Korean higher education system. This study's outcomes underscore the necessity of tailoring interventions to address the unique stressors faced by South Korean university students, thereby fostering resilience and well-being within this population.

Similarly, Jones *et al.* (2022) conducted research examining stress and mental health outcomes among Australian college students, revealing significant connections between heightened stress levels and an increased susceptibility to mood and anxiety disorders. Through their meticulous research endeavors, Jones *et al.* provided insightful observations into the prevalence and correlates of stress among Australian college students, thereby enhancing our comprehension of stress-related mental health challenges within this cohort. By elucidating the link between stress and mood/anxiety disorders, the study underscored the importance of early intervention and support for college students grappling with elevated stress levels. These findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive mental health initiatives within Australian educational institutions to address the multifaceted challenges encountered by college students and foster psychological well-being.

Moreover, Wang *et al.* (2019) conducted a cross-sectional examination among European university students, uncovering parallel patterns of stress-related mental health issues across diverse cultural contexts. Through their research efforts, Wang *et al.* provided valuable insights into the universal impact of stress on mental health outcomes among university students in Europe. By highlighting the consistency of stress-related mental health issues across varied cultural settings, the study emphasized the requirement for a global approach to mental health promotion and intervention efforts within the university environment. These findings underscore the importance of integrating culturally sensitive and contextually relevant strategies to address stress-related mental disorders and promote resilience among university students worldwide.

Furthermore, Oliveira *et al.* (2020) delved into stress and mental health outcomes among Brazilian undergraduate students, accentuating the necessity for culturally attuned interventions to tackle stress-related mental disorders. Through their qualitative inquiry into students' experiences, Oliveira *et al.* provided nuanced insights into the sociocultural factors influencing stress and mental health outcomes within the Brazilian university milieu. By spotlighting the distinct challenges faced by Brazilian undergraduate students and the significance of cultural considerations in mental health interventions, the study contributed to tailoring approaches aimed at enhancing psychological well-being among this demographic. These findings stress the importance of incorporating cultural perspectives into mental health initiatives to ensure their efficacy and applicability across diverse cultural contexts.

Conclusion

The link between psychological stress and mental disorders among students is complex, affecting mental health across educational settings worldwide. Research across regions like South Korea, Australia, Europe, Brazil, India, Vietnam, Mexico, China, Nigeria, and the United States indicates that stress is widespread among students, regardless of cultural or geographic

background. These studies consistently show that high stress can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, suggesting that stress can both initiate and worsen existing mental disorders. The cyclical nature of this relationship highlights the need for a holistic approach in educational institutions to address both individual and systemic sources of stress. Recognizing that cultural variations influence stressors and coping strategies, interventions should be designed to suit the specific needs of students in different contexts. To address this, schools and universities should make mental health a priority by involving school social workers who will implement programs that focus on stress management, providing accessible mental health resources, creating a supportive campus atmosphere, and strengthening social support networks. This approach enables educational institutions to play a significant role in reducing stress-related mental health issues and creating an environment where students can succeed academically and personally.

Social work implication

1. School social workers should ensure that mental health services are easily accessible, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the diverse student body.
2. School social workers should develop and promote programs that will equip students with stress management skills.
3. School social workers should drive campaigns and initiatives to reduce stigma around mental health.

Recommendations

1. University administrators and leadership teams institutions should elevate the importance of mental health by embedding it into their mission statements and institutional objectives.
2. Campus community and facility managers should foster a campus culture that promotes mental well-being.

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