

Mental Health Adversities of University Students Elicited by COVID 19 Pandemic and National Lockdown

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Abstract

The COVID 19 pandemic and the subsequent Nation-wide lockdown which started from the 24th of March 2020 have extensively disrupted the higher education sector by temporarily shutting down all the academic institutions. Unfortunately, in such a setting, the final year students had to suffer the most as they were compelled to compromise with the ongoing education system. A shift from classroom teaching to online classes has not only brought changes in the thinking and behavioural pattern of the students but also became a vibrant factor for mental health problems among the university students. Thus, the present study made an effort to identify the issues which grappled the minds of post graduate final year university students of a central university of the North Eastern Region during the lockdown period along-with its effects. For the study, 58 respondents were selected purposively from one of the departments of the selected university. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative method of data collection. Questionnaire as a tool of data collection was used. The findings of the study revealed that the issues like academics, job prospect, citizens' behaviour and the role of media, have affected the students mentally and hampered their cognitive, behavioural psychological, emotional and social development irrespective of their gender. ¹

Key Words: *Mental Health Adversities, University Students, COVID 19, National Lockdown, Emotional effects.*

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Introduction

When the entire country is hit with economic crisis due to nationwide lockdown, the human mind of different age groups is grappled with fear, uncertainty, insecurity etc. When the elderly seem to be worried about the future, the young are mostly worried about their career. The COVID 19 pandemic had adversely affected almost every aspect of life - education, earning, business etc. The student community mostly suffered their own share of misfortune due to abrupt impedance to their academics, apart from the health related aspects of COVID 19 pandemic. The COVID 19 Pandemic has brought an extensive disruption in the higher education sector, which is one of the determinants of a country's economic prospect. Therefore, to control the speed of spread of the corona virus (SARS CoV2), the government has temporarily closed down all the educational institutions, thereby impacting 60% of the world's student's population (UNESCO 2020). Among all categories of students, probably the final year university students of this year are the worst sufferers. In the final part of their studies they are subjected to experience a major interruption in terms of teaching, assessment, placement, and above all they are likely to graduate at the beginning of a major recession. Undoubtedly, the period is very stressful for students. Regular classes have been substituted with online teaching processes, semesters are about to be postponed in many cases, and already postponed in some cases. Uncertainty has been prevailing with the final examination. All these factors have become a cause of concern and worry for the students with a resultant increase in vulnerability to develop mental health problems in them. Studies on mental health have explored that the university level students face lot of pressure and challenges that pose a variety of physical, social and emotional difficulties (Rodgers & Tennison, 2009). It has also found that a substantial number of university students experience mental health problems (Seim & Spates, 2010) and it has been increasing in number as well as severity (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Mood disturbances, destructive behaviors, interpersonal problems and impairment of self-concept are the common problems being confronted by the university students. (Grayson, 1989). They do experience stress, anxiety, symptoms of depression, appetite issues and other psychological issues, which seem to have a significant negative impact on their academic performance and their mental health (Tosevski, Milovancevic, & Gajic, 2010). The

consequences of such mental health problems could both be of short term or long term, thereby decreasing their work capacity and resulting in poor academic performance (Breslau, Lane, Sampson, & Kessler, 2008), for which students hardly receive any therapeutic or counseling services (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009). For all individuals of different age groups of different sector; mental, physical and social health is interwoven with the different tendrils of life. In fact mental health is crucial to the overall well being of individuals, societies and countries. Indeed, mental health can be defined as a state of well-being enabling individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities. Unfortunately, in most parts of the world, mental health and mental disorders are not accorded anywhere near the same degree of importance as physical health. Rather, they have been largely ignored or neglected (WHO 2003). Therefore the present study has made an attempt to understand the issues affecting the mental health of the university students of a central university of the North Eastern Region of India at the backdrop of the ongoing COVID 19 Pandemic, so that a proper analysis of the issues could suggest measures for promoting mental health among the students.

Methodology

The present study has been conducted on the mental health of final year university students in the purview of COVID 19 pandemic. To conduct the study, a sample with 58 numbers of final year post graduate students of a Central University of the North Eastern Region of India was taken purposively. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative method of data collection. Questionnaire as a tool of data collection was used. The study aimed at understanding the impact of COVID-19- induced nationwide lockdown on the thinking pattern of Post graduate final year students. The broad objective of the study was to explore the mental health adversities faced by the final year students during COVID 19 pandemic and the succeeding nationwide lock down. The findings of the study have been analysed through excel and presented in the form of tables, graph and chart.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The data collected through questionnaire revealed that the students'

thought process have been drawn to various fields during lockdown causing mental adversities. The range of such thinking have been extended to Academics, Job prospects, Role of Media, Economy and Citizens' Behaviour, which to a great extent put impediments in the cognitive and behavioural, emotional, psychological and social development of students. Out of the 58 respondents, 44.82% were female students and 55.18% male students. Almost all of them were within the age group of 23 years. Though all of them belonged to the same class, yet differences of thought made each of the respondent's response unique.

The Findings related to the issues affecting the mental health of the students are presented below.

Issues upsetting the University Students

1. Academics

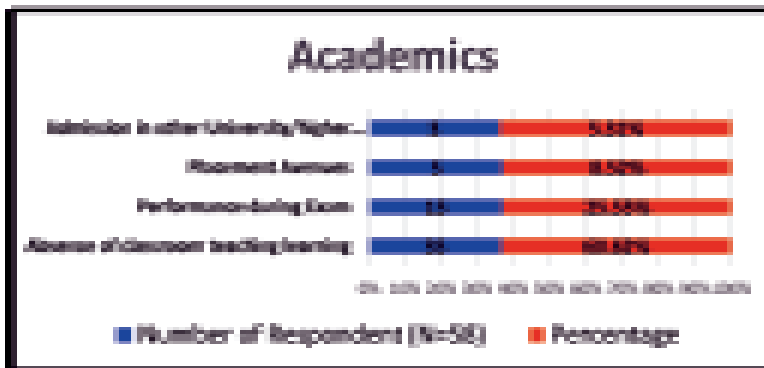


Figure 1: Concerns on Academic prospects

The figure shows that 5.31% (3) were worried about admission in other universities for their higher education prospects, 8.52% (5) respondents shared their concern about placement opportunities for employment, 25.55% (15) of the respondents were anxious about their exam performances and the majority of the respondents, i.e., 60.62% (35) were concerned about the absence of classroom teaching-learning, which indicated that the students were comfortable in the classroom method and were yet to adjust and get benefit from the digital learning method.

2. Job Prospects

Apart from academics, it has been observed that students were equally concerned about their career. Out of the 58 respondents, 12.07% (7) of the respondents were worried, thinking about the limited job opportunities owing to the pandemic worldwide, 31.03% (18) of the respondents were however confident that there will be ample job opportunities in the social sector and the majority of the respondents, i.e. 56.9% (33) have faith that the government will promote jobs, but may have limited vacancies and low salary. This indicated that there is less concern about job opportunities among the students.

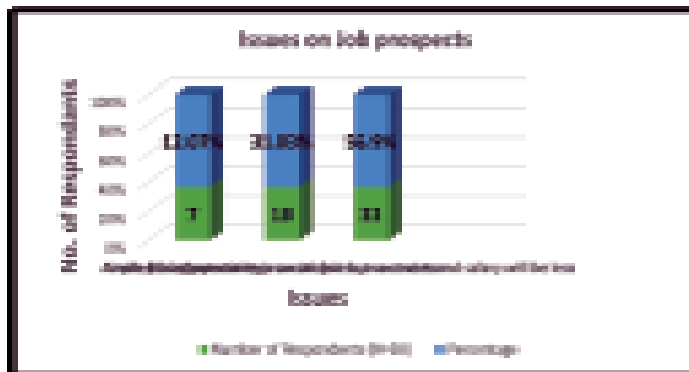


Figure 2: Concerns about Job Prospects

3. Role of Media :

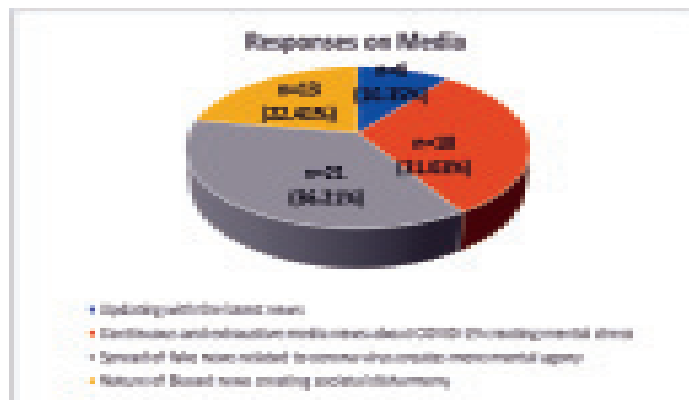


Figure 3: Students responses to Media updates and activities

Figure 3 explains that only 6 (10.35%) students kept themselves updated with the latest news. However, 18 (31.03%) respondents were feeling stressed due to the relentless and exhaustive media coverage on COVID 19; 21 (36.21%) respondents also shared that fake news related to the COVID 19 Pandemic is adding to their mental agony and 13 (22.41%) respondents felt that a state of social disharmony was in the process of making due to deliberation of biased news.

4. Citizen Behaviour

Out of 58 respondents, 11 (18.97%) respondents expressed that the pandemic scenarios got out of control owing to the movement of migrant workers, while 14 (24.13%) of them felt that lack of social awareness about COVID 19 was the reason for the outbreak of this disease. However, the majority of the respondents, i.e. 33 (56.9%) believed that the citizens were not following the COVID 19 guidelines religiously leading to further spread of the disease and thereby jeopardizing the livelihood option of both in-job and prospective professionals.

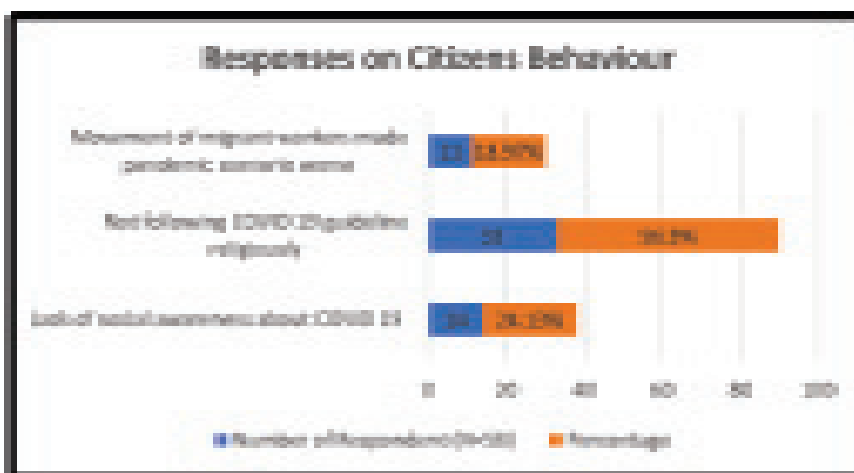


Figure 4: Responses of the students on the citizens' behaviour

Effects on Mental Health of the Students

The study found that the above mentioned issues had affected the mental health of the respondents irrespective of their gender in numerous ways. These are discussed below:

1. Cognitive Effects

Cognitive Effects	Female	Male	Total
Anxious thought	9(15.51%)	17(29.31%)	26(44.83%)
Fearful anticipation	4(6.90%)	4(6.90%)	8(13.79%)
Poor concentration	13(22.41%)	11(18.97%)	24(41.38%)
Total	26(44.82%)	32(55.18%)	58(100%)

Table 1: Distribution of respondents on gender and Cognitive effects

Various cognitive effects were observed among all the respondents which included anxious thoughts, a fearful anticipation of the present conditions and its future ramifications, and an inability to concentrate properly on the works at hand. Majority of the respondents, i.e., 26 (44.83%) students, were having anxious thoughts. However, majority of the female respondents, i.e. 13 (22.41%) students had concentration related issues while majority of the male respondents, i.e. 17 (29.31%) students complained of having anxious thoughts.

2. Emotional Effects

Emotional Effects	Female	Male	Total
Feeling of tension	12(20.69%)	16(27.59%)	28(48.28%)
Irritability	3(5.17%)	3(5.17%)	6(10.34%)
Restlessness	2(3.45%)	2(3.45%)	4(6.9%)
Worries	4(6.90%)	7(12.07%)	11(18.97%)
Inability to relax	3(5.17%)	2(3.45%)	5(8.62%)
Depression	2(3.45%)	2(3.45%)	4(6.89%)
Total	26(44.82%)	32(55.18%)	58(100%)

Table 2: Distribution of respondents on gender and Emotional effects

Any individual’s emotional state directs as to how he/she gets on with his/her day to day life. Hence, a negative emotional status is bound to hamper a person, both mentally and physically. Table 2 depicts the various emotional disturbances being experienced by the respondents of the present

study. It is evident from the table that majority of the respondents, i.e. 28 (48.28%) students which included majority of the males {16 (27.59%)} and the female {12 (20.69%)} students, were in a constant state of emotional (or mental) tension.

3. Behavioural Effects

Behavioral Effects	Female	Male	Total
Avoidance of task	3(5.17%)	6(10.34%)	9(15.52%)
Sleep Problem	13(22.41%)	6(10.34%)	19(32.76%)
Difficulty in completing			
class assignment	9(15.52%)	18(31.03%)	27(46.55%)
Changes in drinking, eating and smoking	1(1.72%)	2(3.45%)	3(5.17%)
Total	26(44.82%)	32(55.18%)	58(100%)

Table 3: Distribution of respondents on gender and Behavioural effects

The present study also found out that the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic has affected the behavioural patterns of the respondent students which have been presented in a tabulated form in Table 3. It has been observed that majority of the students, i.e. 27 (46.55%), were finding it difficult to complete their class assignments. This picture is same in majority of the male respondents, i.e. 18 (31.03%) students. But most of the female respondents, i.e. 13 (22.41%) students, suffered from sleep related problems.

4. Psychological Effects

Psychological Effects	Female	Male	Total
Stiff or Tense Muscle	9(15.52%)	7(12.07%)	16(27.59%)
Increased sweating	10(17.24%)	18(31.03%)	28(48.28%)
Abdominal Cramps	4(6.90%)	4(6.90%)	8(13.79%)
Loosening of bowels	1(1.72%)	2(3.45%)	3(5.17%)
Constipation	2(3.45%)	1(1.72%)	3(5.17%)
Total	26(44.82%)	32(55.18%)	58(100%)

Table 4: Distribution of respondents on gender and psychological effects

Table 4 depicts how this pandemic and lockdown are psychologically affecting the students, which was evident from various physical symptoms like alteration in bowel habits – constipation or loose stools, abdominal cramps, episodes of sudden increased sweating and increased muscle tension or stiffness. It was thus evident that majority of the respondent students, i.e. 28 (48.28%) [Male – 18 (31.03%) students and Female – 10 (17.24%) students] were suffering from frequent episodes of increased sweating, which itself is a physical manifestation of psychological problem.

5. Social Effects

Social Effects	Female	Male	Total
Tend to seek out others to be with	3(5.17%)	8(13.79%)	11(18.97%)
Quality of relationship is getting changed	15(25.86%)	17(29.31%)	32(55.17%)
Prefers to live alone	8(13.79%)	7(12.07%)	15(25.86%)
Total	26(44.82%)	32(55.18%)	58(100%)

Table 5: Distribution of respondents on gender and Social effects

Adverse situations, like the ongoing COVID 19 Pandemic, tend to affect one's social life in multiple ways. The present study also observed some trends in changes of social behaviour of the respondents in response to the present situation. Some of them, i.e. 15 (25.86%) students of either sex, preferred to live alone while 11 (18.97%) of them wanted to avoid loneliness by seeking out to be with others. But, majority of them, i.e. 32 (55.17 %) respondents [17 (29.31 %) Male students and 15 (25.86%) female students] strongly felt that the quality of their relationship with their friends and family members has changed.

Discussion

It is generally accepted that students are more vulnerable to mental health problems than the general population (Benton et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2007) and a pandemic like COVID 19 proves the same. When the students were supposed to be ambitious for their future life and give

efforts to enhance their different skills and seek opportunities accordingly, their wings got tied down amidst the lockdown and social distancing norms leaving them with no options but to ponder and worry about their future. The study explored, the understanding of the students towards practical life, developing and maintaining relationships, academic related matters, future career opportunities, media's role, and the citizens' behaviour making them psychologically, emotionally and socially vulnerable in this pandemic situation, the consequences of which could be detrimental, if not devastating. Therefore the focus of the study was to manifest the effects of lockdown issues on students instead of diagnosing the issues which may require a number of factors other than presence, or absence of a symptom. A good number of respondents who hailed from the other states of India and the North East could not go back to their respective homes due to the lockdown process and were staying in rented houses and university hostels. They shared that staying away from their respective families in such a pandemic situation was making them mentally weak; a feeling of loneliness was compelling the female students to develop a frustrating behaviour whereas the male students were found to commit some unwanted mistakes. Moreover, financial issues of their parents have become a cause of mental health problems among the students. The study has already reflected that the students are habituated and comfortable with the classroom learning method, where there is one to one interaction with the faculties. This one-to-one interaction of the teachers with their students not only help the teachers to provide academic guidance but also enables the teachers to study the psychological status and behavioural patterns of the students and help them to overcome any obstacles, which arises, and guide them to secure their future. The students, however, seemed to be less worried about job opportunities believing the fact that Governments decision in strengthening small scale sector will create many job opportunities in the near future. The role of media in covering the ongoing COVID 19 outbreak had various psychological effects on the respondent students. They were of the opinion that the relentless coverage of news by the media outlets about the morbidity and mortality of the COVID 19 pandemic, with excessive highlights on the lethality or the extreme contagious nature of the SARS-CoV2 virus with limited treatment options, has caused intense psychological turbulence in them. They also opined that there would have been lesser

psychological problems had these media outlets have highlighted more on the positive aspects of the pandemic, i.e. less mortality and a higher recovery rate, than the negative aspects. The students also pointed out that some biased and vindictive news presentations may result in social disharmony. The students are also deeply concerned about the citizens' irresponsible behaviour in not following the COVID 19 regulations religiously, thereby facilitating the easy spread of the virus in the community and challenging the livelihood of both the in-job prospective professionals. Such dilapidating situation brought many sufferings for the students. Inability to concentrate on their studies or other works, unable to complete their assignments, a continuous feeling of anxiety leading to increased tension, behavioural changes, feeling of loneliness, sleep related problems and suffering from various psycho-somatic symptoms like alteration in bowel habits, abdominal cramps, etc., are some of the major problems being faced by the students due to the current scenario. The students' community is the most cheerful group full of anticipation, courage, and zeal. They are the pillars of society. The COVID 19 pandemic and its associated problems are gradually pushing this lively group into depression, stress and worries. Therefore, it becomes important for the university authority to address the mental health issues of students on priority basis so that early identification and timely prevention of mental health problems can be done.

Conclusion

Psycho-Social Counseling has always been an important tool for promoting mental health. To do so, many of the universities of India and the North Eastern Region, including the university considered for the study, has started tele-counseling during the lockdown period. But merely initiating such services cannot reach out to the students who are genuinely in need of counseling because of the stigma, fear and negative reputation associated with it. Therefore, a department-wise proper awareness has to be generated and the students need to be conditioned about the symptoms of anxiety and stress and as to when they should approach a psychiatrist or a counselor/psychologist for help. Moreover, University authority can install softwares to keep the records of the students who attended counseling sessions and who didn't turn up for subsequent sessions later on during lockdown period. Few of the respondents were of the opinion that practicing yoga, activities

like painting, reading, cooking, gardening and developing essential skills like content writing, critical thinking, self awareness, decision making, and emotional intelligence will keep them mentally fit. Initiating measures by the concerned department in this regard could bring optimal growth in mental health.

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