COVID-19 Outbreak, Mental Health and Psychological Counseling among University Students

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Abstract

The outbreak of the global pandemic COVID-19 understandably presents a challenging time for everyone around the world. Not only that this pandemic is a serious medical concern, but it also brings mixed emotions and psychosocial stressors for everyone. Measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 have affected the functioning of higher education worldwide. As most countries started pursuing physical distancing, most higher education institutions also had to shift to online learning within a very short time and change the way they function and communicate with their staff and students. These changes affected students' plans and priorities. Students are at increased risk for negative emotional responses that can interfere with both their learning and their daily lives. Staying at home and doing their studies, in the best cases by digital means, has already had emotional consequences for them. The coping with feelings of isolation, frustration, boredom, anxiety or stress brings a response of hopelessness, depression, loneliness and other mental health conditions. Mental health problems can affect students' motivation, concentration and social interaction – and these are crucial factors for students' success in higher education. Hence, the main aim of our paper is to establish the need for implementation of a mental health assessment, support and psychological counseling among students. Counsellors suggest strategies for managing and altering patterns of upsetting thoughts, feelings and behavior. In the midst of a pandemic, school counsellors did their absolute best to maintain relationship with students and continue to carry out their responsibilities, getting creative in the process.

Keywords: COVID-19 outbreak, stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, psychological counseling, students

Introduction

This is the time for facts, not fear.
This is the time for science, not rumor.
This is the time for solidarity, not stigma.
We are all in this together.
(Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO)

It is a frightening time. We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, with cities and even entire countries shutting down. Some of us are in areas that have already been affected by the coronavirus. Others are bracing for what may come. And all of us are looking at the headlines and wondering: "What is going to happen next?".

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advocate that it is critical to recognize stress symptoms resulting from the lockdown and the disease itself. During outbreaks of transmissible disease such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and equine influenza (Wu et al., 2009), damaging psychological implications have been documented (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). It is apparent that the unswerving psychological and social impacts of the pandemic are inevitable, and it is critical to take steps in building resilience and coping with such damaging consequences of a pandemic. As suggested by Grubic, Badovinac and Johri (2020), it is a timely call for studies investigating the impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health and the need of immediate interventions.

The global academic calendar has been thrown into a state of disarray by the coronavirus outbreak. Most schools, from primary schools to universities, have shut their doors and students have returned home with their parents and together they self-quarantined (UNESCO, 2020). The coronavirus affects students' mental health in so many different ways. Students are at increased risk for negative emotional responses that can interfere with both their learning and their daily lives. It has been found that anxiety and stress interact with specific learning skills, such as time management, concentration, learning methods and motivation to study. Being a student in a pandemic is a new experience and we are increasingly acquiring information in this regard.

COVID-19 pandemic and outbreak

The first human cases of COVID-19 were identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China (WHO, 2020). Since then, the virus has spread around the world and by March 2020, most countries throughout the world started to report sharp increases in the number of cases. As we write this paper in late January, more than 99.4 million people have been affected around the globe and more than 2.1 million people have died (Worldometer, last updates January 24, 2021).

COVID-19 has and is likely to affect people from many countries, in many geographic locations. Isolation, contact restrictions and economic shut down impose a complete change to the psychosocial environment of affected countries. Many streets in cities around the world are empty. Flights to and from affected parts of the world have been grounded. Scientific or business conferences have been cancelled. People have to stay at home. Social relations have been strictly limited to close family members. Many countries have experienced a lockdown of schools. Quarantine can lead to decreased freedom and privacy, and consequently higher stress.

Psychological impact of COVID-19 and lockdown among university students

Public health emergences, such as the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19), are a stressful time for both people and communities. The

coronavirus has affected nearly every aspect of our lives, from school to work, to sports, to where we eat and what we do. Multiple restrictions have been imposed on public movement in order to contain the spread of the virus. People are forced to stay at home and are burdened by the heft of quarantine.

Lockdowns or quarantines are necessary protective measures for physical health, however prolonged impositions are detrimental. Therefore quarantine at home during COVID-19, and the closure of educational institutions have been reported as major reasons for students feeling disconnected from the society and their social circles (Killian, 2020). Perhaps most importantly, students are also facing social isolation and a loss of social support because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mandatory physical distancing measures and reductions of social gatherings have left many students feeling disconnected from their campuses where support and services are typically available. In some cases, students reported negative experiences while returning home during the pandemic crisis. However, with the exception of new studies, notably from China (Cao et al., 2020), there has been evidence of the psychological or mental health effects of the current pandemic on university students, who are known to be a vulnerable population. They experience high levels of stress, anxiety and fearfulness, along with a range of the emotional and behavioral issues.

According to Cao et al. (2020) 25% of university students experienced anxiety symptoms, which were positively correlated with increased concerns about academic delay, economic effect of the pandemic, and impacts on daily life. The students' needs of enhanced emotional support during the current pandemic have also been reported worldwide. Practicing social isolation by communicating with them and providing emotional support throughout these difficult times is very important. Hence, the main aim of our paper is to establish the need of implementing a mental health assessment, support and psychological counseling among students. Based on experience from past global serious viral experiences, the development and implementation of mental health assessment, support, treatment, and services are crucial and pressing goals for the health response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

COVID-19 and stress among students

Stress is a mechanism of any internal or external demand upon the body (Dusselier et al., 2005). Stress is considered a state of individuals that results from their interaction with the environment that is perceived as too demanding and a threat to their well-being. The stressors are not only physical, but may also involve emotions.

In times of an epidemic, people tend to experience fear of getting infected with the viral disease, and this fear results in anxiety, depression and stress. Stress can be explained as a feeling of emotional and physical tension which arises from any event, which requires timely action in regard to mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students all over the world, have also experienced distress, because they have been physically disconnected from their professors, peers and key support system. As a result of physical distancing measures implemented as a response to COVID-19, tertiary education institutions have shifted to an emergency online learning format, which would be expected to further exacerbate academic stressors for students. Students may experience reduced motivation towards the studies, increased pressures to learn independently and reduced ability to rely on typical coping strategies.

At the same time students feel overwhelmed, because they worry about the health of their family and friends who may be exposed to the coronavirus, or that their parents might be unemployed. When stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, they experience physical and psychological impairment (Taylor et al., 2008). In addition, stress during an infectious outbreak can include:

- Problems with memory or concentration;
- Poor academic performance;
- Poor academic life;
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns;
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco or other harmful things;
- Increased level of abusive family situations.

Some research suggests that COVID-19 may differently affect students who identify as male and female (Fegert et al., 2020). For example, more female students indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely disruptive in regard to their stress and mental health, and that it has significantly disrupted their academic studies. In addition, a greater proportion of female students compared to males, report that social isolation has been difficult or very difficult.

Sahu (2020) found that students who were isolated or quarantined during pandemic diseases are more likely to suffer from acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and grief. Most of the students have developed post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that include poor concentration, insomnia, anxiety or depression.

Faced with soaring needs and limited options, counselors have been finding creative ways to reach students.

Anxiety among students in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

Anxiety is a psychological disorder that is associated with significant suffering and impaired functioning. It is a blend of thoughts and feelings characterized by a sense of uncontrollability and unpredictability over potentially adverse life events (Seligman & Wuyek, 2007). The symptoms of anxiety are persistent and not restricted to, or markedly increased, in any particular set of circumstances. With headlines warring us of international terrorism, global warming, economic uncertainty, or viral diseases, such as COVID-19, we are all likely to be a little more

anxious these days. Anxiety interferes with our daily lives, our physical and mental health.

Specifically in regard to this study, early literature has documented the negative influence of a pandemic on students' psychological well-being, which has led to acute depression and anxiety (Brooks et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2020) investigated the psychological impact on university students in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of 7143 students studied, 0.9% had severe anxiety, 27% had moderate anxiety, and 21.3% had mild anxiety. The anxious feelings begin to interfere with their life and they find it difficult to complete their obligations, such as going to university and studying. It can also affect how they get along with other people. They experienced a range of physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral symptoms.

Odrizola-Gonzales et al. (2020) studied the psychological well-being of Spanish university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the sample, 34.19% of young people showed moderate to extremely severe depression symptoms, 21.34% showed extremely severe anxiety symptoms, and 28.14% exhibited moderate to extremely severe symptoms. They identified several stressors as key factors affecting the students' anxiety and psychological well-being: a parent or a friend being infected by COVID-19; educational disruptions; family income stability; reduced social interactions; and increased number of new cases.

Students with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 may experience fear of the consequences of the infection with a potentially fatal new virus, and those in quarantine might experience boredom and loneliness. COVID-19 has been recognized as a killer virus, which has prolonged feelings of perceived threats and uncertainty. Furthermore, mandatory contact tracing and 14-day quarantine, which are a part of public health responses to the COVID-19 pneumonia outbreak, could increase students' anxiety and guilt about the effects of quarantine and stigma on their families and friends. Similar concerns about the mental health, psychological adjustment, and support are now arising everywhere.

Loneliness during a pandemic: the impact and implications

Loneliness is a universal emotional and psychological experience. Loneliness is also considered a normal experience that leads an individual to achieve deeper self-awareness, a time to be creative, and an opportunity to attain self-fulfillment and to explore the meaning of life (De Jong Gierveld, 1987).

Loneliness is not caused by being alone, rather by being without some definite needed relationship or a set of relationships. However, the experience of loneliness is likewise unpleasant and distressing. Loneliness exists in all age groups, so it is a common problem among university students.

Staying at home and studying from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the best case conducted by digital means, has already had emotional consequences for students. This social isolation leads to chronic loneliness and boredom, which if long enough, can have detrimental effects on physical and mental well-being. Loneliness is

assumed to break this essential construct and disrupt social integration, leading to increased isolation. In fact, stressful events related to this period of time during the COVID-19 outbreak are associated with changes in students' relationships: limited contacts with family and friends, necessity of leaving university and birding new social networks. Hence, an unsuccessful process of adaptation to a new situation may result in social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Consequently, loneliness, a significant multidimensional phenomenon, has significant outcomes for mental health.

The linkage between depression and COVID-19 outbreak among students

We are living in the dark time of health where we are surrounded by thousands of contagious viruses, bacteria and other pathogens in the environment that use our bodies as their long-term home. Once these microbes have insinuated themselves into our metabolisms, they frequently remain there for life, where they can slowly or rapidly degrade our physical and mental health. Pathogens living in an individual's body will reduce the person's mental and physical activities. Our bodies are considerably overburdened with persistent viral infections which often alter our physiology.

The burden of depression has been increasing, for the individual, the family, and for the society. Currently most people who are treated for depression are partially responsive or non-responsive. New tools are needed. One of these tools involves a focus on the infections that are often associated with depression. For some young people with depression, their feelings of sadness and unhappiness are long-lasting. Depression affects how they think, how they feel and what they do. Moreover, they feel irritable, sad and stressed most of the time.

For some young people depression develops after a stressful life event, such as the COVID-19 outbreak. It might begin with a feeling of sadness, distress or anxiety, however over time symptoms become more intense and begin to affect friendships, relationships and everyday life (Zhai & Du, 2020).

University students were more anxious and depressed during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 than they were during similar time periods in previous academic years according to a Dartmouth study (Dartmouth College, 2020). The research also found that stress increased dramatically during the onset of the public health crisis in early March.

"COVID-19 had an immediate negative impact on the emotional well-being of the university students we studied", said Jeremy Huckins, a lecturer on psychological and brain sciences at Dartmouth. "We found a large-scale shift in mental health and behavior compared to the observed baseline established for this group over the previous year". The changes coincided with the end of classes and final exams, already one of the most stressful times for students in any academic term. Lockdown stressors include less independence, doubts about the spread of the virus, lockdown

length, monotonous life style, lack of accurate information, monetary loss, and stigma. Therefore, the feelings of depression impair focus and concentration, memory, and motor skills.

Depression in this coronavirus pandemic is a normal reaction to certain life events. It is absolutely natural for each one of us to feel fear, sadness, loneliness and isolation during this time.

The role of psychological counseling for managing stress, anxiety and depression during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

It is understandable that during times like this, people may be feeling afraid, worried, anxious, and overwhelmed by the constantly changing alerts and media coverage regarding the spread of the virus. Therefore it is very important to stay informed, to follow mental health and wellbeing tips and strategies, and to continue to look after ourselves and each other during this difficult time.

During times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, students are exposed at a greater risk for mental health problems, such as isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression or stress, which can interfere with their studying process and their lives. Hence, the provision of emotional and mental health support is one of the most important factors in protecting students during and after a crisis. Students should be made aware of how to take care of their own mental health, and appropriate services should be made available for them.

The findings from numerous studies confirm the importance of the provision of psychological support to students. Universities affected by COVID-19 should be engaged beyond setting up mere intervention alternatives in crisis, and should invest in the creation of long-term strategies than transcend traditional approaches in an innovative and proactive manner (Shi & McBrien, 2019).

School counselors, psychologists and academic staff have been trying to help students. In the midst of a pandemic, school counselors did their absolute best to maintain relationships with students and continue to carry out their responsibilities, getting creative in the process. School counselors spent less time offering individual and group counseling for students than they did before the emergence of COVID-19 (Bartlett, Griffin & Thomson, 2020). Counselors were not able to speak as long as usual while working directly with students on social-emotional issues, post-secondary planning, and career development. In this unprecedented time, a school counseling staff delivers social-emotional support to students using a distance/virtual model. Psychosocial support can reduce negative mental health effects of a crisis for students. However, the provision of such psychological support virtually can be challenging. From the standpoint of care and support, it is very important to recognize three phases of a/an endemic/pandemic (before, during and after). Therefore we try to present the main psychosocial and psychological manifestations in an epidemic, broken down by phases and corresponding actions.

Table 1: Main psychosocial and psychological manifestations by phases and actions

Phases of psychosocial and psychological manifestations in the population	Mental health actions
Before:	**Before:**
• Sense of inevitability, with a high level of tension in the population. • Maximization of preexisting characteristics (positive or negative). • Worry, fear, tension, anxiety, depression, insomnia….	• Communicate risk to the population, with emphasis on vulnerable groups (children, adolescents, elderly people, persons who contracted the disease and survived, persons with chronic physical illness). • Locate personnel trained in mental health. • Establish psychosocial support and counseling groups. • Detect psychosocial risk factors.
During:	**During:**
• Loss of initiative. • Feelings of fear, worry, vulnerability. • Adaptation to changes in the usual patterns of life (restricted movement, wearing masks, reduction in direct physical contact, closure of schools or universities, online learning, reduced contact with peers….). • Anxiety, depression, stress, panic attacks, agitation, somatic disorder of psychological origin.	• Organize virtual support groups for students, staff and caregivers. • Develop methods to educate students on ways to participate in the students-counselor relationship through virtual/distance school counseling. • Create a sense of belonging for students. • Understand students' behaviors and feelings and be able to recognize signs of severe distress. • Opportunities for students to practice positive coping strategies using art, drama and music. • Support students to be connected with others. • Incorporate breathing exercises and relaxation strategies into class, such as meditation, autogenic training or mental imagery relaxation. • Create a menu of personal self-care activities that the students enjoy, such as spending time with family, exercising or reading a book. • Create opportunities for mutual support in the community.
After:	**After:**
• Fear of a new epidemic. • Social and mental health conditions: depression, posttraumatic stress, violence, depression, alcohol or drug abuse. • A slow, progressive recovery process begins.	• Maintain a mass communication strategy to facilitate recovery. • Implement individual and group-based mental health care for the affected young persons. • Support that new life projects should be fostered and encouraged.

Source: own elaboration.

Hence, as counselors, we suggest strategies for managing and altering patterns of upsetting thoughts, feelings and behavior. We help students understand the link between their thoughts, feelings and behavior. It helps them understand how the problems began and learn a more balanced way of thinking. By approaching situations in a more balanced way students will hopefully be more able to solve

problems that they are faced with and feel more in control of their life. This is very important for them in this pandemic time.

The creation of plans for crisis management by school counselors is necessary and important to keep students safe both during and after the crisis, and to have an opportunity to intervene more effectively in order to manage the crisis.

Conclusion

In this review we summarized studies and experience which indicate important relationships between mental health, psychological counseling and viral diseases such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) among university students.

In an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19, in the large majority of countries around the world, educational institutions have decided to temporarily suspend in-person instruction and transfer to a remote learning model of delivery. Within a short period of time, college students' lives have dramatically changed as they have been asked to leave their campuses, adjust to new living circumstances, and adapt to online learning platforms. The shift to online learning, particularly in courses that were not originally designed for on-line delivery has likely increased stress among students. Most young people do not have resources and mental strength to adapt to this type of situation. The fear and anxiety will increase, everyone has unreal thoughts about the new day and everyone feels isolated or depressive. Mental illness can affect students' motivation, concentration, and social interactions, and these are crucial factors for students' success in higher education (De Oliveira Araújo et al., 2020). Hence, a sense of hope instead of fear could allow counselors and students to better cooperate with each other which is a vital element in defeating this outbreak. We must work together with a sense of empathy, keep ourselves informed about the facts, stay connected to people we love and be kind to each other.

Among the many experiences discussed, regarding psychological counseling in an event of COVID-19 outbreak in the university, special attention has been dedicated:

- to the need to involve educational institutions, including the university, before, during and after the epidemic/pandemic;
- to provide early strategies for prevention and treatment of the psychological effects created by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- to provide instructions on how to cope with stress and other mental health problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- to integrate the psychological and mental health intervention within a framework of students' health.

One can conclude that in this period of time, counseling is very important for the education system. Every educational institution should have counselors to guide and help students, to create a good environment, which is motivational for students' growth.

Now more than ever, we should be paying attention to students' mental health.

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