

# Student Mental Health In Contemporary Higher Education

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## 1 Introduction

Throughout the duration of a student's academic career they may encounter a series of setbacks, trouble and challenges otherwise. One recurring challenge, and serious issue in students seeking a degree in higher education is mental health. While its true mental health is not exclusive to higher education, the cognition and pressure of students in this realm of life is acute, and therefore the consequences too. Mental health can be defined as:

our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.  
*What is mental health?* (2021)

As shown in the quote, mental health is multifaceted, and can be improved or degraded as a result of many channels of input. Each of the factors aggregate in to the experiential state of mental health.

Higher education in western society denotes the transition from adolescence, the period of time from eighteen years and younger and then into adult life. The transition can be, and usually is, a multi-year process. The transition in this time is marked with turmoil from family situation, social pressures, class expectations, financial constraints, medical conditions, and work pressure. Some of the social pressures include changing friend groups, racial injustice, sexual identity, and political affiliation. These are not exhaustive of the many avenues of stress for trials to student mental health. Particularly in recent times, there has been the addition of the Covid pandemic to make the previous challenges felt to a greater degree.

These mental health ailments are a challenge to students, but the students are not alone in their academic journey – their instructors can come along side them for the period of understudy and help them to meet and exceed these challenges to their health as a source of compassion and comfort while also edifying the students in their academic skills sought through the degree process. Instructors can be a source of relief given the most direct contact with students on a regular basis.

## 2 State of Student Health

When students go through semesters, they may encounter mental troubles. One study was curious in examining the details of what this means in the distribution of students with

mental troubles. In (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009), a long terms study over two years were taken for university students at a public university. They found that half of the students were suffering with an issue initially, and then around two thirds of them still had a mental issue after the duration of the time period.

This study shows how persistent mental health issue in student can be. One in two people had trouble with a mental issue initially and then the majority of them still had trouble after the long period of time. This means they didn't get sufficient help or potentially suffering form an undiagnosed disorder. This is also not to mention the students that may not have admitted to mental health issue due to the negative stigma it has, shame of their state, or other distress from releasing the information in the study.

In a common thought, the study conducted by (Zivin et al., 2009) may not address other students that could have developed mental health issues as the semesters or progressed throughout the years – classes tend to increase in difficulty as time goes on, which only serves to increase the mental load on students. Another factor is that the study was only conducted in one university, which may not be representative of the population generally. That is to say, some regions of the nation and world may have a higher rate of mental issues, such as places with low sunlight or endemic vitamin deficiency, and others may have fewer mental struggles due to higher support program opportunities, economic opportunities, standards of living, and food availability.

In the study by (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Gollust, 2007) it was shown that man study could have used more information about the resources that were available to help them and could have helped them. For instance, they found that students didn't think the medication would be helpful for people like themselves with depression, or that if it would, have helped, they might not have been covered for the medical treatment due to a gap in the insurance that covers them.

The results in Eisenberg et al. (2007) show that students need more communication about the help that is available, who and who much is currently available for them, and steps to take to make up the difference for students with truly unmet need other than communication shortcomings. Equally as important is insuring there is equality in the help rendered to the students such that all students regardless of race, gender and identity are aided in their needs. One step instructors can take is to list all of the help available in the student resources in several locations, and then also periodically inform the students verbally in class with locations and hours of availability for counselors and mentors, including office hours themselves.

### **3 Deep Effects of Covid**

A student experiences a series of challenges by design int he process of earning their degree, but society does not ideally plan to experience a pandemic. However this additional ch allege started in the Spring of 2019 for students on the east coast of the United States. Emergency measures included shutting down public gatherings, which went as far as in-

terfering with family members seeing each other in times of need, such as hospital visits to infirm members of the family. As a student, stress can be released socially by seeing classmates in the midst of new concepts to change patterns of thought. this was removed in the pandemic.

Similarly, these new ideas can be communicated in new and more relatable words of classmates, which re similarly removes or made more obscure and less common in online learning environments forced by the pandemic. An extension of this is internet challenges that students can experience in viewing even the basic material communicated in lecture. That is, students have such a faulty or slow connection that the lecture videos become patchy and low quality. The effect is students feel shut of from their academic connection, detrimental to their learning and mental state of health.

The sentiment that the pandemic has created an additional hardship for students in the way of mental health is confirmed in the study conducted by Grubic, Badovinac, and Johri (2020), where they found that as much as 83% of participants felt as though the pandemic had worsened their mental state. from closure, social and habit disruption. Further, Grubic et al. (2020) found that 25% of respondents felt and increase in anxiety, which was related to financial and timing instances as experienced effects of the Covid virus.

The result of these statistics are extreme. The result indicates that out of ten students, only two of them felt their mental states were not made worse by the pandemic. Of course, mental states are not logical in the sense that they can be linearly applicable from the perspectives of the experienced, and there fore the extent to which the mental states are harmed as a result may not be proportional to the statistics. That is, the experience may feel as though the pandemic added a multiplier to the struggles already encountered opposed to an additional weight to carry.

While these results are extreme, there are methods and steps that institutions can take to systematically reduced the detrimental effects for the covid virus on the students. For instance, in the study conducted by (Copeland et al., 2021) more than six-hundred students mental health was polled prior to the start of the pandemic in the spring Towards the end of the same semester the same students were polled again, this time after the pandemic started to see how their health was standing. It was found that the students that were involved in support programs of the institution had less of a degradation their status as a result of the pandemic.

This is good news because it means that when the community comes together, institutionally also, the students felt as thought they were in a better place to, which means they are then better suited to grow in the material presented in class.

## **4 Discussion and Conclusions**

Student by the nature of their studies have to grapple with new and challenging concepts to internalize, routines to master, and jobs to develop into. This creates a pressure that affects mental health. Added on top of this is in modern higher education is the addition

of environmental and economic crisis, such as climate change, recessions and most the directly felt effects are the Covid pandemic.

The struggles themselves can be transformed into opportunities for bonding and development through allies of the students, such as counselors and mentors and especially instructors to ease the mental struggles of their students so that they can begin to thrive mentally. Some of these include stepping away from the lecture material to check in on students, provide ample resources for support, have compassion of the various challenges encountered by individual students, and to encourage the growth of the students at every turn, and to believe in their success.

Increasing outreach to the students to constantly inform them help is available is important to increasing the availability of help to the students in need in the times that they need it. Some students that may see help in the earlier time frames of the semesters may forget about it later in the semester, and then find their mental health gets to a low point and really could use the help. People generally need help, and we thrive as a society together. It's important for students to know they are not alone, and there is a support network in their instructors to help them in the hard times.

In the classrooms that I will serve in, I can periodically inform students of the help that is available and let them know that they are not alone on their academic pursuits – that there have been, are, and will be students that need help, and that it is important to get the help. Everyone's quality of life increases when the average quality of life rises. When students have more capacity to learn without being encumbered by mental health trouble, they have more room to be better students, better friends, better family members, and better able to help others that will need them too.

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