

CHAPTER NINE

Mental Health of University Students: Perspectives from Jordan and the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

University students worldwide experience wide range of mental health issues in the form of stress, depression, or anxiety. Leading evidence from multiple robust studies across various countries indicate that the incidence and severity of mental health issues among this population are on the rise. University students are therefore an at-risk population, and the mental health of this population is considered a global public health issue. Students face major challenges when traversing the gap between the secondary and postsecondary education levels, including stressors such as financial hardship, academic overload, competition against peers, pressure to succeed, and worries about the future. These challenging stressors can affect students' academic performance, ability to progress, attrition, and psychological well-being. This leads to increasing risks of stress, depression, or anxiety, which in turn could lead to academic failure or other negative consequences later in life. This chapter provides an overview of the major mental health issues university students may face, with particular attention to studies from Jordan and the UAE to examine factors affecting the mental health of this population of university students. In addition, conclusions and recommendations are inferred from the Jordanian and UAE perspectives to better understand the needs of university students.

Keywords: Jordan, United Arab Emirates, university students, mental health issues, depression, anxiety, stress, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the major mental health issues among university students, with focus on perspectives from Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to examine factors affecting the mental health of this population. The perceptive experiences of mental health issues, specifically depression, anxiety, and stress, are reviewed with appropriate therapeutic modalities respectively highlighted. Conclusions and recommendations are inferred from the Jordanian and UAE perspectives to better understand the needs of university students.

Mental Health Issues Among University Students

Mental health wellbeing is a keen factor to maintain and assure academic achievements for university students. The mental health of university students has been a primary construct of interest across the body of literature and university students have been identified as vulnerable and susceptible to mental health issues (Roelants & Cameron, 2022). This has been mainly attributed to the environmental stressors of university demands as well as developmental aspects of emergent self-consciousness (Roelants & Cameron, 2022).

During the last decade, academic counseling facilities have universally reported a shift in students demand for counseling services, with students increasingly reporting more complex mental health issues. This was evident by the surge of acute cases requiring psychiatric referrals (Tavallali & Cox, 2019). Moreover, college counseling and mental health centers have reported more severe presentations among their students with positive medical history of mental intervention or hospitalization (Tavallali & Cox, 2019). In counseling centers, assessment of mental health, anxiety and depression were identified as the most prevailing disturbances among university students with prevalence rate of 62.7% and 49.3% respectively (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2021). With the current COVID-19 pandemic, attention to students' psychological

status has dramatically increased nationally and globally (Rahayu et al, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has imposed several modifications into students' academic and social life aspects making them suffer from additional stressors and distress (Rahayu et al, 2020). Moreover, the massive information shared by various social media tools has had a notable psychosocial impact on the public perception of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ho et al, 2020). This is why it is of worth to explore the various mental health issues among university students and to shed the light on the possible available therapeutic modalities to be utilized. This in turn will enable students to successfully adapt with any unexpected changes that could impact their psychological status and will help them better cope with current changes as well as seek the needed psychological support in a timely manner.

Although scarce, the literature on the mental health of university students in the UAE concurrently points at a notable prevalence of mental health issues, particularly depression, anxiety, and stress (Al-Yateem, et al., 2020; Razzak et al., 2019). Likewise, studies from Jordan revealed that university students are having mental health issues in the form of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms with those more prevalent among university students in Jordan compared to other countries (Dalky & Gharaibeh 2019).

Anxiety

According the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), anxiety disorders are defined as “excessive fear, anxiety and related behavioural disturbances” where anxiety is “anticipation of future threat.” Currently, 5.82 million incident cases and 301.39 million prevalent cases of anxiety disorders were reported across the globe (Yang et al., 2021). Categorically, achievement anxiety is related to pressure to achieve and a fear of failure in an academic setting. Sources of achievement anxiety

include exposure to overachieving peers, exaggerated expectations, and high sense of self-criticism. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). On the other hand, social anxiety is characterized by persistent and marked fear of one or more social or performance situations in social settings. Social anxiety is accompanied by fears of offending others or being rejected (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). All these anxieties can have a crippling effect on personal and social functioning, hindering proper engagement and integration. They can also aggravate or facilitate the development of other mental issues such as depression, as well as medical illnesses such as cardiovascular, respiratory and neurological diseases (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the UAE, the prevalence of anxiety among Emirati university students was estimated to be 55% (Marzouqi et al., 2021). Associated factors included academic stress, cognitive load, and pressure to perform well (Marzouqi et al., 2021). This has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as the educational system was halted due to the shift from the traditional pedagogy into online learning (Hosany, et al., 2021: Rahayuet al., 2020).

Consequently, more stressors were added for students to cope-with while their resources remained inadequate (Hussein et al., 2020). The UAE undertook leading initiatives to efficiently adapt to remote learning in all private and governmental institutions. The Ministry of Education guided the transition and facilitated the adoption of online platforms (Hussein et al., 2020). However, the sudden shift to online learning has substantially compromised the mental adjustment of students. Many have reported facing challenges such as inadequate support from peers and instructors, lack of concentration, and increased compensatory workload (Hussein et al., 2020). In a study by Saddik et al. (2020) examining anxiety levels among Emirati university students during the pandemic, almost half of the students reported experiencing anxiety. Among those who reported anxiety, 30% reported severe anxiety levels, while the other 70% had mild to moderate

anxiety levels. Contributing factors were related to academic disruptions, and uncertainty about performance and future employment. In particular, the risk of COVID-19 exposure during clinical training was an additional factor for medical students (Saddik et al., 2020). In contrast, prevalence of anxiety among Jordanian university students during COVID-19 pandemic was 67.9 % (Hamaideh et al., 2021). This was attributed to the altered education system into hybrid or online learning (Sallam et al, 2020). Also, the lack of understanding of the COVID-19 infection trajectory was found to mediate anxiety among Jordanian students (Sallam et al, 2020).

Depression

According to the DSM-V, depression is a serious condition characterized by feelings of sadness, hopelessness and insignificance to a degree that interferes with daily life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to the World Health Organization, WHO (2017), more than 300 million people across the globe experience depression. Signs and symptoms include depressed mood or loss of pleasure, weight loss or weight gain, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation, fatigue, feelings of unimportance, indecisiveness, poor concentration and powerlessness Somatic symptoms that may accompany depression include spasms; body aches; headaches; cramps; and digestive disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In the UAE, the prevalence of depression among Emirati university students was estimated to be 38% (Marzouqi et al., 2021). A primary underlying factor of depression was found to be adjustment to modernity. The Emirati community is considered to be collectivist in nature with high regard to societal bonds (Ismail et al., 2021). And in the past 30 years, rapid urbanization has mediated multiple social and cultural changes across the UAE leading to deeper changes in the values, beliefs, and role expectations among the population. This has not only impacted overall adjustment, but also caught the younger population between emerging liberality and pre-

established tradition (Haque, 2020). During the sensitive period of identity formation, students have been bombarded with new concepts and faced with the dilemma of whether to adopt or reject progressive norms. Furthermore, immense economic growth and prosperity has contributed to the expansion of a competitive workforce and widening of the generation gap. Students thus perceive increased pressure to excel in their career path while having to face the societal stressor presented by familial duties (Haque, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic the lockdown restrictions and social distancing mandates were highly disturbing to the values of interdependence and social support of the Emirati community (Ismail et al., 2021). This has created additional strain on social support networks, and has been correlated with increasing rates of depression up to be 44.8% and (Thomas et al., 2020). Another mediating factor for depression was determined to be cognitive vulnerability (Thomas, Alkatheeri, & Grey, 2021). In fact, depressive symptoms were found to be more severe among students who display ruminative response styles and negative attitudes. These variables consistently predicted depression among Emirati university students across altered learning environments (Thomas, Alkatheeri, & Grey, 2021).

With regard to depression in Jordan, a study conducted by Hamdan-Mansour and colleagues in 2009 showed that, around 75% of the Jordanian university students revealed some degree of depressive symptoms which was not correlated to gender and other demographic factors. In the contrary, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the incidence of depressive symptoms among Jordanian university students was at 71% (34% for moderate and 37% for high depressive symptoms) with female students reporting higher levels than male students (Saadeh et al, 2021). Furthermore, Jordanian university students reported higher need for psychological help and support regarding to depressive symptoms during COVID-19 pandemic (AlAzzam et al, 2021).

Stress

Around the globe, stress is considered as one of the most prevalent psychological problems among students during their academic journey (Karaman et al, 2019). Handling or reducing stress effectively requires the ability of the person to recognize and accept use of available coping strategies or therapeutic modalities (Vinothkumar et al, 2016). Stress is defined as the body's non-specific response to external demands. As a process, stress is relative to how individuals perceive and cope with such demands. When environmental threats or challenges are thought to exceed adaptive individual capabilities, stress is prolonged due to perceived lack of control (Al Omar et al., 2020). In the UAE, the prevalence of stress among Emirati university students was estimated to be 29% (Marzouqi et al., 2021).

The main congregated predictor of stress appeared to be the type coping mechanism individually employed. In fact, Emirati university students who relied on emotional catharsis, problem-solving, and positive reinterpretation experienced stress less intensely than others (Al Omar et al., 2020). On the other hand, students who displayed negative appraisals and mental disengagement experienced higher stress levels. These results were among students of the same university program relatively controlling for the variability in academic stressors (Al Omar et al., 2020). In contrast, the prevalence of stress among Jordanian university students was estimated to be 65.7%; however, this was clustered under the experience of mental distress (Abuhamdah et al., 2021). Furthermore, adequate social support was identified as the main protecting factor against stress in the Jordanian community (Abuhamdah et al., 2021).

Therapeutics Modalities and Appropriate Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has become the first line treatment of stress,

depression, and anxiety and strong empirical evidence has supported its utility with adolescents and young adults. (Carpenter et al., 2018; Wojnarowski et al., 2019). Recently, CBT has demonstrated high efficacy in the management of stress, depression, and anxiety in both face to face and online forms (Sigurvinsdóttir et al., 2019; Howes et al., 2021). The CBT model combines cognitive therapy and behavior therapy to modify irrational thoughts and negative behaviors. Through CBT, experienced disturbances are linked to the root cognitive distortions that trigger maladaptive responses. The course of CBT involves specific psycho-education, affect regulation, skills training, cognitive restructuring, exposure methods, and relapse prevention plans (Carpenter et al., 2018). Psycho-education provides corrective information; affect regulation targets autonomic arousal and related physiological responses. Cognitive restructuring skills are focused on identifying cognitive distortions and teaching realistic, coping-focused thinking. Exposure techniques involve graduated, systematic, and controlled exposure to feared situations and stimuli, and relapse prevention methods focus on consolidating treatment outcomes ((Stefan et al., 2019).

The application of CBT is not without challenges. While CBT has become widely acknowledged as a reverent psychotherapy, Emirati culture still has a high regard for traditional practices. Family is considered the most important source of emotional support. The coexistence of these contradictory values within the same culture has made it problematic for young students to seek mental health support (Al-Darmaki, 2015). In a study of help-seeking attitudes among Emirati students by Heath et al. (2016), many expressed interests in receiving mental health care, but were impeded by fears of losing face by exposing personal issues, being regarded as weak and bringing shame to their family. Other concerns stemmed from having their faith questioned and their situation being stigmatized (Heath., 2016).

Another challenge is that the overall status of counseling is not well established in the UAE,

due to the limited recognition of the profession in society and the absence of regulations on the counselling practice in educational or community settings (Al-Darmaki, 2015). Moreover, the education programs for this profession in the UAE are underdeveloped and limited to undergraduate-level training (Al-Darmaki, 2015). To compensate for this shortage of mental health care providers, foreign mental health professionals have been employed posing an additional cultural strain on the services provided (Sayed, 2015).

Similarly, cultural and personal beliefs toward mental health in Jordan have negatively impacted service utilization and thus accessing available therapeutic treatment. In fact, the majority of university students were not aware that psychological help was available nor being willing to seek professional help (Dalky & Gharaibeh 2019). Jordan like other developing countries, suffering from lack of human and health resources pertaining mental health. In 2011, the WHO in collaboration with Ministry of Health in Jordan published the WHO Assessment Instrument for Mental Health Systems (WHO-AIMS) report; the first comprehensive mental health related report in which areas of improvements in the field of mental health care in Jordan are highly recognized and plan of action was approved and fully applied. Since then, high efforts are directed toward training health care providers in general health care facilities as well specialized mental health settings to proper and needed mental health care. The plan emphasized the transition from institutionalized mental health care to provision of mental health services in primary health care settings available across Jordan. To this, health care providers are expected to provide basic assessment and conduct the necessary consultation or specialized Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) or other mental health treatment modalities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the demands for mental health services continue to rise, the need for a competent mental

health strategy in Jordan and UAE becomes more paramount. In order to strengthen the profession and services provided, it is important to found regulating bodies that would instill practice guidelines to fit the cultural context of Jordan and UAE. It is recommended to develop mental health system research and test the utility of introducing the CBT model into the training of mental health professionals in the region. In turn, this would enrich the availability of publications and practical resources on the topic and build a foundation of textbooks and manuals that allow for the expansion of counselling training programs. This way proficient graduate programs can be successfully launched and potentials maximized. Finally, taking these steps ought to be coupled with media exposure to recruit potential candidates, as well as encourage help-seeking behaviour among students by instilling their faith in the system.

As recommendation for both educational and governmental entities, it is recommended that Jordanian and UAE academic education policy makers and administrators call for extensive collaboration required to assure launching of psychological counselling programs and supporting availability of psychological help offices in each university campus. Efforts to be made to ensure availability of well-trained healthcare certified or specialized psychiatric mental health personnel who will be able to provide psychotherapy interventions as well as to help and support students who are having mental health issues. These efforts should be receded by the importance health care screening students of all programs and at different points of their program study have to have regular to assure mental health and prevent occurrence of metal health issues to intervene timely. Many health issues including mental health problems can be easily prevented when they are discovered early and treated properly.

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