



SCREENING OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN PERIOD: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The uncertainty and dread linked with COVID-19 has contributed to a rise in mental health disorders among the general population showing high rates of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and psychological discomfort. The current study aims to assess the prevalence of psychological distress among undergraduate students of an Arts college in rural Tamilnadu. A cross-sectional study was carried out among 100 undergraduate students of an arts college selected by convenient sampling technique using GHQ-12 questionnaire via online platforms. Among the 100 medical students who participated in the study, 78% were found have severe problems with psychological distress. Leisure time activity like smartphone usage was found to have a significant association with psychological distress ($p < 0.05$) while other factors like gender, socio-economic status, physical activity, dietary preferences, junk food consumption and sleep habits were not associated statistically. Early recognition of students under stress and counselling will go a long way in helping students adjust to the demands of the educational curriculum.

KEYWORDS : Psychological distress, college students, undergraduates, General Health Questionnaire, GHQ-12

INTRODUCTION:

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy has suffered serious losses. The uncertainty and dread linked with COVID-19 has contributed to a rise in mental health disorders among the general population showing high rates of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and psychological discomfort¹. Similarly, healthcare professionals are exposed to change, uncertainty, stress, and solitude, as well as a high level of mental disturbance, and they must be protected^{2,3}. Up to 70% of healthcare employees are experiencing psychological distress as a result of this⁴. Students are also under a lot of pressure and stress of the COVID-19 situation. They confront drastic changes in teaching methods, anxiety about their academic future, and some even participate in the fight, in addition to being subjected to similar restraints as the general population^{5,6}. As college students are recognised for having greater rates of anxiety, despair, and burnout, these new situations could jeopardise their mental health^{7,8}.

The current study aims to screen for the prevalence of psychological distress among college students of an arts college in rural Tamilnadu in order to make recommendations on how to lessen the negative effects of psychological distress and to thereby promote health.

MATERIALS & METHODS:

A cross-sectional study was conducted among 100 undergraduate students of an Arts college in rural Tamilnadu during May 2021. Based on the prevalence of psychological distress in a study done by Pradeep Kumar Sahu⁹, the prevalence (p) was taken as 63% with a relative precision of 15%, the required sample size was calculated as 99.4 and was approximated to 80.

100 undergraduate students of an arts college were selected by convenient sampling technique and data was collected using a pre-tested pre-designed structured 12 items General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) via online platforms (SMS, WhatsApp, e-mail). Informed written consent was obtained from individual participants before data collection. Those who were not willing to participate were excluded from this study. Data was entered in Microsoft Excel 2019 and data analysis was done using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26.0. Descriptive statistics was used.

RESULTS:

Among the total 100 participants, 31 were males and 69 were females. The socio-economic status of the study population was classified based on Modified BG Prasad's scale where 18% belonged to Class 2 (Upper middle class), 50% to Class 3 (Middle class) and 32% belonged to Class 4 (Lower middle class).

57 of them said that they never do any form of exercise, 37 rarely do some form of exercise whereas only 6 did regular physical exercise. Among them, 10% were vegetarians and the remaining 90% were non-vegetarians. 66% claimed to consume junk food only once a month while 31% consumed it once a week and 3% more than thrice in a week. 66 of them said to have an adequate night time sleep of at least 8 hours whereas 34 did not have adequate sleep. Among the 100 study participants, 22% said that they sleep during their leisure time, 9% said that they hangout with their friends, only 1% indulge in sports or games while the remaining 68% spend time in their smartphones. (Table 1)

Table 1: Socio-demographic details

Variables	Frequency	Percent	
Gender	Male	31	31%
	Female	69	69%
Socioeconomic status	Class 2- Upper middle	18	18%
	Class 3- Middle	50	50%
	Class 4- Lower middle	32	32%
Physical activity	Never	57	57%
	Rarely	37	37%
	Regularly	6	6%
Dietary preference	Veg	10	10%
	Non-veg	90	90%
Junk food consumption	Once a month	66	66%
	Once a week	31	31%
	More than thrice a week	3	3%
Sleep habit	Adequate	66	66%
	Inadequate	34	34%
Leisure activity	Sleep	22	22%
	Smartphones	68	68%
	Hangout with friends	34	34%
	Sport/ Games	1	1%

The study shows that 78% have severe problems with psychological distress. There was a statistically significant

association between leisure activity and psychological distress ($p=0.031$) showing a higher proportion of smartphone usage during their leisure hours. Factors like gender, socio-economic class, physical activity, dietary practices and sleep were not significantly associated with psychological distress in the study participants.

DISCUSSION:

The study was designed to screen for the prevalence of psychological distress of undergraduate students of an Arts college in rural Tamilnadu using the 12-items General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The present study shows that the prevalence of psychological distress among medical students was 77.5%. Similar studies done by Zulkefly et al. among nursing students shows a prevalence of 47.1%¹⁰. A similar study done by Panesar et al. among adolescent girls show that psychosocial factors such as abnormal sleep patterns and disturbance in studies have been found to be statistically significant for the presence of mental health problems among adolescent girls as per the GHQ score. Similar results were obtained in a study by Chauhan and Dhar, where it was found that age, gender, education, household economic status and religion to be significantly associated with mental health disorders¹¹. In the present study, leisure activity like smartphone usage was the only factor found to be significantly associated with psychological distress ($p<0.05$). However in another study done by Shukla et al., on applying multiple logistic regression, no statistical association was found between mental distress in relation to age group, religion, and mother's education, and type of family ($p>0.05$)¹².

Although adolescent mental health is a growing global issue, resource constraints and insufficient health-care infrastructure make it a greater worry in low- and middle-income nations like India where the majority of the adolescent population resides. This is complicated further by the stigma associated with mental illness in our culture. Since the study was done in a single setting involving a small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized. A larger sample size and a multi-centric study is recommended for a better representation compared to the present one.

CONCLUSION:

The findings of the present study also indicated that the GHQ-12 is a useful instrument to be used for assessing the overall psychological well-being of college students. But without longitudinal data, we cannot establish the extent to which these acute symptoms become chronic. Therefore, the government must work with competent health specialists to provide regular stress management and stress inoculation programmes across the country in order to reduce the harmful health effects of burnout and psychological distress in every field.

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