



PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND MENTAL HELP SEEKING BEHAVIOR AMONG THE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT Psychological distress is known to affect a person's overall mental well-being and college students are often seen as a bundle of energy. Therefore the present investigation studies the emotional distress and mental help seeking attitude among college going students in south Indian city. 94 college going students aged between 18 to 25 years pursuing degree course from colleges at Chennai, Tamil Nādu, India was enrolled in this study using random sampling method. After obtaining informed consent, DASS-21 and MHSB were self-administered to assess the level of Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (MHSB). Psychological distress in the form of mild level of Depression and moderate level of Anxiety along with MHSB was present among the college students. There is a positive correlation between Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and MHSB (significant at $p < 0.01$). Significant difference was observed between nuclear and joint family towards MHSB ($t = 2.896, p < 0.01$) and Domicile and MHSB ($F = 4.060, p < 0.05$) and between economic status and MHSB ($F = 3.669, p < 0.05$). The findings of the current study concluded the presence of Depression and Anxiety features among college students and thus there is a need for periodic mental health assessment of college going students and subsequent addressal of their mental health issues, if there is need.

KEYWORDS : *Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Mental Help Seeking Behavior*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health refers to a state of emotional, cognitive and behavioural well-being. Usually, mental health is not given the same attention as physical health. Previous studies clearly proven that if, mental health is neglected it has a global impact affecting the persons social, occupational, physical, emotional and spiritual health. Although everyone is susceptible to develop mental health issues, but, college going young adults were believed to be among the most vulnerable one. The National Mental Health Survey (2015–2016) has revealed that the age group of 15–49 years being most affected from psychological issues and the prevalence of Depression is one in 20 among this population. From psychological perspective, adolescent phase is well known to be “storm and stress period” and hence college students are one of the most vulnerable groups. There are various reasons like heredity, financial problems, family issues, peer pressure, physical changes, relationship problems, moving away from the family for their studies, etc., which might trigger a psychological condition or exacerbate the existing symptoms. Various risk factors for Depression among children and adolescents were reported to be education related difficulties, relationship issues with parents or at home, family related issues, economic difficulties, and other factors (Grover et al., 2019). They face physical, psychological, social and academic demands that increase their risk and vulnerability to psychological distress such as depression, anxiety and stress. Depression, anxiety and stress are considered indicators for mental health and in particular especially among college students it has its crucial importance (Tee et al., 2021). The most common conditions found among college students were anxiety and depression about 9.2% and 8.7% respectively which significantly affected their academic performance (Asheer Blackdeer et al., 2021). In a study done in Jahangirnagar University at Bangladesh, it has been reported that prevalence of anxiety and depression were 69.5% and 61%, respectively (Islam, S., Akter, R., Sikder, T. et al., 2022). In another recent study done among the students of professional colleges in Andhra Pradesh, India has revealed the results that 66% of the males and 64.6% of females were having mild to severe level of depression, anxiety, and stress (Behera, et al., 2021). In another study done among the adolescents by Bhasin SK et al., 2019, depression level was also reported to be high.

While discussing mental health at the current scenario, we could not ignore the effects of Covid-19 pandemic impact on mental health of college going students. The pandemic period created fear and uncertainty among the students. Many of them had difficulty in adapting to the online classes and they were deprived of many of the activities including their recreation and social activities. Many researchers have revealed increased psychological problems and especially among students who had lot of adjustment problems in their academic, daily, and social activities. The students during COVID-19

outbreak suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, anger, fear, sadness, nervousness and emotional disturbances (Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). Recently, post-pandemic condition, most of the regular activities has been resumed and the students are attending their regular direct classes which need lot of adaptation and coping to deal with it. Hence, this study is intended to examine the level of depression, anxiety, and stress among college students at the present scenario. Although the prevalence of mental health disorders has been high among the college students, research studies suggest that they tend to avoid seeking psychological help from mental help professionals. UNICEF conducted a 21-nation survey on help-seeking behavior and found out that only 41 per cent of young people in India seek support for mental health problems, compared to an average of 83 per cent for 21 countries. Students generally try to implement their own coping strategies and try to keep themselves more independent. Research has identified barriers to mental health services are stigma (Vidourek, Rebecca A., et al., 2007), low perceived need, pessimistic view regarding treatment, perceiving treatment as ineffective, financial problems, and problems accessing the care (Mojtabai, 2011; Bayer & Peay, 1997; Sareen et al., 2007). Awareness towards mental health problems is also more important to have positive attitude to seek help. As young adults are the most vulnerable evaluating their mental health condition and attitude towards mental seeking behaviour is very important so that intervention strategies could be implemented in the colleges and institutions to increase their awareness and deal their mental health problems with appropriate care and treatment.

METHODOLOGY

Aim Of The Study

Then broad aim of the study was to examine Psychological distress and Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (MHSB) among the college students.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To assess the level of Psychological Distress as indicated by Depressive, Stress and Anxiety features among the college students.
2. To examine the level of Mental Help Seeking behaviour (MHSB) among the college students
3. To study the relationship between different domains of Psychological distress with various socio-demographic variables among the college students.
4. To study the relationship between Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (MHSB) and socio-demographic variables among the college students.

Hypotheses

1. There will be significant level of Psychological distress as indicated by high Depression, Stress and Anxiety features among the college students.
2. There will be increased level of Mental Help Seeking Behaviour

(MHSB) among the college students.

3. There will be a significant relationship between different domains of psychological distress and socio-demographic variables among the college students.

4. There will be a significant relationship between Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (MHSB) and socio-demographic variables among the college students.

Sample

The sample consisted of 94 male students pursuing degree program from different colleges at Chennai, TamilNadu, India. Students of both genders aged between 18 to 25 years were enrolled for this study using random sampling. Students having any co-morbid physical or psychiatry illness were excluded from the study.

Procedure

Present study is an institution based cross-sectional study conducted at Chennai, TamilNadu, India. Few colleges offering degree programs in engineering, paramedical, science and arts stream were approached and after necessary approval and permission from the concerned authority, sampling was done. Students pursuing degree programs in any stream and aged between 18 to 25 years were randomly picked up and explained the nature of study. After their informed consent, they were enrolled for the study. After this, they were approached in their respective classes and administered the study tools. Initially, socio-demographic information was collected in specially designed socio-demographic data sheet. Following this, DASS-21 and MHSA scale were administered one by one, with some time interval between them. The researchers thanked the [participants for their participation after this.

Tools Used

- Socio-demographic data sheet- a data sheet was prepared to collect information from the participants over various socio-demographic variables such as age, sex, course of study, history of any significant medical or psychiatry illness, background, type of family, mother tongue, economic status, occupation, and parents/guardian education level etc.
- Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale - 21 (DASS-21). It is a self-administered questionnaire. The DASS-21 has set of three self-report scales designed to measure depression, anxiety and stress. Each subscale consisted of seven items, and each item is rated on a Likert type scale ranging from 0 to 3. The DASS-21 has demonstrated adequate reliability (ranging from 0.81 to 0.97) and construct validity. Cronbach's alpha was 0.942 for the whole scale and was 0.874, 0.876 and 0.875 for depression, anxiety and stress subscales, respectively.
- The Mental Help Seeking Attitude Scale (MHSAS). The MHSAS is a 9-item instrument designed to measure respondents' overall evaluation (unfavourable vs. favourable) of their seeking help from a mental health professional if they found themselves to be dealing with a mental health concern. A higher score indicates a more positive attitude. It is a self-administered questionnaire. It has good reliability and validity. It has good fit and an approximate test information function of 8.5. The bivariate scores were 0.76 and the intraclass correlation coefficient scores was 0.86.

Statistical Analysis

The data collected were consolidated, coded and scored using Statistical Package for Social Science-version 26 (SPSS-26) software. Independent sample T-test, ANOVA and Pearson correlation, were used for analysis of the data obtained.

RESULTS-

Table 1 - Socio - Demographic Characteristics Of All Participants (N=94)

S. No	Socio-Demographic characteristics	M	SD	N	%
1	Age	20.8	2.94	94	-
2	Gender	-	-	30	31
	i. Male	-	-	64	68
	ii. Female	-	-	64	68
3	Type of family	-	-	69	73
	i. Nuclear	-	-	25	26
	ii. Joint	-	-	20	21
4	Domicile	-	-	16	17
	i. Rural	-	-	16	17
	ii. Semi-Urban	-	-	16	17

	iii. Urban	-	-	58	61
5	Type of economic status	-	-	25	26
	i. Lower (<5000INR)	-	-	47	50
	ii. Middle (5000INR - 50000INR)	-	-	22	23
	iii. Upper (>50000INR)	-	-	22	23

Table 1 exhibits various socio-demographic characteristics of all participants. It is evident from the table that the mean age of the respondents is 20.8 years. Further the data reveals that majority of the participants were females (68%) as compared to males (31%) and majority of them belonged to the nuclear family (73%) where-as only 26% of the total belonged to joint family. Furthermore 61% of them were from urban background, 17% belonged to semi-urban, and 21% belonged to rural area. Analysis further reveals that exactly half of these participants are from Middle SES (50%) where-as 26% are from Lower SES, and remaining 23% were from Upper SES.

Table no 2 reveals, mild level of depression features (Mean=11.45), moderate level of anxiety features (Mean=13.56) and not so significant level of stress (Mean=12.62). Further Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (MHSB) was found to be moderately high among the participants (Mean = 5.73).

Table No 2: Frequency Distribution Of Depression, Anxiety, And Stress In Means Of Severity Level Of All Participants.

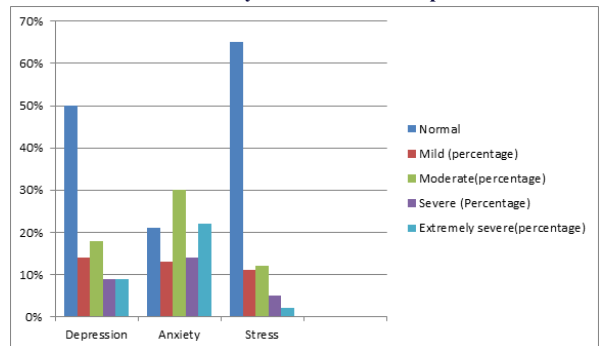


Table No 3 shows that there is positive correlation between Depression and Stress (r = 0.772, p<0.01), Depression and Anxiety (r = 0.645, p<0.01) Depression and Mental Help Seeking Behaviour (r =0.342, p<0.01) Anxiety and Stress (r = .620, p<0.0), between MHSB and anxiety (r=0.268, p<0.01) MHSB and stress (r =.376, p<0.01).

Table 3 - Depicts Pearson's Correlations Among Depression, Stress, Anxiety, And MHSB Of All Participants.

Variables	Depression	MHSB	Stress	Anxiety
Depression	1	.342**	.772**	.645**
MHSB		1	.376**	.268**
Stress			1	.620**
Anxiety				1

**Correlation is significant at 0.01

Table no 4 reveals that there is no significant difference between male and female students on depression, stress, anxiety features and MHSB.

Table 4 Shows Comparison Between Male And Female Participants On Depression, Stress, Anxiety And MHSB.

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value
Depression	Male	30	13.2000	11.45426	.829	0.409
	Female	64	11.4375	8.62973		
Stress	Male	30	12.6000	9.93982	-.012	0.990
	Female	64	12.6250	8.80025		
Anxiety	Male	30	13.5667	11.30665	-.111	0.912
	Female	64	13.7813	7.27568		
MHSB	Male	30	5.6667	1.34762	-.230	0.819
	Female	64	5.7344	1.32428		

Table no 5 depicts that there is significant difference between nuclear and joint family towards MHSB (t = 2.896, p < 0.01) where nuclear family (5.66±1.34) has more MHSB than the joint family (5.73±1.32). However, there was no significant difference in the level of depression, anxiety, and stress between nuclear and joint family.

Table 5 - Shows Comparison Of All Participants On Family Type And Depression, Stress, Anxiety & MHSB On T Test.

Variables	Family	N	Mean	SD	t-value	P value
Depression	Nuclear	69	11.97	9.84	-0.048	0.962
	Joint	25	12.08	9.04		
Stress	Nuclear	69	12.63	9.60	0.036	0.971
	Joint	25	12.56	7.84		
Anxiety	Nuclear	69	14.04	8.51	0.610	0.543
	Joint	25	12.80	9.32		
MHSB	Nuclear	69	5.94	1.24	2.896	0.005**
	Joint	25	5.08	1.35		

**p-value is significant at 0.01

Table no 6 shows that there is a significant difference between Domicile and MHSB, ($F=4.060, p<0.05$). Hence, a post-hoc analysis using Tukey HSD was employed to reveal the differences among the different domiciles. The Tukey analysis showed there was a significant difference in MHSB between Rural, Semi-Urban, and Urban type of family. Based on the table data, it is clear that students belonging to urban locality had more mental help seeking behaviour (5.98 ± 1.33) whereas the students belonging to the rural community had low mental seeking behaviour (5.05 ± 1.146).

Table 6 – Depicts Comparison Of All Participants On Depression, Stress, Anxiety, MHSB And Domicile On ANOVA (One Way)-

Variables	Domicile	N	Mean	SD	F-Value	Sig
Depression	Rural	20	14.80	11.41	1.14	0.321
	Semi-Urban	16	12.00	8.61		
	Urban	58	11.03	9.14		
Anxiety	Rural	20	16.90	10.33	1.83	0.166
	Semi-Urban	16	13.68	7.18		
	Urban	58	12.62	8.34		
Stress	Rural	20	14.00	9.62	0.41	0.664
	Semi-Urban	16	13.25	7.92		
	Urban	58	11.96	9.33		
MHSB	Rural	20	5.05	1.14	4.06	0.020
	Semi-Urban	16	5.56	1.26		
	Urban	58	5.98	1.33		

*p-value is significant at 0.05 level

Table no 7 demonstrated that there is a significant difference between economic status and MHSB ($F = 3.669, p<0.05$). Based on the data in the table, it is evident that the students belonging to upper economic class had more MHSB ($6.32 \pm .84$) in comparison to the students belonging to the Lower economic group which had low MHSB (5.32 ± 1.22).

Table 7 Depicts ANOVA For Depression, Stress, Anxiety, MHSB And Economic Status Of All Participants-

variables	Economic Status	N	Mean	SD	F-value	Sig
Depression	Low	25	11.12	8.16	0.582	0.561
	Middle	47	13.06	11.04		
	Upper	22	10.72	7.67		
Anxiety	Low	25	13.92	8.04	0.025	0.975
	Middle	47	13.51	9.49		
	Upper	22	13.90	7.98		
Stress	Low	25	10.64	6.70	0.981	0.379
	Middle	47	13.78	10.36		
	Upper	22	12.36	8.61		
MHSB	Low	25	5.32	1.21	03.669	0.029**
	Middle	47	5.63	1.48		
	Upper	22	6.31	0.83		

*p-value is significant at 0.05 level

DISCUSSION

The present study was carried out to find the psychological distress among college going students. Depressive, anxiety and stress features were taken as a marker of Psychological distress among the participants. Findings of the study indicate mild and moderate level of depressive and anxiety features respectively among the participants.

Our study findings were consistent with the previous findings (Behera et al., 2021; Bhasin SK et al., 2019). Contradictory to the study findings of Lathabhavan (2022) and Behera et al (2021), that reported prevalence of high stress level; our study did not find any significant level of stress among the college students, even though there is prevalence of depressive and anxiety features among the students. One possible explanation that could be attributed is that students especially after COVID lockdown started their regular classes having face to face interaction with teachers and peers, involving in extracurricular and recreational activities, availing help resources etc. which could be serving as buffers in stressful situation.

Findings of the present study revealed presence of depression, anxiety is positively correlated with MHSB, which is in accordance with the previous findings (S & Deasy et al, 2015) which found out that individuals who seek professional psychological help tend to report greater levels of psychological distress and when the psychological distress is more and beyond the coping abilities, seeking external support would be the preference.

In our study, it has been found that students belonging to Urban locality had more mental help seeking behaviour whereas the students belonging to the Rural community had low mental seeking behaviour. This might be due to the reason that students from the rural community have limited resources and awareness compared to students from urban background. The stigma associated with seeking mental help seeking behaviour would also be high in the rural community (Guttikonda et al., 2019). The reluctance to seek mental help for mental health problems among the rural students is also reported in the recent study done by Doan et al., 2020. The reasons attributed were about the confidentiality, accessibility to mental health services etc.,

It has been further found that students belonging to upper economic class had more mental help seeking behaviour in comparison with the students belonging to the Lower economic group. Higher economic status can be related to higher level of education and employment status which might increase their mental seeking behaviour. The similar finding has been reported in the study done by J. Ssebunnya et al., (2019). He has reported that lower education status and lower economic status have lower help-seeking behaviour than people with higher education and higher economic status.

CONCLUSION

Our study showed presence of psychological distress in form of depressive and anxiety features among the college students. And also it highlight the tendency of college going students to seek for Mental help (MHSB). MHSB is found to be influenced by certain socio-demographic variables of the participants such as locality of the participants and economic status. Therefore, the findings of the study have practical implications for the society at large, as it highlights the importance of periodic assessment of mental health and subsequent addressal of psychological well-being of students in educational institutions. Frequent mental health awareness programs and screening camps may be arranged for the psychological well-being of college students.

Limitations Of The Study

Small sample size and lack of objectivity in tool administration could be the issues that would come in generalization of the study findings. Thus, in future research protocols, such limitations could be avoided, if possible to yield more generalizable outcome.

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Conflicts Of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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