

THE DISTRIBUTION OF DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND STRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN EASTERN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: Stress brings abundant negative consequences to student success in life and academic field. The aim of this study is to examine depression, anxiety and stress level among student in Pahang, Malaysia. Online survey was used to collect data from 135 college students. A demographic sheet and DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety Stress Scale) were used to measure the level of depression, anxiety and stress. The means of Depression, Anxiety and stress are $M=6.21$, $M=4.86$ and $M=5.20$ respectively. The frequency of depression, anxiety and stress among university students was found 28%, 32% and 52% respectively. The findings of the study showed the prevalence of Depression within the range of normal (62.50%), mild (17.65%), moderate (13.24%), severe (2.94%) and extremely severe (3.67%). The prevalence of anxiety was found to be in the range of normal (46.32%), mild (22.06%), moderate (16.91%), severe (8.09%) and extremely severe (6.62%). Stress was normal (70.59%), mild (12.50%), moderate (13.24%), severe (2.94%) and extremely severe (0.74%). It is concluded that symptoms of anxiety are more prevalent with moderate to extremely severe range than stress and depression in the current sample. The majority of students in the study were categorized as normal (70.59%) in terms of stress and (62.50%) in terms of depression. These findings suggest urgent need of some preventive measures and interventions to improve the mental health of students.

Keywords: Anxiety, DASS-21, Depression, Stress, Students

INTRODUCTION

College students experience a difficult developmental shift from youth to adulthood, which makes them more vulnerable to mental health problems. Additionally, higher education exposes students to more stressful situations, such as demanding coursework, difficult projects and work assignments, and living in dorms. According to Kumaraswamy (2013), depression is a multifaceted condition that causes a great deal of social load and impairs one's ability to operate on an individual, social, interpersonal, and professional level.

Meanwhile, Hysenbegasi, Hass and Rowland (2005) stated that an internalized, potentially fictitious, activation of fear is called anxiety. An unconscious response to depression tendencies is anxiety, which can develop into extreme fear or panic. Additionally, it has been noted that worried individuals have trouble solving problems and learning. The physical and psychological symptoms include frequent urination, shaking of the hands and lips, dry mouth, and restless sleep. Ericson and Gardner (1992) revealed that stress is characterized as a danger that jeopardizes our health. Biological and psychological disorders arise when an organism's ability to adapt fails to meet environmental demands.

College students are exposed to a wide range of stressors during their study. Previous research on stress issues revealed that students are expected to be well-prepared for upcoming demands, pressures, and greater obligations in their social and academic lives, all of which contribute to mental health issues among college students (Meeks, Peak & Dreihaus, 2021). Uncontrolled stress is frequently linked to mental and physical illnesses, which in turn cause psychological problems like aggressive conduct, disagreements, and bad compatibility. According to Yousuf (2007), people who are under stress find it difficult to adopt the constructive strategies and procedures that are necessary to limit the harmful impacts of stress on their physical and mental health.

In United State and Canada, prior studies suggest that mental health is especially affected, with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and perceived stress among medical students compared to age matched non-medical student peers (Dyrbye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006; Heinen, Bullinger & Kocalevent, 2017). Meanwhile, Isla et al., (2020) study indicated that perceived stress levels showed moderately high at about 60 on a scale of 0 to 100 among medical students in US. According to Jensen and Cross (2021), engineering students self-report high levels of stress, anxiety, and despair. Moreover, female students experience much higher levels of stress and anxiety. Mofatteh (2021) mentioned that stress, anxiety, and depression are common among undergraduate university students in both industrialized and developing nations.

Another recent research conducted by Wong, Vasugi and Norlizah (2024) on public university students in Malaysia are having moderate level of depression (37.4%), anxiety (29.1%) and stress (60.9%). A study in 2023 found that 43.8% of university students in Northern Malaysia had depression, 42.2% had anxiety, and 33.5% felt stressed (Maung, Win & Win, 2023). It was shown that over 20% of health students had severe symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, and that almost 50% of students had mild to extremely severe symptoms of these illnesses (Freitas et al., 2023). The overall rates of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms were 50%, 72% and 42%, respectively. 11% of pharmacy students in Malaysia had serious depression, 34% had serious anxiety and 12% had serious stress (Radeef & Faisal, 2020). A study conducted by Saharudin, Firdus, Khair, Abdullah and Harun (2020) revealed that undergraduate students were having moderate to very severe level of depression and anxiety. There was no earlier evidence investigating the prevalence, frequency and severity levels of depression, anxiety and stress among college students in Eastern Malaysia. Thus, an effort was undertaken to look into the mental health issues among this sample.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

A survey was carried out among 135 college students at Institut Latihan Perindustrian (ILP) Kuantan, as part of a cross-sectional study. The students participated voluntarily and were assured of the confidentiality of their information. Consent was given by all the final year students. The study took place in the middle of the course, before the exam period, to reduce additional stress. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 21 years old. Around 52.7% of the participants were male. Moreover, the majority of the participants in the study were Malay.

Instruments

The DASS-21 is a short self-assessment questionnaire developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) was used to evaluate depression, anxiety and stress of the participants. This questionnaire is designed to measure the severity of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms and includes statements about the past week. Each statement is rated on a 4-point scale, with 0 indicating = (did not apply to me at all), 1 = (applied to me to some degree, or some of the time), 2 = (applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of the time), and 3 = (applied to me very much or most of the time).

Procedures

Participants will be invited to answer descriptive demographic data such as age, gender and faculty. Participants will complete the questionnaires at their own pace. All participants will respond to questions assessing their response to depression, anxiety and stress items.

RESULTS

A total of 136 participants answered the questionnaire via online. Participants were welding technology course (18.38%), electrical technology course (17.65%), metal fabrication technology course (16.18%), mechanical maintenance technology course (13.24%), computer technology course (8.82%), architecture course (8.82%), machine manufacturing technology course (8.82%), hardware manufacturing technology course (4.41%) and mechatronic technology course (3.68%) as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Distribution of demographic data

Course	Percentage (%)	Total Participants (N=136)
Welding Technology	18.38%	25
Electrical Technology	17.65%	23
Metal Fabrication Technology	16.18%	22
Mechanical Maintenance Technology	13.24%	18
Computer Technology	8.82%	12
Architecture	8.82%	12
Machine Manufacturing Technology	8.82%	12
Hardware Manufacturing Technology	4.41%	6
Mechatronic Technology	3.68%	5

Table 1.2 showed the distribution of depression, anxiety and stress among all participants. Depression within the range of normal (62.50%), mild (17.65%), moderate (13.24%), severe (2.94%) and extremely severe (3.67%). The prevalence of anxiety was found to be in the range of normal (46.32%), mild (22.06%), moderate (16.91%), severe (8.09%) and extremely severe (6.62%). Stress was normal (70.59%), mild (12.50%), moderate (13.24%), severe (2.94%) and extremely severe (0.74%).

Table 1.2 Distribution of depression, anxiety and stress level

Percentage/ DASS (N=136)	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression	62.50%	17.65%	13.24%	2.94%	3.67%
Anxiety	46.32%	22.06%	16.91%	8.09%	6.62%
Stress	70.59%	12.50%	13.24%	2.94%	0.74%

DISCUSSION

It was concluded that symptoms of anxiety were more prevalent with moderate to extremely severe range than stress and depression in the current sample. This study in line with Freitas et al., (2023) which almost 50% of students had mild to extremely severe symptoms of these illnesses and a study conducted by Saharudin et al., (2020) also showed the same result which undergraduate students were having moderate to very severe level of anxiety.

The students exhibited anxiety levels ranging from moderate to extremely severe and shared comparable demographic profiles, including being final year students dealing with similar challenges. This could be attributed to their concerns about finding employment after graduation (Van Berkel & Reeves, 2017). The students identified seeking internships or jobs as significant sources of stress (Belle, Antwi, Ntim, Affum-Osei & Ren, 2022; Olupeliyawa et. al., 2007) and transition to workplace as a contributor to stress (Moczko, Bugaj, Herzog, & Nikendei, 2016).

Final-year students can adopt anxiety-reduction strategies, such as getting help from guidance and counselling services, which can stabilize their academic performance (Alias, Mustafa & Hamzah, 2022; Ariffin & Abdullah, 2022; Saharudin et al., 2020; Dami, Setiawan, Sudarmanto & Lu, 2019). Thus, academically related psychological disorders can be effectively managed in universities with the help of a counsellor. The university should take a more proactive approach to organizing counselling support programs so that students can better manage their stress, anxiety, and depression.

Besides that, a vital component of helping kids manage their stress, anxiety, and depression is social support (Bakar, Lim, Basri & Ludin, 2021; Talwar, Othman, Ghan, Wah, Aman, Yusoff, 2017; Yasin & Dzulkifli, 2010). Students are typically more comfortable sharing problems with their own family, family was ranked as the highest level of support. This lends even more credence to the study's findings. Teenagers who experience depression are more likely to have inadequate parental support (Stice et al., 2004) and insufficient support from friends (Kugbey, Osei-Boadin & Atefoe, 2015). Students also can engage with positive strategies to manage stress included having conversation, physical activities, and reflection (Lane, McGrath, Cleary, Guerandel & Malone, 2020).

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