

# ***Navigating the Storm: Addressing University Student Mental Health Amidst COVID-19 and Beyond***

**Jiyan Yu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Psychology, University of Toronto Scarborough, Toronto, M1C 1A4, Canada  
a. Eric\_yu0715@outlook.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 had significant worldwide implications, leading to a widespread health catastrophe that affected many continents. In the midst of the ongoing struggle against the viral outbreak, a parallel but equally consequential phenomenon has emerged: a notable decrease in mental well-being, particularly among those enrolled in higher education institutions. This article explores the complex relationship between pre-existing academic demands, changing social dynamics, and personal development obstacles, which are further intensified by the abrupt shift to distant education and social seclusion. The confluence of painful information and an ambiguous outlook heightened sensations of anxiety and sadness. Nevertheless, in the face of these challenges, students showed remarkable resilience by developing creative methods of coping, educational institutions strengthened their mental health resources, and technology emerged as a valuable tool in promoting overall well-being. The current global epidemic serves as a pressing reminder of the need to give precedence to mental health, particularly within the domain of higher education.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, university students, mental health deterioration, online learning, technological interventions

## **1. Introduction**

In the closing months of 2019, the global community was taken aback by the abrupt appearance of the new coronavirus, known as COVID-19, which resulted in a significant global health emergency of unparalleled magnitude. In addition to the immediate physiological consequences, the COVID-19 epidemic has precipitated a significant mental health crisis. University students, considered vulnerable, find themselves at a critical point when they must navigate the challenges of academic obligations, changing social environments, and the search for personal identity. The psychological difficulties experienced by individuals were further exacerbated by the additional burden imposed by the pandemic, which included enforced seclusion, a rapid transition to online education, and a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty. As a result, a pressing need emerged for schools, parents, mental health experts, and society at large to actively acknowledge and mitigate the escalated mental health issues experienced by this specific population. This article thoroughly examines the consequences, including pre-existing vulnerabilities, immediate disruptions, and possible long-lasting repercussions. Additionally, it highlights the importance of resilience, adaptive methods, and institutions' crucial role in fostering student well-being.

## **2. Method**

The objective of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive examination of the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the mental well-being of university students. A thorough exploration of peer-reviewed scholarly publications, academic journals, and credible sources from many databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, was undertaken to accomplish this objective. The search was conducted with a specific emphasis on studies published from January 2020 to September 2023 to ensure the inclusion of up-to-date and relevant research.

### **2.1. Pre-Pandemic Vulnerabilities**

The first stage of our literature review was identifying and synthesizing studies examining the vulnerabilities university students experienced before the pandemic. Multiple studies have highlighted academic demands as significant stressors, which include challenging courses, the quest for excellent grades, and the continual pursuit of academic excellence [1]. Furthermore, the study conducted an analysis of the interaction between psychological susceptibility and the context of higher education institutions, covering factors such as interpersonal connections, societal norms, and the pursuit of a feeling of inclusion. The literature also explored the financial limitations experienced by students, which often arise from the financial burden of tuition fees, living costs, and the aspiration for further education [1]. The researchers analyzed pre-existing stresses to get a thorough grasp of the psychological vulnerability that formed the basis for appreciating the significant effects of the pandemic on students' overall well-being.

The selection criteria for studies included in this review were grounded in the significance of their findings, methodological robustness, and alignment with the exploration of pre-pandemic vulnerabilities. This section establishes a comprehensive framework for comprehending the subsequent implications of the pandemic on students' mental health by synthesizing insights from a diverse array of scholarly sources.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. The Immediate Impacts**

The advent of the pandemic triggered sudden and significant upheavals in the lives of college students. The expeditious shift of education to digital platforms, prompted by safety concerns, resulted in the absence of conventional classroom exchanges and the familiar cadence of in-person encounters. The introduction of this novel virtual reality technology presented immediate obstacles for students' established learning methods and routines, resulting in sensations of confusion and alienation [2]. Concurrently, the sudden discontinuation of in-person social connections, including university activities, extracurricular commitments, and informal social encounters, intensified feelings of alienation and detachment [2]. These disturbances coincided with an atmosphere of uncertainty that affected not only individuals' well-being but also the advancement of academic endeavors and the formation of future professional trajectories. The combination of many uncertainties has led to heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness among students. This attitude has been further exacerbated by their disconnection from the formerly known sense of camaraderie found within campus communities [3].

### **3.2. Long-term Psychological Impacts**

The discernible effects of the pandemic on mental health were promptly observed. According to Torales et al., the extensive impact of the pandemic on mental well-being was evident, underscoring

its unparalleled magnitude [4]. Students' psychological well-being has been significantly impacted by the rapid transition to online learning techniques, the isolating consequences of lockdown measures, and the uncertainty surrounding the future [5]. The sudden change and the accompanying ambiguity had a detrimental effect on their psychological well-being, mirroring the more considerable societal repercussions of the epidemic.

A complex interplay of mental health consequences emerged among university students during this era. A wide range of psychological reactions, such as the manifestation of despair, anxiety, and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), were seen among several pupils [6]. The impacts discussed in the study were significantly shaped by a variety of factors, including the tangible apprehension surrounding the spread of infection, the complex difficulties associated with adjusting to a modified educational environment, and the profound experience of social isolation resulting from the implementation of lockdown measures [7]. Significantly, in China, the country that experienced the early and most severe consequences of the epidemic, there were evident psychological consequences characterized by increased worry and panic, as highlighted by Cao et al. [8]. Various mental health reactions highlight the complex interaction between individual, societal, and environmental elements influencing the psychological state throughout the pandemic.

### **3.3. The Imperative of Technological Solutions**

The COVID-19 epidemic has highlighted the need to use technology advancements to tackle mental health issues effectively. The need for online mental health treatments became apparent due to the impracticality of conventional face-to-face therapies caused by social distancing measures [7]. In the context of China, where the first pandemic outbreak occurred, there was a rapid adoption of digital therapeutic methods. Digital platforms, such as online counseling sessions, teletherapy, and mental health applications, have significantly addressed the psychological needs of those who experienced abrupt isolation or confinement. Digital channels have not only addressed the absence of physical healthcare facilities but have also shown the resilience and adaptability of technology tools in addressing new mental health concerns.

Amid the many personal difficulties faced by students, the notion of collective trauma loomed over the student body. The empirical findings from Greece revealed the full depth of the impact, demonstrating the adverse effects on the mental well-being of university students during the quarantine time. The presence of elevated stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms was discernible, as shown by their significant manifestation [9]. The cumulative psychological burden highlighted the communal encounter with hardship that resonated throughout the community. The United States also exhibited comparable manifestations of collective coping, as seen by the presence of heightened symptoms of mood disorders and an escalation in alcohol use among students, which were identified as suggestive indicators of their resilience methods [10]. The adaptive reactions demonstrated how pupils strove to manage the array of problems before them when confronted with exceptional circumstances.

The enduring repercussions of the pandemic's effect on mental health persisted much after the original crisis, as shown by a study conducted in the United Kingdom. Following the first surge of the pandemic, it became apparent that individuals in the student and young adult demographic persisted in experiencing enduring mental health problems [11]. The continued existence of these issues highlights the long-lasting impact of the psychological burden imposed by the epidemic on this particular group.

### **3.4. The Upside - Resilience and Coping**

In light of the significant obstacles presented by the epidemic, a diverse range of innovative coping mechanisms emerged, serving as a testament to the tenacity shown by student community members. For example, nursing students showed exceptional flexibility as they navigated the challenges of balancing rigorous academic obligations with direct exposure to the virus in their frontline roles. The participants' reactions varied widely, including strategies such as actively seeking social support networks and intentionally shifting their focus as methods to alleviate feelings of worry [12]. These novel approaches highlight the ability to adapt to challenging situations and demonstrate the creative problem-solving skills people may use to overcome difficulties.

Amidst challenging circumstances, the global pandemic has acted as a driving force for profound personal and societal development. The students better understood the importance of face-to-face interactions, acknowledging their relevance throughout periods of physical separation. Concurrently, the challenging circumstances of the crisis facilitated the cultivation of self-discipline and drive among students as they confronted the difficulties associated with distance learning [12]. The dual narrative is augmented by technology's rapid incorporation into the psychological well-being domain. According to Liu et al., virtual platforms have emerged to establish crucial social connections during the epidemic [7]. These platforms have facilitated virtual social gatherings, remote therapy sessions, and the formation of support groups, serving as vital sources of support for persons grappling with the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic.

### **3.5. Academic Institutions' Responses and Initiatives**

In response to the increased demands of their student populations, colleges have undertaken proactive measures to strengthen student support systems. The significance of augmented mental health services, which include individual counseling, informative webinars, and easily available helplines, has increased as essential elements of complete methods for promoting overall well-being [8]. Furthermore, the educational institutions acknowledged the importance of fostering a feeling of belonging and community within virtual learning environments. According to Aucejo et al., various strategies such as virtual meetups, online clubs, and flexible academic policies have been implemented in response to the pandemic's unique challenges [5]. These measures have not only promoted a sense of camaraderie but have also offered flexible approaches to achieving academic success.

## **4. Discussion**

Amidst challenging circumstances, the global pandemic acted as a driving force for profound personal and societal development. The students better understood the importance of face-to-face interactions, and the challenging circumstances facilitated the cultivation of self-discipline. According to Liu et al., virtual platforms emerged to establish crucial social connections during the epidemic [7].

### **4.1. Recommendations**

To address the challenges and findings highlighted above, the following recommendations are suggested for educational institutions:

#### **4.1.1. Holistic Mental Health Integration**

Traditional counseling, while effective, might only resonate with some students. Therefore, as Aucejo et al. and Charles et al. highlight, universities should explore holistic interventions [5,10]. Activities such as mindfulness and meditation workshops can assist students in developing a resilient inner self.

Additionally, stress-relief methods may provide instant respite during moments of high pressure. Furthermore, recreational therapy sessions can treat mental health concerns by engaging individuals in fun activities. Using a multi-dimensional strategy guarantees the accessibility and attractiveness of mental health treatment to a broader spectrum of pupils.

#### **4.1.2.Digital Mental Health Platforms**

Given the pervasive nature of digitization in contemporary society, it is imperative that mental health treatment also embraces this technological transformation. The rising popularity and usefulness of online mental health services are underscored by the focus on it by Liu et al. [7]. By incorporating these platforms, institutions may accommodate students who seek assistance anonymously or are far away. Implementing this integration guarantees every student equitable access to high-quality mental health support services, leaving no one behind.

#### **4.1.3.Stress Management Training**

With the pandemic intensifying academic and social pressures, equipping students with stress management skills becomes imperative. Savitsky et al. shed light on the heightened anxieties faced by students [12]. Incorporating regular workshops not only imparts these skills but also reinforces the university's commitment to mental well-being.

#### **4.1.4.Real-time Behavioral Analysis**

The digital age presents unique tools for gauging student well-being. Huckins et al. highlighted the potential of real-time assessments like smartphone-based tools [13]. These technologies provide the capacity to offer important information on student well-being patterns, enabling prompt interventions. This technique is a novel and proactive strategy for addressing mental health difficulties instead of a reactive one.

#### **4.1.5.Increased Awareness and Training for Faculty**

The relationship between faculty members and students has significant importance. According to Fegert et al. [3], if faculty members identify the first indicators of distress, they may serve as a crucial intermediary to mental health services. This approach not only enhances the efficiency of support systems but also cultivates a societal environment where the mental well-being of individuals is seen as a collective responsibility.

#### **4.1.6.Peer Support Groups**

Shared experiences provide a profound capacity for healing. According to the studies conducted by Kaparounaki et al. and Patsali et al., peer groups have been shown to provide a secure environment for students to express themselves openly, establish connections, and process emotional recovery [9,14]. When well-managed, these groups have the potential to significantly mitigate feelings of social isolation and provide concrete coping mechanisms.

#### **4.1.7.Public Awareness Campaigns**

Stigma often acts as a barrier to those seeking mental health assistance. Awareness initiatives, particularly within the realm of student mental health throughout the epidemic, can dispel misconceptions and provide an environment conducive to candid discussions. According to Torales

et al., these campaigns may effectively highlight authentic narratives, fostering a sense of empathy and motivating more students to seek assistance actively [4].

#### 4.1.8. Flexible Learning Systems

Flexibility is the need of the hour. As Aucejo et al. indicated, the pandemic has shifted educational paradigms [5]. Hybrid learning models provide a range of learning options that accommodate diverse learning preferences and mitigate possible stresses such as commuting, thus providing students with a well-rounded academic experience.

#### 4.1.9. Financial and Academic Support

Financial and academic pressures, especially in unprecedented times, can be overwhelming. Son et al. [1] emphasized that universities should display empathy and pragmatism. Various initiatives, such as providing financial help, extension of deadlines, and flexibility in attendance, may effectively mitigate excessive demands experienced by students, enabling them to prioritize their overall well-being in conjunction with their academic pursuits.

#### 4.1.10. Post-Pandemic Adjustment Counseling

In the process of returning to the state of normality that existed before, distinct, and complex obstacles accompany the epidemic. The study conducted by Tang et al. provides insights into the importance of tailored counseling services in facilitating the process of transitioning [11]. Universities demonstrate their dedication to student well-being by recognizing and tackling these distinctive obstacles, even when the acute crisis diminishes.

### 5. Conclusion

The global scope of the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the preexisting mental health challenges that college students face, compelling a fundamental reevaluation of our understanding and approach to their mental health. The synthesis of research findings argues persuasively for immediate, adaptable, and comprehensive interventions. These interventions seek to improve students' mental health during the tempestuous pangs of global crises and their lengthy afterglow.

As the world confronts the enduring effects of such crises, the strident call for concerted action grows louder and more insistent. Addressing the distinct psychological requirements of university students is not solely the responsibility of educational institutions; it is also a societal obligation. This emphasis demonstrates our unwavering commitment to uphold and foster mental health, especially in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Recognizing this, our strategy should be twofold: to provide immediate respite and support during crises and to guarantee a framework that consistently addresses mental health concerns during periods of relative stability. This commitment is an investment in the future, where mental health is placed at the vanguard of societal priorities, ensuring that our students, the future leaders, are prepared to confront any challenge.

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