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Psychological Well-Being and Mental Health among University Students

Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted all aspects of human life, including the educational settings. Online and hybrid learning carried out during and after the pandemic certainly has a positive and a negative side, especially when it comes to students' mental health. At the same time, psychological well-being problems have become increasingly common among students nowadays. Thus, the main objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between mental health and psychological well-being among university students. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) were administered to a sample of 240 university students (129 female and 111 male students). The results indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between the level of psychological well-being and psychological distress. The students' psychological well-being had the highest rating in personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose of life and environmental mastery, while autonomy and positive relationship with others had lower levels. Simultaneously, there was a positive relationship between mental health and gender, but there was no correlation between psychological well-being and gender. The study concluded that those mental health problems have powerful predictive qualities with regard to changes in students' psychological well-being which reflects the implication of intervention programs and strategies that help students to better cope with and manage distress.

Keywords: mental health, distress, psychological well-being, medical students, support

Introduction

We need to be prepared when we reopen schools to ensure that social and emotional supports are a bigger part of the whole experience-not just this spring, but moving forward. We really need to think about how social and emotional learning and mental health support that our students need is the foundation of the programs that we provide and the schools that we use to serve our students.

(Dr. Miguel Cardona, U.S. Secretary of Education)

Commencing higher education represents a key transition point in a young person's life. It is a stage often accompanied by significant change combined with high expectations from students of what university life will be like, and also high expectations from themselves and others around their own academic process and performance (Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2020). Relevant factors include moving away

from home, learning to live independently, and developing new social networks, with the additional greater financial burdens that students now face.

The recent global COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on mental health across society (González-Sanguino et al., 2020), and there is concern that younger people (ages 18-25) have been particularly affected. Everyone in one way or another has personally felt the effects of isolation, fear, loss or fatigue (Pheleps & Sperry, 2020). Recent evidence has revealed that stress, anxiety, depression, and poor sleep are common psychological reactions among students around the world (Rajkumar, 2020). Many students found emergency online education difficult to cope with and said they preferred face-to-face instruction (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). These changes contributed to a decrease in students' psychological well-being. Psychological well-being problems have become increasingly common among university students nowadays, because they are vulnerable to mental health problems which generated increased public concern (Son et al., 2020).

Mental health

Mental health is defined as the successful performance of the mental function, which results in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and capacity to adjust to changes and cope with difficulties and hardships (WHO, 2020). From early childhood until late life, mental health is considered the springboard of thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience for quick recovery, and self-esteem. Mental health is the balanced development of the total personality which enables one to interact creatively and harmoniously with society. Mental health is a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms and a capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life. Even in the absence of severe mental health illness, the consequences of mental health problems among young people in high education may include disruption to their developmental trajectory, higher rates of academic dropout, and attrition (Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, 2017).

Students in universities generally experience a high level of distress, increased fear, anxiety, anger, sadness/depression, and conduct problems (Furr et al., 2010). This means that tertiary education is a critical environment to reach young people to promote and support mental health and influence lifelong outcomes. In addition, university students frequently have more complex problems today than they did over a decade ago. The common stressors at university include greater academic demands, changes in family relations, and changes in social life, exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations. Academic pressures of meeting grade requirements, test tasking, the volume of the material to be learned, and time management, have been shown to be a significant source of stress for students (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

Psychological well-being

The conceptualization of psychological well-being has been in a state of divergence ever since it was studied for the first time. Some researchers have associated psychological well-being with the fulfillment of life and potential and happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2008), while others associated well-being with the personal experience of individuals (Diener, 2009) or with the result of accomplishing goals

(Ryff, 1995). According to Ryff (1995), psychological well-being refers to the extent to which people feel that they have meaningful control over their life and their activities. He introduced six core dimensions of psychological well-being, specifically: 1) self-acceptance (state of having positive thoughts and feelings about oneself); 2) positive relations with others (ability to engage in warm and trusting relationships with others); 3) autonomy (ability to be independent and cope with social pressure); 4) environmental mastery (ability to adapt, change or create one's needs through physical and mental activities); 5) purpose in life (state of having objectivities and goals in life and working towards being goal-oriented); and 6) personal growth (continuously growing and developing as oneself).

These six dimensions, if fulfilled by students, imply that their psychological well-being is excellent and optimal. Students who have higher psychological well-being tend to have positive attitudes towards themselves, be independent in learning, have good social relationships with others, have life goals, and the ability to develop optimally (Ward & King, 2016). Meanwhile, students who have low psychological well-being lack independence in learning, they have poor social relationships, do not have clear life goals and feel inferior (Dogan, Totan & Sapmaz, 2013).

The impact of mental health on the psychological well-being of students in post-pandemic time

The COVID-19 outbreak has impacted all aspects of human life, including the educational settings. Online learning carried out during and after the COVID-19 pandemic certainly has a positive and a negative side, especially when it comes to the mental health of students (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021). Students feel unhappy with what is happening in their life and feel disappointed with their current situation. Petrie et al. (2020) found that students experience difficulties during online or hybrid model of learning. Loneliness and social isolation were strongly associated with poor mental health and a sense of belonging and strong support network associated with psychological well-being and happiness among students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Voltmer et al., 2021).

Hence, during and after the COVID-19 outbreak a study on the psychology of well-being has become a crucial issue to research, because it is essential for students, particularly in a post-pandemic time. Students with high psychological well-being will achieve optimal development in their lives (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Poor psychological well-being and mental state may affect the positive learning and task performance of the students. Hence, the main goal of this study was to examine the possible relationship between mental health and psychological well-being among university students.

Research methods

Participants

The sample of students was randomly selected and all of them participated voluntarily. The participants included 240 university students between 19 and 23 years of age. The mean calculated age of students was 21.73 (SD=7.35). Of all participants, 129 were female (53.75%) and 111 were male (46.25%). In this study we used a simple random sampling technique. The study group of the research included first and third-

year students who studied medical sciences at the University of Tetova. The students from the first year started their studies with physical presence at the University, while the third-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic had online and hybrid model of learning, and this year continued their studies with physical presence.

Data collection tools

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

The K10 is among the most widely used short instruments for screening psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2010). It includes ten items measuring different emotional status (e.g., nervous, hopeless, depressed, and worthless) during the past 30 days. Participants indicate their symptoms on a Likert scale ranged from 5 (all of the time) to 1 (none of the time). The total score ranges from 10 to 50. The higher score indicates a higher level of psychological distress. In this study, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for internal consistency was 0.86.

Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)

The psychological well-being scale consists of 42 items, each item has 7 closed answer choices, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance are the six dimensions of this scale. Cronbach's Alpha for 40 of 42 items was .784, which represents a good correlation between the items (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Data procedure and data analysis

Data collection tools were administered by the researchers during the winter semester of the academic year 2022/23. They were applied to the students in a classroom setting, with the permission of the researchers. The duration of the time for answering the scales was 30 minutes. Statistical analysis of the results obtained in the study was conducted with SPSS 20.0 for the Windows package program. The descriptive statistics were expressed as mean and standard deviation to describe the demographic information of our participants. Furthermore, Chi-square test with the course of study as the fixed factor was conducted to assess the relationship between psychological well-being and psychological distress. Spearman correlation coefficient (r_s) was estimated to determine the association between the psychological well-being, distress and gender.

Results

In our study we observed that the median score of psychological well-being was $M=196.50$, while the median score of psychological distress was $M=35.00$. The Chi-square test revealed that there was a positive relationship between the level of psychological well-being and psychological distress $\chi^2 (1 | n=240) = 24.710$ ($p=0.000$). Also, the students' psychological well-being had the highest rating in personal growth ($M=39.50$), self-acceptance ($M=37.00$), purpose of life ($M=35.50$), and environmental mastery ($M=35.00$). The dimensions they rated at the lowest level included autonomy ($M=27.50$) and positive relationships with others ($M=25.00$).

At the same time we observed that there was no significant difference between the scores of psychological well-being among the boys and girls. The median score of

psychological well-being among girls was $M=87.50$, while the boys had a median score of psychological well-being $M=86.00$. There was a negative relationship between the level of psychological well-being and gender ($r_s = -.356, p > .001$). On the other hand, the girls had higher scores of distress ($M=35.50$), while the boys had lower scores of distress ($M=17.00$). There was a positive relationship between the level of distress and gender ($r_s = .296, p < .004$).

Discussion

Students' mental health and psychological well-being have always been a hot topic in colleges and universities. This research explored various domains of students' well-being in post-pandemic period. In our research we found that the dimension with the highest mean score was personal growth, followed by self-acceptance, purpose of life, and environmental mastery. In this context, as university studies require students to constantly deal with challenges, students are able to experience a higher level of personal growth and self-acceptance. When students have good self-acceptance, they will be able to face the difficulties and challenges they face in times of a COVID-19 pandemic (Barrett et al., 2022). They need to self-actualize and realize that individual potential is central to a clinical perspective on personal growth. A vital characteristic of a fully functioning individual is an attitude that is open to new experiences.

Musifuddin and Aturrohmah (2019) explain that the meaning of life is closely related to happiness. Moreover, students have an excellent environmental mastery dimension when they can master their environment including a sense of mastery and competence and ability to choose a conducive situation and environment. But students are still distressed in facing their problems, during the hybrid model of learning, because most of time they learned from home, however in this post-pandemic period they have the possibility to analyze the demands of a complex environment.

Psychological well-being from the aspect of students' autonomy is very low, because during online or hybrid learning, they had limiting direct interaction with their friends and teachers. Thus, this study found that the students' ability to build relationship with other people after the pandemic was low. Distance learning forces students to stay at home making them frustrated and distressed. They experienced difficulties in establishing relationships with their peers, which affected their psychological well-being (Schwartz et al., 2021; Galea, Merchant & Lurie, 2020).

In our study we found that there was no gender-based significant difference in the total psychological well-being score. This phenomenon has not been explained in other studies, which state that female students have a different pleasure of life than boys; girls have higher scores than boys (Heinsch, Wells & Sampson, 2020). On the other side, the results indicated that the female students have higher level of psychological distress than male students. Existing literature reveals that female students have more tension, anxiety and stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017).

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between mental health and psychological well-being among university students. On the basis of the results, reported above, it can be concluded that mental health and psychological well-being are related i.e. good mental health will lead to psychological well-being or psychological well-being will improve mental health. This shows that students having good mental

health are happy, sociable, and emotionally stable. The students who are mentally healthy will accept challenges, make efforts for personal development and strive for their own growth. Psychological well-being helps in developing positive relationships with others and establishing better adjustment with the environment.

Overall, students' psychological well-being demonstrated higher levels of personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and lower levels of autonomy and positive relationship with others. Regarding mental health, the girls are more stressed than boys, because they have skills in understanding and revealing their feelings, but boys possess the ability to control impulses and tolerate stress.

Our study demonstrated that mental health problems have powerful predictive qualities with regard to changes in students' psychological well-being which reflects the implication of intervention programs and strategies that help students to better cope with and manage distress. Such programs include, for instance, mediation, mindfulness-based stress-reduction, feedback on various health habits, educational discussion, changes in the length and type of curriculum, changes in the grading system, or music therapy and muscle relaxation. The evidence suggests that with young people, early intervention can play a crucial role in outcome, so universities need to make it easier for students to access specialist treatment by ensuring they provide adequately resourced services. Hence, the higher institution should have a mental health policy covering mental health promotion, mental illness prevention and services for students with mental problems. The institution should have a strategy for communicating its mental health policy to staff and students. They need to make the well-being of their students a priority and ensure that the support services provided are sufficient to deal with the increased students' numbers. Students need to be psychologically healthy if they are to get the most out of their education and move confidently into employment. Based on this study's result, further research is suggested to examine the factors that affect students' mental health and psychological well-being.

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