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Review Article

How has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Student Mental Health?

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Abstract: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students has been significant, with increased pressure due to the various restrictions and measures that were enforced in the education sector. Academic pressure and difficulties paired with the insecurity about the future has generally worsened students' mental health, with surges of cases as a result of pandemic pressures. Key aspects of the pandemic affecting students are outlined and explored in depth, using different studies and surveys to reach an overall understanding of the impacts on student mental health.
Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Mental Health, Students, Wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID pandemic has had a dramatic effect on the education sector. Schools have closed, openings have been delayed and some governments have even suspended school while they reassessed their pandemic plans.

There has been a lot of focus on how the pandemic has affected adult workers and those who are in their prime working years, but a lack of monitoring of student and adolescent mental health impacts from pandemics. Despite this, it is clear that prolonged school exposures as well as lockdowns and strict social distancing measures have been detrimental to students' mental health in a variety of different ways.

Pandemic pressures in different aspects of student life has worsened the stress and anxiety faced by many students, and with the gradual de-stigmatisation of mental illnesses in various regions of the UK, for example the North West, an already increasing number of mental health issues reported in adolescents have surged.

Key aspects of the pandemic affecting students are outlined and explored in depth, using different studies and surveys to reach an overall understanding of the impacts on student mental health.

Section 1: Academic
Uncertainty about Studies

Because of its unpredictability, the pandemic poses many challenges for universities and colleges across the UK. Students, parents and staff may have concerns about student life during this period of uncertainty. Students at university and other important stages of education were significantly affected by this. When the pandemic outbreak was confirmed, universities around the world went on lockdown; students were confined to their houses and rooms, bringing normal life screeching to an almost immediate halt. This sudden and unforeseen change evidently brought with it concerns for studies and access to productive teaching, which was led to an increase in academic-related stress as insecurity for education grew. Overwhelmed by the uncertainty and loss of the stable environment and routine that ensured a pathway to academic success, growth in anxiety and stress-induced mental illnesses can be understood, as students began worrying more about the unclear futures and outcomes of their education, which arguably play an increasingly important role in further education and/or employment opportunities (Lee, 2020). Students who face delayed or postponed exams have felt further anxiety, added to the stressors of staying healthy.

School Closures

School closures due to the pandemic have had a significant effect on students, especially those in the

primary and secondary school age range. Schools are often the centre of a child's life and provide them with stability and routine from an early age. Closing a school means uprooting that stability and routine, which can have long-lasting implications for these children.

School closures can have a huge impact on students and families. These impacts can range from increased stress between parents and their children to economic hardship as families pay for online facilities needed to continue education. A significant increase in mental health issues is correlated to the widespread closing of school as well. Overall, we see that school closures can have a huge impact on students, families, and communities. While it can be argued that school closures were also a chance for communities to come together by donating laptops and other devices to people with less access, the academic concern as a result of limiting educational access due to the pandemic played a big part during school closures to worsen mental health problems.

Students with special educational needs are particularly at risk of being negatively affected by the pandemic (Lee, 2020), for example children on the autism spectrum, facing this level of disruption in their daily routines can make them frustrated and short tempered, which further shows the anxiety and unease caused by this uncertainty.

Lockdown procedures have been found to drastically increase the stress levels of students. In particular, the stress levels of students who were forced to spend time in lockdown have been found to be comparable to the stress levels of soldiers engaged in battle. When stress levels are this high, it can be challenging for students to focus on their studies, pay attention to their lessons and complete their coursework. Indeed, when students are faced with high stress levels, they may struggle to retain information, make logical decisions and be attentive during class. In addition to impacting the academic outcomes of students, high stress levels can also lead to a wide range of health concerns. Extreme stress can cause the body to release hormones that can lead to a number of health issues, including insomnia, anxiety, hypertension, headaches, muscle spasms, stomach aches and ulcers.

Academic Performance

Academic performance of students has dipped considerably in the recent years, the situation being aggravated by the prevalence of the covid pandemic among young students, who as well as being directly affected by illness and therefore reducing their ability to study, the changes and restrictions placed on their learning has presented itself in reduced academic success. This decline has been influenced by a variety of factors, including losses in motivation as well as distractions while working at home, and overall increase in stress and concerns.

In the digital age, when information is readily accessible, we're constantly reading, learning and growing as individuals. However, when a pandemic of new strain of influenza appears that could potentially kill millions of people around the world and prevent them from going to school or work for several weeks in some cases, for many students, this makes their lives more challenging than it already is. Students in these circumstances have also had a devastating impact on their academic motivation. With everything else going on in their lives at the moment, they no longer feel like school is worth their time or effort. While everyone has different motivations for why they study something in particular, there is the undoubted strain added as a result of the pandemic, which has a huge impact on the mental health of students.

One of the main reasons why the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted students' academic motivation is because these students no longer feel motivated to do their work. Students naturally want to do their best and perform their best in school; however, when they're worried about their health and their lives, it's difficult for them to concentrate on their school work. This means that school becomes more of a burden than a place of learning and growth. And, with that being said, students also tend to focus more on their health and safety than their schoolwork when a pandemic is going on. Because students are so worried about the potential impact of the pandemic on their lives, they may find it hard to concentrate on their schoolwork. If they get sick, they may spend a lot of time at home or in bed, which means they won't be able to complete their work, which in turn increases stress and anxiety about catching up with missed work and falling behind in class. This could then cause them to lose confidence in their abilities, affecting self-esteem and causing more stress to their lives.

A lack of concentration and focus is another reason why the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted students' academic motivation. When students are worried about their own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of their loved ones, they have less mental energy and focus to put toward their studies. When they're worried about their own health, they're too focused on taking care of themselves to put 100% of their effort and energy into their studies. And, when they're worried about their loved ones' health and safety, they're too focused on providing support and assisting them to focus on their studies. Therefore, when students have a lack of concentration and focus, it's difficult for them to get things done.

Difficult behaviours caused by stress demonstrate another way the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted students' academic motivation. When students are worried about their own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of their loved ones, they're often under a lot of stress. This stress

could then cause them to react negatively to stressors in their lives. Students who are experiencing difficult behaviours due to stress may find themselves snapping at people or losing their temper a lot more often. They may also be too stressed and busy to put their all into their work or studies. This could cause them to fall behind and potentially fail courses.

Another significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college students has been its impact on their academic performance overall. College students have expressed feeling frustrated with the isolation imposed by their colleges and universities. Students have expressed feeling like their colleges and universities have overreacted to the pandemic and have imposed unnecessary isolation measures, which further highlights the helplessness and desperation they feel. Many students have expressed feeling stressed by the isolation measures imposed by their colleges and universities, as well as feeling frustrated with their inability to go outside and enjoy themselves. They have also expressed feeling like they are losing focus and motivation to study, and feeling like they are losing valuable study time due to the isolation.

Online Learning
Students had to adapt to new ways of teaching to cater to the digital prospects of education. The covid pandemic has brought about a change in the methods of teaching as teachers had to come up with more engaging ways of teaching so that students were enthused and learnt effectively. The differences between schools on how to operate in these conditions has added to the uncertainty felt by students, and they saw an increase in online learning as a result of school closures.

The spread of this virus has also resulted in a shift in teaching styles among schools once they opened. In an effort to reduce risk and prevent transmission of the virus, many institutions have restricted or ceased field trips and outdoor activities. Once a time where students receive a break from studies now just feels monotonous and increased feelings of depression among many students, especially as learning from home means there is significantly less activity and interaction – which is only worsened by the lockdowns and implementation of isolation measures.

The actual impact on education will vary from person to person; for some it could be positive, for others negative. While some students who feel more comfortable learning from home and the advantages these technological advancements brought, it is undeniable that the changes to styles of learning put more pressure on students and their overall academic performance, and exacerbated the increasing feelings of depression and anxiety which demonstrates the widespread decline of student's mental health. Kelly Maguire, a university student, describes a general sense of grief, ""When we hear the word grief, we tend to think of the death of a loved one or somebody really closes," she says–a tragically frequent occurrence since COVID-19 began. "On top of that, there's the grief of losing your sense of normalcy, routine, and social connections."" (Ellis, 2020)

Section 2: Health concerns
Sleeping Habits
In the past year, as schools across the country have been forced to implement lockdowns in response to the pandemic, when fears of contracting the virus at school are especially high. As a result, students have had their sleeping habits disrupted and their stress levels raised because of more time spent at home without a regular structure to be maintained.

School lockdowns have caused a significant disruption to students' sleeping patterns. The sleep disruption caused by this can lead to a wide range of problems, including difficulty paying attention, difficulty regulating emotions and an increased risk of developing anxiety disorders. While some students can recover from sleep deprivation in less than a week, others may be impacted for months and even years after the incidents. Those who experience extreme sleep disruption due to lockdowns may find it challenging to fall asleep, stay asleep and sleep through the night. Because sleep is so crucial to the health of adolescents, disruptions to the sleeping habits caused by lockdowns can have serious long- term consequences. Adolescents struggling to get the sleep they need on a consistent basis may struggle to succeed in school, have an increased risk for substance abuse (Richter, 2015), and have an increased risk of developing long-term illnesses such as diabetes.

Eating Habits
The impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns had on the eating habits of students cannot be dismissed. In lockdown situations, where school administration are forced to close the campus and prohibit students from leaving the school premises, students have no option but to stay back in the college and try to continue with normal activities in highly abnormal atmospheres. The sudden change in eating habits during lockdown situations can affect both your physical and mental health.

A large increase in snacking and consumption of unhealthy foods to a higher degree was evident as staying at home for such prolonged periods of time meant that there was a constant access to food and with boredom increasing as well as anxiety, food became a source of comfort for stress and a regular thing to turn to. The sudden change in eating habits during lockdown situations can affect both physical and mental health.

Remaining fit while being trapped at home proved difficult without frequent outside access, and

coupled with unhealthy eating habits this leads to serious impacts on students' health. While gaining weight is normal and expected, it often affects adolescents by contributing to the destruction of their body image, worsening or instilling habits/mind sets of eating disorders, and overall deteriorating self-esteem.

Health Anxiety

More obviously, the direct effects of the pandemic can be seen in the increased levels of health anxiety and concern for catching the virus and becoming ill - which would affect their studies as well as cause them to not feel well. The results of not being well-informed about what was happening with pandemic management and unclear guidelines/ unknown advice from global health governing bodies - which also calls to question the effectiveness of WHO as a global organization - added to the stress and insecurity felt by many students, and this only worsened their other concerns about academic performance, as well as pre-existing mental illnesses. Furthermore, the impacts of this increased health anxiety can be seen in concerns for relatives who may be at risk as well, which only adds to the overall feelings of stress they might feel.

Section 3: Lifestyle
Isolation

While there are several factors that can lead to mental illness, like genetics, upbringing, stress, and anxiety among others, a variety of disorders such as depression, panic attacks, and social phobia can be triggered by environmental factors such as stress or isolation.

Analysing some studies of the psychological impact of quarantine for infectious diseases showed an increase in stress: e.g., a study of people who had come into contact with an infectious disease found that having been in isolation was the "factor most predictive of symptoms of acute stress disorder" (YaMei, 2004). They were significantly more likely to report: "exhaustion, detachment from others, anxiety when interacting with others, irritability, insomnia, poor concentration and indecisiveness, deteriorating work performance and reluctance to work or consideration of resignation".

Another study analysed symptoms of depression after quarantine and found that 9% of the whole sample reported "high depressive symptoms". (Xinhua, 2012) In this group, nearly 60% had been quarantined but only 15% of the group with low depressive symptoms had been quarantined. This shows an increase in the impact of isolative measures on the mental health of many people, and so for students at such a crucial time in their lives it has a highly significant effect.

Student life is an essential part of each and every student's experience during college and university. It's the time where they make new friends, get involved in various activities, and form lasting memories that will stay with them for the rest of your life. Long periods of social isolation brought about by the pandemic have evidently impacted this in a negative way.

The isolation measures taken by colleges and universities have had a significant impact on the lives of many students. Isolation also plays havoc with their social life: parties cannot be held within or outside campuses; sports fields are not accessible; and everything revolves around staying at home, leading to boredom as well as increasing mental illness. This should not come as a surprise since students are a vulnerable population. Students are vulnerable to contracting the flu because they are exposed to a lot of people every day, often in close quarters such as dorms, classrooms, and buses. In addition, many students face financial pressures and mental health issues that can make them more susceptible to being affected by the virus. The pandemic has affected students in many ways, including their social lives.

These measures have isolated students from their friends and families and have affected their social life, academics, and overall health. For instance, students who have been quarantined due to the flu virus might find themselves isolated, especially if they do not have friends or family members who can take care of them. Cancellation of extracurricular and social events and cancellation of classes have added to this. Furthermore, it can be correlated with an increase in social anxiety in students as they have had less interaction and may feel uncomfortable.

The high level of isolation has led to feelings of loneliness and depression among many students (Walsh, 2021). Many college students have expressed feeling extremely lonely during the pandemic. Feeling lonely is not uncommon when many students are away from home, but the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these feelings. Loneliness is one of the most common feelings felt by students during the pandemic, and the feeling of loneliness is worsened by the fact that many students are physically separated from their friends and family members. This is especially true for students who live in communities that were experiencing a high level of isolation, and overall increases in loneliness often lead to a rise in depression. A study indicates that the conditions created by the pandemic and disease containment responses are found to be traumatic for children and adolescents (Sprang, 2013).

For students struggling with mental illnesses, school closures and isolation mean a lack of access to the resources they would normally have. In a survey by

the mental health charity Young Minds, (which included 2111 participants up to age 25 years with a mental illness history in the UK), 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse. 26% said they were unable to access mental health support; peer support groups and face-to-face services have been cancelled (Lee, 2020).

Masks

The effects of wearing face masks during COVID-19 on mental health have yet to be fully understood. While for some, they feel less anxious after putting on a face mask, but the effects on others mental health is evident.

Face masks are commonly worn during pandemics to protect against infectious diseases. However, they are also used in different situations such as when people travel on airplanes, visit public places with poor air quality, or when they are exposed to people with flu-like symptoms. There are many possible benefits of wearing face masks during COVID- 19: - Less Stress: Wearing a face mask can help you reduce your stress levels. In fact, it can make you feel less anxious. The increased awareness of your breath while wearing a mask can be very calming. - Physical Barrier: Face masks are designed to create a physical barrier between you and the virus. This means that you don't need to be worried about spreading the virus to your loved ones. - Less Stigma: When you wear a face mask, you can avoid stigmas associated with pandemics and respiratory illnesses.

Although wearing a face mask during COVID-19 was necessary for health protection, there are some disadvantages that impact mental health:
- Reduced Comfort: wearing a face mask can be uncomfortable, especially for long periods of time. The mask can make your head feel stuffy and impair your breathing, which can be problematic for people with respiratory illnesses.
- Lack of Social Contact: Human beings are social creatures. They crave social interactions, which are crucial for our mental health. Putting on a face mask can make you withdraw from social interactions, leading to a lack of human contact and socialization.
- Lack of Vitamin D: Your body produces Vitamin D when exposed to sunlight, so wearing a mask will deprive you of this vitamin. This can have adverse effects on your bones and immune system.

A wide range of mental illnesses can be triggered by environmental factors such as stress or isolation. The consequences of wearing face masks during COVID-19 on mental health are unclear, as the effects of wearing a face mask vary from person to person; however it is clear that becoming accustomed to wearing a face mask can lead to feeling uncomfortable in taking it off, so they may experience self-consciousness and anxiety about not wearing one.

Anxiety about Job Market

Another reason way the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted students is because they may experience doubt about the future and getting a job – e.g., no longer believe that their chosen career path is right for them. When they're worried about their own health and mortality, and the health and mortality of their loved ones, it's difficult for them to think logically and objectively about their studies or interests. They often find themselves too worried about their own survival to think about their future. This could mean that students, who are studying something that they don't really care about or that doesn't really interest them, change their minds and no longer want to pursue that path in life.

Financial burden can be a problem during quarantine, with people unable to work and having to interrupt their professional activities with no advanced planning; the effects appear to be long lasting (Pellecchia, *et al.,* 2015). Due to the unexpected nature of the pandemic, students, who often have to manage their own finance in their new independence, struggled too. In reviewed studies, the financial loss as a result of quarantine created serious socioeconomic distress and was found to be a risk factor for symptoms of psychological disorders and both anger and anxiety several months after quarantine. (Jeong Hyunsuk, 2016). This kind of economic pressure worsens stress and adds another cause for worry, adding to factors that contribute to mental illness.

The job market has changed drastically over the past few years, as they are now harder to come by and there is a lot more competition. The chances of getting employed after graduating are not as high as they used to be. It's not uncommon for new graduates to struggle in the job market, especially during economic downturns like the one we are currently experiencing.

The job market plays a large role in the mental health of employees. Having a job can make employees feel more confident, secure, and accepted in society. During times of high unemployment, it is more likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, especially if you do not have a job and do not know when or if you will find work, which is evident in consequences of the pandemic for students.

Potential unemployment leading to mental health issues such as depression can be due to the prospect of not having a regular income, the stress of looking for a new job, the stigma associated with being unemployed (whether you are feeling it or others are projecting it on you), or feelings of inadequacy, which all contribute to lack of secure mental health.

Stigma

Stigma can affect how people feel about themselves, how others treat them, and how they view their future. For example, a person with a mental health condition might feel ashamed and believe that others will think less of them if they know about their condition.

Mental health concerns have been prevalent in colleges, universities and high schools for years. While many people have grown more aware of mental health issues and taken the time to understand them, there has also been a strong stigma attached to those who experience such things. Students have sought support from friends, family and professionals during this pandemic but there is still an uneasy feeling around those who may need help. The fear of being judged keeps many from reaching out and getting assistance, and leads to many students suffering alone.

Young people have been disproportionately affected by anxiety and depression, and stigma can make it harder for people to seek help, but it can be particularly harmful for people who are dealing with mental illness. According to a survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), stigma is the No. 1 reason people with mental illness do not seek treatment (Unknown, 2022). Respondents reported feeling shame, fear of being discriminated against, and lack of access to services as significant barriers to treatment. Students are particularly vulnerable to mental illness and its effects, with increasing rates of anxiety and depression among young people in recent years. While for some these mental health conditions are manageable, for others, they can be debilitating.

Students in particular may be hesitant to seek help due to the stigma surrounding mental health. Many fear what others will think of them, even their teachers and advisors, and may be afraid to tell their families for fear of being criticized or looked down upon. This is one of the most common fears and has been reported by many who stay silent. Overall a general increase in mental illnesses has been seen and the stigma around which remains being tackled.

Often there is a stigma of the virus itself, which continues for some time after quarantine. In a comparison of workers quarantined versus those not quarantined, 9 quarantined participants were "significantly more likely to report stigmatisation and rejection" from people in their local areas (Brooks, 2020), which suggests that there is stigma specifically surrounding people who had been quarantined. Participants in several studies reported that others were treating them differently: avoiding them, withdrawing social invitations, treating them with fear and suspicion, and making critical comments (Brooks, 2020) – which shows the impact of COVID-19 and the way it can affect students: isolating them and exposing them to a kind of ostracization that induces stress and negative feelings.

CONCLUSION

Overall, as seen in multiple studies and reviews of the impacts of the pandemic on adolescent mental health, it is clear that students have faced an extremely difficult time in the past two years. Unprecedented measures to manage the virus such as changes in schooling methods and isolations and lockdowns have led to a widespread increase in stress and affected academic performance, e.g., due to the disrupted workload and difficulty they have to deal with, and this substantial pressure placed on students to do well is correlated with higher levels of anxiety and stress. However, while increased academic pressures have played a big role in worsening the mental health of students, their consequently affected physical health and concerns for this only add to it – not only the suffering and fears of the virus but the unhealthy sleeping and eating habits developed during lockdown. Furthermore, the extent of the impacts of this isolation can be seen in the increase in depression and feelings of loneliness, also contributing to social anxiety, which has long lasting effects. As well as the concern over current studies, COVID-19 has drastically damaged the economy and unemployment has risen, which affects students' mental health as they face loss in motivation and are presented with such an unpromising and unstable future. Mental health is still being destigmatised, which is adds to the difficulty in reaching out for help and resulting in the majority of students suffering alone.

Schools should do their best to minimize the number of lockdowns that occur on their campuses. This can be done by enhancing security measures, improving communication with students, taking steps to control infectious outbreaks and improving the general well-being of the student population. Students can help schools minimize the number of lockdowns that occur by taking steps to avoid contracting contagious diseases, handling their emotions during stressful situations and being careful to avoid triggering the lockdown procedures.

Quarantine and isolation can be the catalyst for many mental health problems; even in people who have been previously well. These can include acute stress disorders, irritability, insomnia, emotional distress, mood disorders, including depressive symptoms, fear and panic, anxiety and stress (Usher, 2020), and this overall demonstrates the extreme extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mental health of students.

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