

COVID 19 AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

*Report submitted as part of the emotional well-being and stress assessment survey
conducted among the students of NMSM government college Kalpetta, Wayanad*

Jeevani Centre for Students' Well-being

in association with

Internal Quality Assurance Cell

NMSM Govt College Kalpetta

2021-2022

Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (WHO, 2018)

Background

The unprecedented outbreak of a novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) influenced people's lives across the world in every aspect. And it has resulted in a drastic alteration to individuals' emotional, physical, mental, social, and financial status. Empirical evidence has shown the negative effects of the pandemic on the psychological and mental well-being of the general population across several countries. Evidence has suggested that students have higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms than general workers during the pandemic (Romeo et al., 2021). College students are increasingly recognized as a vulnerable population, suffering from higher levels of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and disordered eating compared to the general population.

The pandemic has created uncertainty among students about what will happen in the future, which generates stress, and stress has unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of students. Therefore, when the nature of their educational experience radically changes, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the burden on the mental health of this vulnerable population is amplified. Against such a backdrop, it is pertinent to examine the students' emotional wellbeing and stress they are facing during these pandemic days.

Wayanad, being one of the high-altitude districts in northern Kerala and with a large forest area, poses a great challenge to the students during these pandemic days from attending online classes due to poor internet connectivity. Thus, this study is an attempt for evaluating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns on the psychological well-being and anxiety/stress among the students of NMSM government college, Kalpetta during the heights of the second wave of pandemic and lockdown, in May-June 2021. Jeevani Centre, a platform for psychological well-being in the college in association with Internal the Quality Assurance Cell of the college conducted the survey.

We hope the findings of this study could assist the students informing a theoretical basis for determining psychological well-being and identifying psychological intervention practices to assist the students now and also in times of similar situations in the future. It should also provide guidelines for authorities on possible ways to moderate the impacts of anxiety/stress on students during such health crises. Jeevani Centre is organizing various programmes and measures to address the various psychological issues faced by our students.

Ultimately, we hope that by identifying the specific challenges and emotional issues students are encountering during the COVID-19 pandemic, we may be better able to provide tailored supports and resources for these students to cope with their issues.

Materials, Methods and Measures.

Keeping in mind the safety and precautionary guidelines for the pandemic which include physical distancing, primary data was collected through an online survey using questionnaires (Google forms) which were circulated via emails, class Whatsapp groups and Google classrooms. The questionnaires consisted of both MCQs (Multiple Choice Questions) and open-ended questions. They were divided into four main themes: one, students' responses to the questions regarding their personal information; their class, gender, age etc. Two, students' perception and their emotional response towards the online class and learning environment. Three, queries regarding their worries about personal circumstances were included. Lastly, students' experiences of being confined to their homes which focused on family relationships and dynamics and also, students' leisure, their dreams and future aspirations. Once the initial survey was accomplished, virtual interviews were conducted with the set of students from selected classes who answered in affirmation for being interviewed. The interviews conducted were semi-structured which largely focused on obtaining in-depth information on the themes outlined in the survey questionnaire. The students of three batches (first and second year degree and final year post graduate students) were the samples for the study. A total of

513 students participated in the survey, but only 348 ones (discarding the faulty ones) were selected for the analysis of the study. The incomplete questionnaires ones were an outcome of the poor network connectivity of students. Many students find it distressing not to participate in the survey provided from the college and they communicated the same with Jeevani Centre.

A Paradigm Shift from Physical Space to Virtual Space

When asked how they feel while attending the online classes, majority of our respondents said that they are frustrated with online class while a clear 38% said that they are very much anxious with online classes. With respect to the shift to online classes, 79% of the respondents were bored in this virtual learning space. During the interview with the students, they shared that the earlier situation was much better and they prefer physical presence and interpersonal interaction with friend and teachers. Staying home gives them a number of reasons to be distracted (many hinted at how the home is not the ideal setting for learning) resulting in their non-participation in the classes. For instance, a final year student of the college said online classes are not fulfilling their needs, it is very difficult to look at the screen throughout these days and the classroom environment is missing. She also shared her concerns about her future which might get affected in the event of the pandemic. A least minority (12%) of the students opined that they feel relieved during these online classes. And a 40% of the students felt angry towards the new learning environment. Some students feel ashamed while dealing with these online classes. These emotions of students, whether it be anxiety, angry or frustration should be considered with serious concern. Very few respondents marked that they feel proud or joyful in this new teaching – learning environment. And that emotional belongingness should also be studied.

Family Relationships

During the lockdown, mostly all students were confined to their houses with family members that lead to positive and negative impacts. The positive aspect of the

pandemic, for them, is that they got some quality time to spend with other members of the family. Two respondents commented that the lockdown offered them a chance to tie with their near ones like they had it never before. The students thus responded were hostlers for whom a prolonged stay at home due to the lockdown was an opportunity to share their time with their family. They were asked whether they could share their emotions and personal feelings during the pandemic time with their family members, teachers and friends. From the survey it is clear that 20% of our students spoke with counselors regarding their mental state. Most of them (76%) never shared their emotions and feelings with family members. This is a clear indication of the magnitude of emotional loneliness they face while at home. During the personal interview some respondents shared that, they faced conflicts within their family during these pandemic days. Even some students do not feel or they cannot even stay 'safe' at their homes during lockdown days.

The students feel that they have lost their independence especially with regard to their thought processes and lifestyle. They find college as the best place to exist. Many of them (36%) depend on social media as a panacea to stay away from the stress they feel. Most of the students (56%) rarely communicated with their close friends during the pandemic days. Many students (42%) responded that they often interact with their teachers regarding their uneven emotions. Campuses are a primary space for socialization. The complete absence of socialization process leads students to depression and existential crisis. During the pandemic, their interactions with their friends and, in some cases, with their partners (although none of the respondents mentioned it out rightly) have been limited to virtual spaces under the constant surveillance of the family. As a result, students get deprived of their freedom that they enjoy in the space provided by educational institutions.

Leisure Activities

Despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is still plenty of fun to be worth mentioning. In fact, seeking out fun activities may be even more important now. Doing something you enjoy can distract you from problems and help you cope with life's challenges.

Most of the respondents were very anxious about leisure activities. Almost 74% of the students felt that they lose their leisure time activities like sports and cultural activities, hang outs with friends etc. When asked about them while interviewing, many students shared what they've lost, shared their anxiety about their social life. "I can't talk to people," was a common response. "I have not been able to see friends or work at all," was another response.

During pandemic, different governments have adopted different kinds of restrictions to control the spread of the virus. Such restrictions could largely affect peoples' lifestyles; In particular, the travel and outdoor activities of humans could be significantly affected. The study also tries to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' travel behavior. About 68% of the respondents never travelled during pandemic days. Only a 32% of the students travelled for some time during the pandemic and lockdown days. Future studies which follow a longitudinal approach to assess the travel behaviour changes during pandemic time can be employed.

Personal Circumstances and Stress

Uncertainty and anxiety about the future are the core feelings during the pandemic time as well as during the crucial developmental phase of life that college students are currently in. Following the disruptions to college academics due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students (64%) reported much uncertainty regarding their academic futures. Students are worried about issues related to their studies and their future professional careers, they feel anxiety and frustration and great uncertainty until they become clear about how their courses will be restored after the pandemic situation. More than half of

the participants (53%) expressed their concerns about their financial situations being crushed by COVID-19.

Although a majority of participants (70%) expressed concerns regarding academic performance. Among the adverse effects of the pandemic, the most prominent one was the anxiety about one's own health, followed by the frustration about the loss of leisure activities. 78% of the total respondents shared their concerns over their physical as well as mental health. And a 74% of the students worried very much about their leisure time activities.

The feeling of 'not knowing' what will happen in the coming days or expecting another pandemic in the future is another cause of anxiety and fear. Approximately 66% of total respondents shared such anxiety. This may cause changes in their sleeping patterns and created regular feelings of hopelessness and frustration. Uncertainty about their future plans with regard to higher education or employment was a major cause for concern for most respondents. They strongly believe that the pandemic will have an effect on their careers; the economy is suffering and running in losses which will adversely affect job and career opportunities.

Concluding Remarks

The study was conducted with the aim to arrive at an understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on mental health, specifically stress-related issues of students of NMSM Govt College, Kalpetta. By conducting online survey interviews in the midst of the pandemic, we found that a majority of the participants were experiencing increased stress and anxiety due to COVID-19. As demonstrated above, the respondents found it difficult to adapt to the new changes in the education system which did put a lot of pressure on them leading to feelings of frustration, anger and fear. In the context of family there was a mixed opinion, portraying both the supporting and conflicting sides of it. The pandemic brought about many changes and continues to do so in the institutions of family and education. During the lockdown period of COVID-19, factors related to changes in

academic structures, examinations and a battle with limited resources can be directly associated with anxiety, stress, frustration, and depressive disorders

Overall, the current literature showed that the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the emotional well-being of our college students more adversely. This decline in emotional well-being is due to factors such as lack of social interaction, increased screen time, fear towards Covid 19 infection, lack of leisure activities, academic stress etc. The results shows high to moderate levels of agreement regarding students' perceptions of the positive and negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their emotional well-being and stress. However, no statistically significant gender difference is identified.

Regarding the positive impacts, the findings in relation to the social and emotional aspects of students' lives demonstrated that students perceived the COVID-19 pandemic helped them to be connected strongly with their family members. This result indicates that students enjoyed time with their families and that their family relationships have been strong throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the results related to the negative impacts indicate that students were more concerned about being alone or disconnected from everyone due to the pandemic. However, missing the classroom social environment, and finding online education inadequate for practical learning were the highest reported negative impacts. Furthermore, the results of this study were limited to differences by gender. Male students enrolled in the college were too low compared to female students. There were differences between students in the second year and final year, as the final year students need to decide on future academic plans soon and there were more anxious about their future education and career. The college should adopt an online method of psychological intervention to reduce the depression level of the students. Several aspects limit this study. The results, findings, output may not be applicable outside NMSM government college. There may exist other constraints that may impact the students' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. The open ended question provided in the questionnaire did not get much response. Governments and governmental agencies may plan and promote their strategies and policies by having a

clear concept about students' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. Future research for this aspect may be conducted effectively by increasing sample size, expanding geographical location and research instrument as well as expanding variables. The small sample size and by extension the limited methods used for statistical analysis are the limitations of this study. A replication of the present research, if done nation-wide, would provide a more representative data for generalization.

References

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