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Students Pursuing Higher Education & Their Struggles with Mental Health

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# Introduction

The global pandemic of 2020, as of the writing of this research report, is still a reality that affects everyone. Ever since the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 and the following curfews and quarantines put in place, health professionals have been concerned about the strain put on the healthcare systems of the world, the measures put in place to slow down the spread of the disease, and the morale and mental health of the general population. The former is especially relevant for the younger generation, as this situation has never occurred in their lifetime, or in the lifetime of anyone currently alive, for that matter. To highlight an even more specific group of people, young people who were transitioning from high school to college or who were already in tertiary education were impacted quite harshly. For the students who were unfortunate enough to experience a global pandemic during such a transitional period in their lives, it meant having to sacrifice months of potential memories and having to adapt to a new, uncertain and unpredictable lifestyle. These events, without a doubt, have affected the mental health of countless students, who have to pursue their studies in said lifestyle. Thus, because of the heightened awareness of mental health, this subject will only become more and more relevant as the years go by. The objective of this paper is to shed light onto college students' struggles with mental health, and the causes behind those struggles. It is quite common to hear stories about students experiencing extreme levels of stress. Why do young people who pursue higher education studies struggle with stress and mental health at a disproportionately high rate? Young students' efforts in tertiary education put a ton of pressure on their psyche, and if they already suffer from a pre-existing mental disorder, it can take a toll on their academic performance. This paper classifies, compares, and analyzes various case studies, surveys, and statistics to find a detailed and precise answer to the research question.

**Hypothesis**

Students who transition from secondary to tertiary studies have to adapt to a new lifestyle and to an exposure to new culture and experiences, so they may struggle if they cannot manage living a more busy way of life (Riba & Cusumano, 2018). Mental health and performance in school are dependent on each other, and must be kept in balance. If one fails, then the other is sure to fail as well. Consequently, many young students tend to have more difficulty in living comfortably because of a lack of knowledge on managing stress, unhealthy ways of coping, a lack of confidence and self-esteem, and an overall lack of mental hygiene.

# Defining mental health issues

Diagnosable mental disorders are defined by significant changes in thinking, emotion and/or behavior, and the consequences are distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities (Parekh, 2018). Anticipating the future and feeling uneasy about the future are normal. However, fearing everything, panicking, facing unnecessary amounts of stress and being overtly irritable are not normal. Anxiety disorder is a common problem that affects a large amount of people. Merikangas et al. (2010) conducted a survey among 10,123 adolescents aged 13-18 in the continental United States, and 31.9% of them appeared to show symptoms of anxiety disorder, while there was an overall prevalence of disorders with severe impairment and/or distress of 22.2%. People with an anxiety disorder tend to avoid situations that trigger or worsen their symptoms, such as schoolwork. They see every situation as anxiogenic, and they struggle with carrying out basic but crucial tasks in their everyday lives. Untreated children with anxiety disorders are at higher risk of performing poorly in school, missing important social experiences,

and engaging in drug abuse (Kessler et al., 1995). If left unchecked, anxiety can cripple a students'

ability to perform adequately in school.

Depression is characterized by a loss of hope & motivation in daily life. When someone

suffers from any form of depression, they fail to derive joy from everyday life, and they struggle

with functioning normally (British Psychological Society, 2011). Depression is distinct from

anxiety, but has similar symptoms such as nervousness, irritability, problems sleeping and

concentrating. The overanalyzing behavior that is associated with anxiety disorder can cause

depression. When someone loses confidence in their abilities, they tend to discourage themselves

and lose focus on their goals and their meaning in life (British Psychological Society, 2011).

Because of this heightened fear of the future, a student can lose track of his or her academic life,

and perceive school as an enormous weight on their shoulders. In a massive survey conducted

across three different California public college systems among 38,143 students, Sontag-Padilla et

al. (2014) found that approximately 19% of students met or exceeded the established threshold for

probable psychological distress during the 30 days prior to the survey. Among those students, 10-

12% of them reported feeling hopeless most or all of the time, and 8-10% of them accounted

feeling so depressed that nothing could cheer them up all or most of the time. This means that their

perception of school and other responsibilities in their lives were overwhelming to the point of

negatively affected their mental well-being.

A sample of 2843 college students' internet surveys on mental health problems, substance

use behaviors, and utilization of mental health care was analyzed by Cranford, Eisenberg & Serras

(2009). Depression, panic disorder & generalized anxiety disorder positively were all positively

associated with cigarette smoking. Frequent binge drinking was negatively associated with major depression and was positively associated with generalized anxiety disorder. Out of those students, 67% of them needed mental health services, but only 38% received them in the previous year (Cranford, Eisenberg & Serras, 2009). The cause of substance use can be traced to the need of suppressing negative emotions. When someone struggles with their mental health, they will find a way of coping to defend themselves against a perceived threat, even if it is unhealthy. Thus, using substances to deal with one's problems is only a temporary solution to a long-term problem, and it can create even more problems, such as an addiction to drugs, alcohol, caffeine and even internet usage. When one distracts himself from his problems, he only digs himself deeper into his hole. In sum, students' mental health is affected by the stress that they experience, and they find ways to cope because of it.

## Stigma, maturity & pressure

The stigma on mental health greatly affects college students' attitudes on mental health counseling service-use (Holland, 2016). When people feel judged or differentiated by society for doing something, they will be less likely to do it. This is why a greater level of stigma correlates to lower counseling service-use (Britt et al., 2008; Cook, 2007; Yorgason, 2008). When a student experiences more stress because of their academic studies, they are less likely to seek mental health counseling services. In the extensive survey conducted by Sontag-Padilla et al. (2014), 73% of the 33,640 students felt that counselling services were not necessary, and 30% of them believed that they did not have enough time to use them. Because of societal stigmatic views, people who needed or wanted to use counselling services found it difficult to avoid the label of "mentally ill" (Holland, 2016). Yorgason (2008) states that living off campus, being male, and being in college for fewer

years equals to having less knowledge of campus mental health services. The feeling of exclusion, which will be addressed further on in this paper, can cause people to act irrationally and can accentuate symptoms of mental disorders.

All of this ties in with emotional maturity and self-awareness. When someone is more informed about mental health and how to maintain it, they deal with it in a healthy way. For example, adaptive coping is the use of emotional support and instrumental support, positive reframing, planning, acceptance, humor and even religion (Schottenbauer et al., 2006). When someone is aware of their problem and they have a genuine desire to solve the problem, they are more likely to ask for help and use mental health counselling. The opposite is also true, however. When someone is young, they do not have the experience or maturity to adequately deal with the challenges that they face in life, so they try to cope in ways that only satisfy their immediate sense of pleasure, and not their long-term sense of accomplishment. As a counter-example, maladaptive coping is self-distraction, denial, substance abuse, behavioral disengagement, venting and self-blame (Schottenbauer et al., 2006). When someone is unaware of his strengths and weaknesses, they regard outside help as unnecessary, which decreases use of mental health counselling. Thus, a person's emotional and cognitive maturity has a link to the ability of dealing with stressful situations. In Quebec, the pursuit of higher education begins at age 17, when students begin their CEGEP studies. At such a young age in life, a lack of maturity is expected. The transition to a more independent learning style is an objectively challenging reality to deal with. This is why first-year students in college experience more difficulties with emotionally adapting to their surroundings than final year undergraduates (Sharma, 2012). The perception of school workload and extracurricular workload has impact on students' stress. Students with responsibilities outside

of school are proven to experience more stress (Koch, 2018). This is in part due to the large amount of pressure that students put on themselves to get high marks and to secure a stable job in the future. Students not only put pressure on themselves, but they also receive it from their family and society. From a young age, people are given the idea that college studies are the logical next step in life after high school, because it is the safest option. All in all, because of time crunches, deadlines, not knowing how to organize tasks and overdramatizing the challenges that need to be overcome, a student may struggle with keeping up with their academic studies.

## Social isolation, rise of internet & online classes

Social isolation is not a bad thing in of itself. It is physical separation, and the objective form of being alone. One can be alone, and not necessarily derive discomfort or suffering from it. Loneliness is the subjective & unpleasant state of a lack of meaningful social interaction and communication with other people. Social isolation is a factor for loneliness (Smith, 2019). There is no central way of combatting loneliness, as it is affects everyone differently. Humans are social beings, so they still need to interact with others to be content. Ever since the increasing convenience of personal devices with internet access, the average person has become less sociable, and it has led to negative effects on overall happiness, because of the lack of people to confide in has grown from 1985 to 2004 from 10% to 24.6% (Wang, Zhu & Shiv, 2012). In a longitudinal study conducted in 1998 by Kraut et al., 169 people in 73 households were given instructions on internet use, and an interesting link was made between internet use, sociability, and mental health. After 1 to 2 years, because of their greater use of internet, these households experienced a decline in communication between family members, a decline in size of social circles and an increase in depression and loneliness.

Linking these two studies is interesting: by correlating internet use to social interaction, it is obvious that the more time spent browsing the internet is less time spent with friends and family. Humans are at risk of psychological harm when kept in isolation, since it is comparable to a punishment or a correction in a prison context (Usher, Bhullar & Jackson, 2020). Loneliness is linked to stress, which is linked to mental health, which is in turn linked to overall happiness. Currently, there is an increased feeling of loneliness caused by social isolation because of the global pandemic. Due to the efforts of containing the virus, traditional face-to-face social interaction has been restricted. Because of this, social distancing and long-distance video calls have become the norm. This is especially true in an educational context, because of the prevalence of online classes. Ever since the definitive end of hybrid classes in October 2020 for Quebec colleges, school has lost many advantages derived from its social aspect, like socializing with peers and developing relationships with new people. Because of the correlation between isolation, loneliness, and mental health issues, there is no doubt that this has taken a toll on the morale and overall happiness of students. El Mansour & Mupinga (2007) pointed out some advantages and disadvantages concerning online classes. Advantages include a higher flexibility in scheduling, more convenience, and less social pressure. Disadvantages include a heightened dependence towards technology, which can be defective at times, and the lack of real face-to-face social interaction. Even though online classes are the best answer to a safe method of communication between professors and students in the world's current situation, they remain a teaching method that cannot be kept in place for too long. In essence, people are lonelier than they used to be, which means that they are more prone to stress.

# Conclusion

Overall, young students live a stressful way of life. Because attending college is mentally demanding, younger students are more prone to struggling with stress and mental health issues. Their experience can be much more challenging when their mental health is declining, because poor mental health correlates to poor academic performance (Murff, 2005). With all of this, why are young college students struggling with stress and mental health at a disproportionately high rate? The hypothesis was that younger students live in more stress because of their lack of overall experience with tertiary education and their illiteracy with mental health. This turned out to be true. Multiple studies proving the hypothesis have been conducted, and they proved that a lack of experience correlates to a higher amount of stress. The purpose of this study was to provide a commentary on the current state of students pursuing college studies, to inform about the issues that a group of people is facing, and to provide suggestions to improve the current situation. As previously implied, the educational system that currently exists presents some majors flaws concerning the well-being of students. A better system would factor in students' social lives and personal hobbies, and be more lenient on giving less work. In addition, humans are a complex and heterogeneous group of beings. This means that a uniform system designed to serve everyone equally is prone to fail, because it eventually produces graduates tailored to a specific set of preconceived ideas, and not individuals who can reach the maximum of their personal capabilities. In life, stressful situations are expected, but they should be regulated to prevent unnecessary suffering.  Society has been using the same educational model for entire centuries, and yet it has been proven that it could be greatly improved.  Education and learning should be positive experiences in one's life, and they must aid personal development. Attending school must be challenging to a certain degree, but they must not cause a student to want to abandon education.

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