

Original Research Article

COVID-19: impact on the mental health of university students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Ever since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, education institutions in the entire country were shut down. This shutdown of universities caused the students to stay at home which caused a detrimental impact on their mental health.

Methods: This survey-based study aims to decipher the impact the lockdown has caused on the mental well-being of the students. The survey was conducted through a set of online questionnaires.

Results: The results of the study show that the students suffered from various psychological problems. Anxiety and stress were the most prevalent amongst mental illnesses and were reportedly increased due to uncertainty about future prospects like job and graduation.

Conclusions: The study confirms that the pandemic has had a negative impact on the psychological health of the patients and has amplified stress and fear amongst them.

Keywords: COVID-19, Mental health, Quarantine, Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Conferring to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, quarantine comprises of separating and limiting the movement of the public who have been exposed to a transmissible disease to check whether symptoms occur.¹ Large-scale quarantine appears to be the most appropriate term to refer to a compulsory physical separation, including the restriction of movement, of populations who have been potentially exposed to a contagious ailment.² Extensive quarantines are presented as strategies for plummeting contact among people, and consequently, the spread of a contagion obliges, under pain of economic or criminal sanctions, a population to stay home.¹

To suppress the spread of the pandemic coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in India, the government declared a nationwide lockdown commencing from 24th March 2020. All schools and colleges in the nation were directed to

remain shut for students about a week before this.³ On 26 April India saw the peak daily tally of new severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) infections ever documented in the world, 360 960, taking its pandemic total to 16 million cases, following the US, and more than 200 000 deaths. The distressing second wave arises a year afterward the country imposed one of the most rigid lockdown restrictions in the world—and just three months since its health ministry professed those infections and mortality were at an all-time low.⁴ Subsequently, a large number of distance learning solutions have been arrayed all over the country to reach 32 crore scholars affected by school and college terminations. Apart from this paradigm shift in the approach of teaching-learning, there exists foremost limitations to stay indoors, uphold social distancing, restrictions on eating at their preferred outlets and not being able to go for shopping, etc. could possibly be major factor affecting the social and emotional lives of these

adolescents who crave to hanging out with at their desired engagements with their peer group.³

Amid the wide-ranging population, university students appear to be predominantly susceptible to the adverse impacts of quarantine. Undeniably, before the COVID-19 outbreak, the mental health of young adults was already a global concern.² Occurrences of various diseases and social isolation are linked with psychological distress and symptoms of mental health disorder including depression and substance use disorders.⁵

This raises the question of the mental health load of the pandemic on quarantined university scholars in India and of the effects associated with this. To our knowledge, this study is the survey devoted to students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted to establish the pervasiveness of self-reported suicidal feelings and indications of suffering, stress, depression, and anxiety; additionally students may be facing increased mental stress due to the qualms viz a viz their suspended examinations, impending summer internships, admissions to higher courses, placements, and jobs they were looking forward to joining post examinations, etc. Nonetheless these adolescents and young adults are trying their best to deal with this unexpected transformation in their life, there may be a lot of fluctuations that stressed pupils, this pandemic may bring in their activities, emotions, and life as a whole.

The objective of this study is to understand the impact of the lockdown imposed because of the disastrous novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) on the day to day living, activities, learning styles and mental health of young Indian students in enrolled in colleges and universities in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. This study focuses on various aspects of a student's life and the changes that have been brought up due to the pandemic.

METHODS

This study was based on a proprietary questionnaire provided via the Internet at the peak of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. An anonymous self-designed online survey was conducted to obtain the dataset required to support this study. The students were selected from universities in India. Before conducting the study, the informed consent from the student was taken. The survey questionnaire consisted of 20 questions divided into five major categories: basic details of the responding students, details about their pre-covid and post-covid life, impact on their education, engagements, overall mood, and sleeping habits during the period of national lockdown due to COVID-19. Further the results were analysed using MS-excel.

A total of 350 students responded to the survey. Students participating were selected from various universities in India. The survey was started during the second wave of the covid pandemic in India. The survey was first published online through Google forms on May 20, 2021

and the final response was taken on August 5, 2021. The students from various educational background were selected and asked to answer the questions asked in the survey. The participation in the survey was voluntary and the choice to withdraw survey at any point was given. Consent was required before filling the survey. All the respondents were Indians and above 18 years of age. However, no compensation was paid.

Statistical analysis

Only the questionnaires fully completed were taken into consideration. The results obtained were analysed using MS-excel. Comparisons were made between the pre-covid and post-covid experiences of students. Also, the responses were analysed for the various mental health issues, eating habits, sleeping habits and their fears and concern. Various graphs and pie-charts have been used to depict the results in percentage for a comprehensive summary. The results were analysed in percentage and concluded accordingly.

RESULTS

Amongst the 350 students surveyed 60.9% were female and 38% were male while 1.1% identified as other. About 28.3% were students of business studies, 18.6% of science and engineering, 11.1% of medical and health, 19.7% studies arts and humanities while the remaining 22.3% were from other streams.

Anxiety, depression and related characteristics

The overall prevalence of anxiety amongst the respondents was found to be a whopping 23.9 and depression about 12.2. The most common problem that students dealt with was stress. Reportedly 30.9% students were stressed during the covid-19 pandemic. Other major symptoms seen amongst the participants were self-harm 1.2%, suicide ideation 1.5%, whereas 17.5% felt social isolation and loneliness.

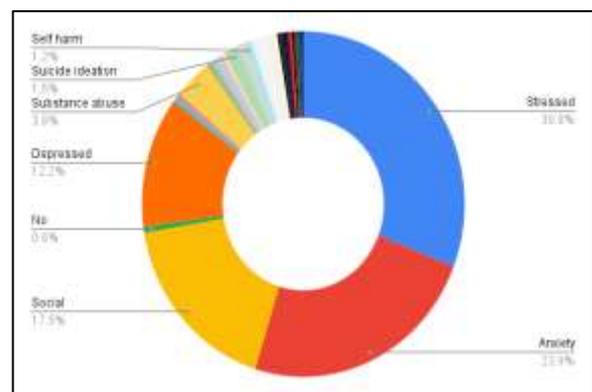


Figure 1: Mental health issues faced during the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic.

When students were asked how often they felt depressed or hopeless during the pandemic 58.2% said they felt

depressed for several days and around 16.3% said felt depressed every day.

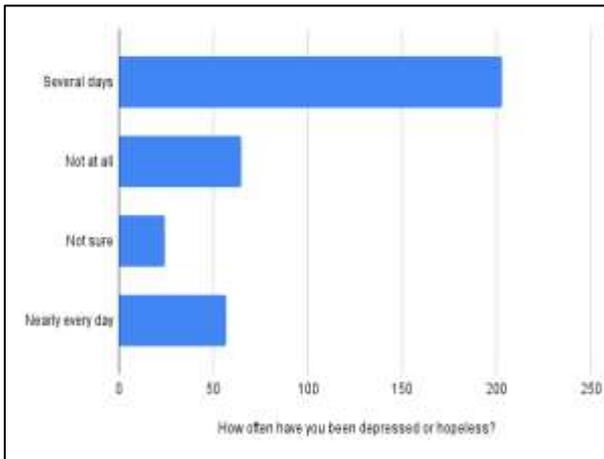


Figure 2: On an average feeling of depression and hopelessness.

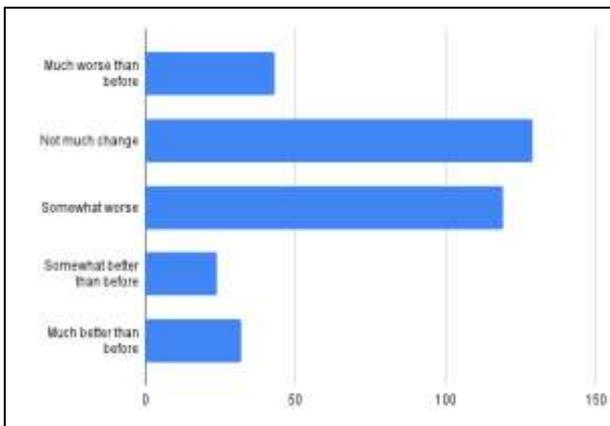


Figure 3: Affect in learning abilities.

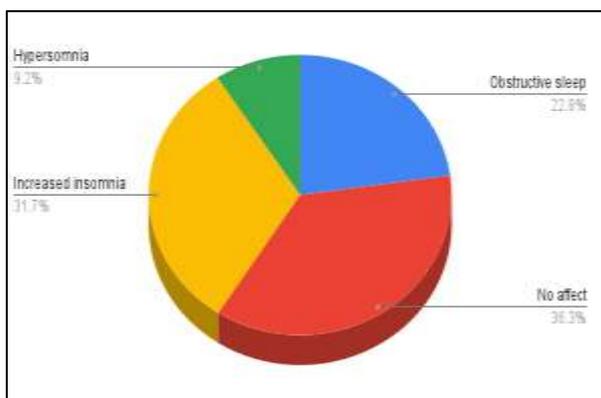


Figure 4: Impact of COVID on sleep.

The biggest source of stress amongst the university students was the fear of graduation and job about 43.1%, 22.7% reported class and workload to be the source of stress while 13.7% reported no contact with friends and about 12.5% said examination.

Learning abilities

The shut-down of colleges has hampered the learning abilities of students considerably. 77.8% students reported that their education was affected by the covid-19 pandemic. 52.1% students reported that their syllabus for the academic year was incomplete. As there are no normal classes, the study schedule has been affected. 34.3% reported that the learning abilities were somewhat worse than before, 12.4% reported it was much worse than before. However, 37.2% reported that there was not much change. 16.1% said their learning abilities were much better than before. 70.5% said they felt uncertainties about their future whereas 66.7% feel this lockdown has affected their career opportunities.

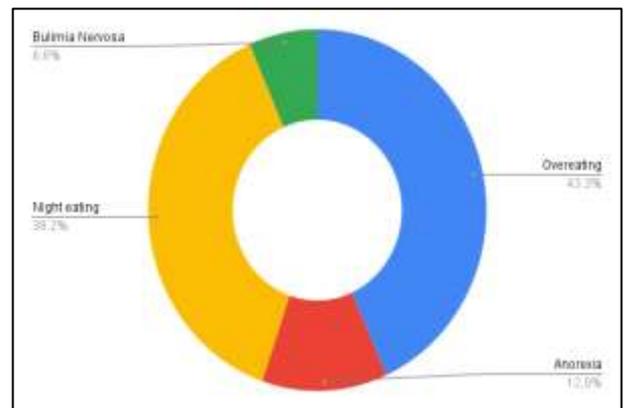


Figure 5: Impact of COVID on eating habits.

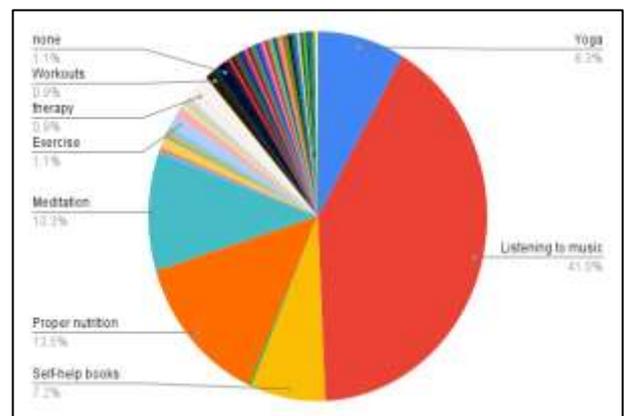


Figure 6: Steps taken to overcome stress.

Emotional health of students

Out of the total respondents of the survey about 36.6% reported that their health was somewhat worse than before whereas 12% said it was much worse than before. However, 34.3% said there was no effect on their health and 9% reported an improvement. On the other hand, when asked how often they were bothered by having little to no interest in doing things, a considerable percentage of students responded (54%) said they were often not

interested in doing activities like before the covid pandemic.

Sleeping schedule and eating habits

The covid-19 pandemic has caused major changes in the sleeping habits of the students. As there is a lack of schedule, students are facing various sleep related disorders. A large majority of about 31.7% reported increased insomnia, 22.8% suffered from obstructive sleep and 9.2% had hypersomnia. When asked how has the pandemic affected their sleep students responded that they were now sleeping much more or were not sleeping enough, a lot of students concluded that sleep changes were due to increased screen time which completely changed their schedule. Majority of students reported that the sleep was now inconsistent compared to before the pandemic.

Steps taken to overcome stress

Various methods were used by students to overcome stress due to the covid-19 pandemic like listening to music, yoga and meditation were the most preferred. Other steps like reading self help books, workouts, eating nutritious food were common.

DISCUSSION

According to the results obtained from the study it was reported that there was an increase in stress (30%), anxiety (23%) and depression (12%) these results were slightly lower than the student population observed Essadek et al.⁶ Eating habits were seen to be affected the most as it was observed that overeating increased by 43% which corroborated with the results reported by Sidor et al.⁷ Sleeping pattern was also largely affected and insomnia and sleep obstruction were the most common as seen in the study performed by Chaturvedi et al.⁸

Limitations

Although the response rate of the study was good but a bias is likely in case the pupils were too stressed or anxious during the time of response. It should also be stressed that the number of men were underrepresented which is the case in most of the online surveys. Moreover, the existing questionnaire used simplified approach to provide general conclusions. Finally, while the study provides an overview on the general mental health of the students the data cannot be corroborated as long-term effect and must use with caution.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the pandemic has deteriorated the mental health of the students to a considerable degree. Most students had a uncertainty about their future which has made them more anxious. The need of the hour is to have appropriate intervention by mental health professionals and mentors in order to help students deal with the repercussions of the pandemic.

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Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee

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