

Chapter 9

Insights Into Mental Health Challenges Among University Students: An Overview


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ABSTRACT

University students are particularly prone to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, in part due to their transition to emerging adulthood and higher education. Recent studies have established that a considerable number of students go through mild-to-severe episodes of depression, anxiety, and stress during their university years. Despite the exponential increase in interest in this problem, an integrated overview is still lacking. The initial sections of the present review aim to: (i) give an updated view of the state of the art regarding university students' mental health; (ii) present the prevalence and associated consequences of mental health issues, (iii) identify the risk and protective factors; and (iv) summarize the types of interventions available. The concluding section focuses on making recommendations for the future and proposes new research directions based on the identified literature gaps, namely courses of action, help-seeking behaviours and mental health literacy, and positive mental health.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been described as a growing priority for decades since related conditions contribute to poor health outcomes and lead to very considerable economic losses worldwide. Despite this increased attention, there has been limited commitment and funding for sustained implementation (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). University students represent a disproportionately affected group, as they are particularly susceptible due to their life cycle and the transitional circumstances into higher education. For this reason, interest in the mental health and well-being of this population has grown exponentially (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020), although there is still a pressing need for combined efforts to tackle this issue, as we will further demonstrate.

The concept of mental health has changed and evolved over time. At the turn of the century, it was suggested that it should be more than the mere absence of mental illness, being defined as "...a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity" (U.S. Public Health Service, 1999, p. 4). A few years later, WHO (2004, p. 10) conceptualized it as "...a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community". Although the concept has progressed beyond the absence of mental disorders (psychopathology) into a positive state, generally it appears as if the presence or absence of mental illness is still the most common reference when it comes to operationalizing mental health.

The main objective of the present narrative review is to illustrate and summarize the state of the art regarding university students' mental health, identifying its prevalence, protective and risk factors, and consequences, while duly presenting this phenomenon in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we will outline some available interventions and recommendations for the future and propose other research directions.

University Students' Mental Health

The shift from adolescence to emerging adulthood occurs during the college years, which is a crucial developmental stage for young people (Cuijpers et al., 2019). This represents a distinct period of transition that can be defined by increased autonomy from parents (e.g., moving out), significant variations in social roles, and relational instability (Auerbach et al., 2018). In particular, their admission to higher education is marked by change, uncertainty, and the need to adapt in order to deal with numerous challenges (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). University students (especially

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