


Chapter 4

A Systematic Review of Mental Health and Productivity Challenges and Navigating Turbulence in Academia


S. Baranidharan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7780-4045>
Christ University, Bangalore, India


M. Sridevi

*Christ Academy Institute for Advanced Studies,
India*

N. Krishnaveni

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2621-6543>
Nirmala College for Women, India

Chippy Mohan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8589-4944>
Christ University, India

S. V. Pradeep Kumar

Christ University, India

D. Sandhya

Christ University, India

Priya Vinod

Christ University, India

Rahul R. Kurup

Christ University, India

ABSTRACT

This study examines academic mental health and productivity through a systematic and thematic literature review of research published from 2019 to 2025, with a focus on the impact of COVID-19. Searches in Scopus, Ebsco, ProQuest, Science Direct, and Google Scholar identified key challenges, including stress, burnout, and work-life imbalances, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. Systemic barriers such as inadequate funding, fragmented support, and rigid institutional policies further disrupted academic productivity. Vulnerable groups, including academic mothers, doctoral candidates, minority students, and early career researchers, faced disproportionate burdens. Additionally, academic writing productivity declined, and excessive media use negatively impacted attention spans and mental health. While interventions such as peer support systems, flexible work policies, and co-designed mental health initiatives have been proposed, existing approaches remain fragmented and insufficient for long-term solutions and targeted interventions to improve academic mental health and productivity.

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INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of academic excellence has long been revered as a noble endeavor in a world where intellectual curiosity thrives, innovation is nurtured, and society's brightest minds seek to advance knowledge for the greater good. While, behind the esteemed image of academia lies a more complex and often overlooked reality: an environment riddled with pressures, systemic imbalances, and emotional strain. In recent years, particularly accelerated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conversations around mental health and productivity within academic settings have shifted from being whispered concerns to urgent discourses demanding collective attention. The turbulence faced by students, researchers, faculty, and academic administrators alike has exposed the deep-rooted vulnerabilities of academic ecosystems, where high expectations, precarious career trajectories, and institutional demands often collide with personal well-being. Mental health in academia is not a new concern, but its visibility has markedly increased. The traditional perception of the academic as an isolated, hyper-focused scholar burning the midnight oil in pursuit of the next breakthrough has romanticized a culture of overwork and underappreciation. Yet, the psychological toll of such expectations has become alarmingly evident. Across the globe, studies have consistently shown elevated levels of anxiety, depression, burnout, and imposter syndrome among academic populations. Graduate students, in particular, have been highlighted as a vulnerable group. A 2018 study published in *Nature Biotechnology* reported that graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population. Similar patterns have emerged among early-career researchers and tenured professors, many of whom grapple with funding insecurities, administrative overload, and diminishing work-life boundaries.

At the heart of this crisis is the often-invisible weight of academic productivity. In an environment where publishing, grant acquisition, student performance metrics, and institutional rankings dominate, the pressure to produce is constant and often unrelenting. This productivity model, while intended to drive innovation and excellence, has inadvertently fostered a culture where quantity can overshadow quality, and mental exhaustion becomes a collateral consequence. Academics find themselves trapped in cycles of performance anxiety chasing deadlines, fearing rejection, and silently battling the sense of not doing enough. The term "publish or perish" is not merely a slogan; for many, it represents a lived experience of professional precarity and personal sacrifice. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a magnifying lens, intensifying pre-existing challenges and bringing mental health into sharper focus. With campuses closing, research projects halted, and teaching moved online, academics were suddenly thrust into unfamiliar modes of operation. The lines between professional and personal spaces blurred as homes became classrooms, laboratories, and offices. Simultaneously, caregivers juggled responsibilities without adequate support, while international scholars faced isolation, visa uncertainties, and cultural dislocation. The pandemic underscored a truth that many had long felt but seldom voiced: that academia, for all its intellectual rewards, can be a deeply isolating and emotionally taxing place. Importantly, mental health challenges in academia are not evenly distributed. Intersectional factors such as gender, race, socio economic background, and disability status intersect to create unique barriers for marginalized groups. Women, for example, often face the double burden of academic responsibilities and caregiving roles, leading to higher burnout rates. Scholars from underrepresented ethnic groups frequently report experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, and a lack of institutional support. For disabled academics, structural inaccessibility and ableist attitudes remain pervasive. Understanding the mental health landscape in academia, therefore, requires an inclusive lens, one that acknowledges the diversity of experiences and the systemic inequities that underpin them.

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