

## Art and Music in Reducing COVID-19 Stress among College Students

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the student's life in enormous ways from shutting down of the educational institutions to remaining confined in the four-walls of the house for several months. The present qualitative study tries to understand the role of Art and Music in reducing the stress faced by the students during the pandemic. The present study comprises five open ended questions relevant to the aim of the study. The five open ended questions were completed by 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Thematic analysis was used to identify the following themes, namely: Stay-at-home orders, Uncertainty about the future, Impact of negative news, feeling of desolation and Art and Music: an escape. The results of the study showed that Art and Music were greatly used as a strong coping mechanism towards the situation. And also, the study delves into the integration of Art and Music into the wellness programs for college students for their betterment and providing a sense of connection, expression and creativity.

**Keywords:** Art, Music, COVID-19, Stress, Wellness, Betterment

**S**tress is an unpleasant emotional state accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioural alterations meant to change the stressful event or adapt to its effects. According to Selye (1956), "stress refers to the results of anything that poses a significant threat to homeostasis". The "stressor" is the actual or imagined danger to an organism, and the "stress response" is the organism's reaction to the stressor. Selye recognised that strong, sustained stress reactions could result in tissue damage and disease, even though stress responses have developed as adaptive processes.

One of the most typical human experiences is being exposed to stressful circumstances. These kinds of circumstances might include everything from normal daily irritations to unanticipated tragedies (such illness, bereavement, or natural disasters). However, stressors may encourage physiological and behavioural problems regardless of how severe they are, from psychiatric diseases to immune system failure (Brown 1993). (Herbert and Cohen 1993).

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Received: April 26, 2023; Revision Received: May 03, 2023; Accepted: May 06, 2023

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Stress is characterised as a process in which the demands of the environment create a strain on an organism's capacity for adaptation, leading to both psychological demands and biological changes that could put the organism at risk for illness. Stressors are things that make us anxious. Everyone is impacted by stress, young and old, wealthy and poor. Life is a stressful place. We must all learn to deal with stress because it is a constant in life. It comes in all kinds and sizes; even our thoughts have the power to stress us out and increase our susceptibility to disease. Environmental stress, psychological (emotional) stress, and biological stress are three ideas or viewpoints on stress.

There are many different contributing causes to the multifaceted stress that college students experience (Reddy et al., 2018; Karyotaki et al., 2020). An increasing body of evidence indicates that academic stress contributes significantly to college retention (Misra and McKean, 2000; Dusselier et al., 2005; Elias et al., 2011; Bedewy and Gabriel, 2015; Hj Ramli et al., 2018; Reddy et al., 2018; Pascoe et al., 2020). For instance, a poll of college students in the United States found that up to 87% of them said that their main cause of stress came from their studies (American Psychological Association, 2020). Academic stressors that are new to college students include a heavy course load, intense studying, time management, classroom competition, financial worries, family demands, and adjusting to a new environment (Reddy et al., 2018; Liu, C. H., et al., 2019; Freire et al., 2020; Karyotaki et al., 2020; Misra and Castillo, 2004; Byrd and McKinney, 2012; Ekpenyong et al., 2013; Bedewy and Gabriel, 2015; Ketchen Lipson et al., 2015; Pedrelli et al.) Academic stress can lower motivation, impede academic success, and increase the number of college dropouts (Pascoe et al., 2020).

There is a mental health crisis as a result of the coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) pandemic, which is a significant stressor (American Psychological Association, 2020; Dong and Bouey, 2020). The COVID-19 epidemic has caused considerable changes and disruptions in college students' daily lives, as well as increased stress levels and degradation in their mental and physical health (American Psychological Association, 2020; Husky et al., 2020; Patsali et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Clabaugh et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Lopes and Nihei, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). While all college students are susceptible to these pressures, minority group members have it far worse (Salerno et al., 2020; Clabaugh et al., 2021; McQuaid et al., 2021; Prowse et al., 2021; Kodish et al., 2022). Finding pupils that need help the most risk offers chances to provide assistance, resources, and mental health treatments to particular subgroups.

During the pandemic, adults' use of music for emotional control and stress management appeared to be a cross-cultural phenomenon (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021, Finnerty et al., 2021, Ribeiro et al., 2021, Vidas et al., 2021, Ziv and Hollander-Shabtai, 2021). In a Brazilian descriptive study, 494 adults increased their daily music consumption and used it to control their mood, enhance cognitive function, elevate their mood, and engage in physical activity (Ribeiro et al., 2021). The use of music as a coping mechanism was shown to be more prevalent among participants with severe depression than among non-depressed participants, which is interesting (Ribeiro et al., 2021). Nearly 200 people in Israel who took part in the study (N = 200) said they listened to more music in the past year compared to earlier months, it was used more frequently and in larger quantities during the pandemic as an emotion-regulation technique. In other words, they thought that listening to music more frequently helped them cope with the negative consequences of the crisis by elevating their mood, boosting their energy, and relaxing (Ziv & Hollander-Shabtai, 2021).

Similarly, Art also played a huge role as a coping strategy for college students during the pandemic. As everyone were locked inside the four walls as per the government regulations there was not much to do. Schools, colleges and other institutions were shut down students shifted their attention more towards creative things. Such as, writing and painting, Crafts, leisure reading etc. Thus, Art and Music played an important role during the Covid-19 for college students. This study emphasises on how and in what way it helped students with various types of stressors arising during the period of Pandemic.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Jennifer Fiore (2018)** conducted a study on Exploring the Use of an Online Pre-Composed Receptive Music Experience for Students Coping with Stress and Anxiety. This research investigated whether music therapy students' stress and anxiety levels may be reduced through the use of an online receptive music experience. It also sought to see whether any particular musical aspect was thought to be more helpful in reducing stress and anxiety. A study that was conducted online involved 23 participants, including music therapy undergraduate and graduate students. The Spielberger State Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), the Stress Overload Scale (SOS), and a post-experience survey regarding the usefulness of musical elements were used as measurements. According to the findings, students' stress and anxiety levels significantly decreased after their receptive music experience.

**Carolyn Moore and Lindsey. A Wilhelm (2019)** conducted a Survey of Music Therapy Students' Perceived Stress and Self-Care Practices. The purpose of the study was to guide future research in this field, this study looked at how stressed-out music therapy students felt and how they took care of themselves. This study was carried out by music therapy students (n = 371) who were presently enrolled in academic degree programmes for music therapy in the United States. The Perceived Stress Scale and a modified Student Self-Care Scale were used as measurement tools (SSCS). Students were given access to the online poll by academic programme directors. The outcomes showed that the internal consistency of both scales was adequate to good. Eight characteristics relating to academic and personal self-care practises were identified by an exploratory factor analysis of the SSCS as being important to music therapy students' self-care.

**Rachael Finnerty et al. (2021)** conducted a study on Extra-Curricular Activities and Well-Being: Results from a Survey of Undergraduate University Students During COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions. It has been discovered that participating in extracurricular activities is related to improved wellbeing. The researchers looked at the activities that university students at a Canadian university engaged in during the strained COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in April 2020, which fell during a novel online exam period, and how these activities related to perceived well-being, anxiety (STAI-S), social aspects of activities, and personality. The sample size for this study was 786 students. 65 percent of students received a high anxiety level on the STAI-S, which is concerning given that just 24 percent of them sought out professional assistance. This is in line with findings that the assistance offered on college campuses nowadays are insufficient. The most common activities were watching movies or television shows (92%), listening to music (92%), and social media use (89%).

Students gave somewhat varied ratings for the activities that were most beneficial to their wellbeing, with outdoor exercise receiving the highest marks, followed by online socialising and listening to music. All activities were considered beneficial, but those that had a social element frequently received high ratings, which is consistent with students' attempts to make up for missed social encounters.

**Dianna Vidas et al. (2021)** conducted a study on the topic Music Listening as a Strategy for Managing COVID-19 Stress in First-Year University Students. Several university students academic surroundings, working conditions, and social support. According to research with young people, listening to music is one of their best coping mechanisms for stress. The effectiveness of music listening during COVID-19 compared to other stress management strategies, whether music listening for stress management was related to well-being, and whether differences emerged between domestic and international students were all investigated in this survey of 402 first-year Australian University students (73.9% female, M age = 19.6; 75% domestic and 25% international). The authors also asked participants to recommend a song that helped them deal with the stress of the COVID-19 and looked at its characteristics. One of the best ways to deal with stress was to listen to music, and was as helpful as moving locations, sleep, and exercise. The effectiveness of music listening as a coping mechanism was associated with improved wellbeing but not COVID-19-related stress levels.

**Ridwan Islam Sifat, et.al (2022)** conducted an explorative study on the topic the Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of school-going adolescents: insights from Dhaka city, Bangladesh. This exploratory study chose a qualitative approach that included 60 respondents in in-depth interviews as a means of gathering data. In the Bangladeshi capital city of Dhaka, this study seeks to shed light on the factors that contribute to teenage mental dissonance as well as the effects of infection prevention strategies, such as lockdowns, on adolescent mental health. This study offers a potential solution for this dilemma as well. According to the report, factors that halt negative impacts on adolescents' mental health include prolonged school closures, fear of sickness, disruptions in the classroom, excessive use of digital gadgets, and the culture of disregarding adolescents' mental health. During the lockdown, adolescents experienced mental health problems such stress, anxiety, sadness, and sleeping abnormalities.

**Hernandez-Ruiz E (2022)** conducted a study on Music to decrease anxiety in college students. during the COVID-19 pandemic College students' mental health has reportedly been significantly impacted during this time. The study examined how a previously studied musical event affected the anxiety levels of 36 college students studying performing arts. Pre-intervention anxiety levels were high, whereas post-intervention anxiety levels were significantly lower and normal. These findings demonstrate the viability of theoretically sound, brief music experiences to alleviate severe distress in vulnerable people, while a limited sample size necessitates caution in generalisation.

**Anthony Chmiel et al. (2022)** conducted a study on Creativity in lockdown: Understanding how music and the arts supported mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic by age group. The study investigated in order to assist their mental health during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns, Australians in four different age groups (18–24, 25–34, 35–54, and 55+) participated in ACAs, which were the subject of this study. Between May and October 2020, participants (N = 653) who were drawn from the general public filled out an online survey in which they indicated which ACAs they had used throughout the pandemic using a pre-established list. The success of the undertaken ACAs in helping the participants "feel better" was then rated by the participants, and those who had participated in musical ACAs also completed the Musical Engagement Questionnaire (MusEQ). Also, assessments of symptoms of anxiety (GAD7) and depression (PHQ9) were made, and potential changes across four different factors—age, activity, gender, and state/territory of residence—were looked at. Younger participants in the ACA largely rated those over 55 regarded non-musical activities,

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with the exception of singing, as the most effective, whereas younger adults rated musical activities as the most effective. All six MusEQ subscale evaluations, which strongly suggested that the youngest participants (ages 18–24) used music during the pandemic in ways that were significantly different from participants in all other age groups, corroborated these disparities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Problem:***

To identify the role of art and music in reducing levels of stress among college going students during the pandemic.

#### ***Objectives:***

- To find out the role of art and music in reducing the stress arising during the pandemic among college students.
- To identify the different kind of stressors that increased the levels of stress among college students during COVID-19.

#### ***Research questions:***

- How has Art and Music helped college going students improve their moods and decrease their levels of stress?
- What is the different kind of stressors arising due to the advent of COVID-19 pandemic?
- What could be the potential benefits of incorporating art and music into wellness programs for college students?

#### ***Need and significance of the study:***

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a lot of problems along with its prevalence. There was a lot of chaos all around. People were falling sick some were losing their parents, their loved ones. All around there was a very distressful situation all around. And in the midst of all these there were college students who were under a lot of pressure and stress. The first their physical classes and classrooms were shut down, there was no connection with their peers, they were not able to move out of the house, their career was under danger. All these contributed a lot towards various kind of stress among college going students. In this situation Art and Music played a major role in helping students cope with the ongoing situation. It helped them calm down and be more composed during the period of the pandemic.

#### ***Sampling:***

A sample is any number of persons selected to represent the population according to some rule or plan. Thus, a sample is a smaller representation of the population. For this study, Purposive Sampling Technique is used. This sampling technique, also known as judgemental sampling, focuses on the researcher's judgement when determining and choosing the people, cases, or events that can provide the most information for achieving the study's purposes.

#### ***Participant description:***

For the present study, 20 participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Among the 20 participants 25% are male and 75% are female. All the participants are college going students who are currently pursuing undergraduate degree and postgraduate degree. All the participants were asked to fill the Informed Consent form and before

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collecting the data audio informed consent was also taken. The participants were also made aware that their information will remain confidential and it will be used for research purpose.

### ***Procedure:***

For this study, a one-to-one interview schedule with open ended questions was organised. Before the interview the participants were asked to fill the Informed Consent form. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions that were tape-recorded were used to obtain the data. Additionally, observations and daily notes have been recorded. While conducting the interviews, every effort was made to assist the participants in explaining their experiences without changing the direction of the conversation. Additionally, the participants' actions and remarks during the interviews were noticed and noted.

The 5 open-ended questions are mentioned below: -

1. How have Art and Music influenced your overall wellbeing during the pandemic?
2. What were the instances that made you stressed during the Pandemic?
3. Can you describe a specific experience where engaging in Art or Music helped you cope with stress or anxiety during the pandemic?
4. Do you believe that incorporating art and music into mental health and wellness programs for college students would be beneficial? Why or why not?
5. Have you discovered any new creative activities or genres of music during the pandemic that have helped reduce your stress levels?

### ***Data Analysis:***

Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to explore the participant's responses to 5 Open ended questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) define Thematic Analysis as a "method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (theme) in the data.

Thematic Analysis is a method of analysing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interview or transcripts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. It provides a special sense of the information through repeatedly handling of the data.

Braun and Clarke recommended the following rules when conducting thematic analysis:

- Familiarisation with the data
- Generate initial codes
- Search of themes
- Review of themes
- Define and name themes
- Produce the report.

**Table 1 Process of Thematic Analysis**

Phase	Description of Process
1 .Familiarizing with the data	Use of transcribing process to note down initial ideas Read and re-read data to identify ideas
2 .Generating initial codes	Interesting data were highlighted in a systematic way Data collated and comments tagged
3 .Defining and naming interpretive codes for entire data set into themes	Collate codes into possible themes with close reference to RQs; gathered relevant data to each possible theme
4 .Identifying patterns across all data to derive themes for data set	Cross-check if themes worked in relation to the codes and generate a thematic map of the analysis to address the key areas identified by the RQs
5 .Defining and naming themes	Themes are being refined as the coding process continues

*Adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006*

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, in order to obtain the main objective, 20 undergraduate and postgraduate students were interviewed. Among the 20 participants 15 were female (75%) and 5 were male (25%). Their age ranges from 19-23 years. The details of the participant are given in Table no2.

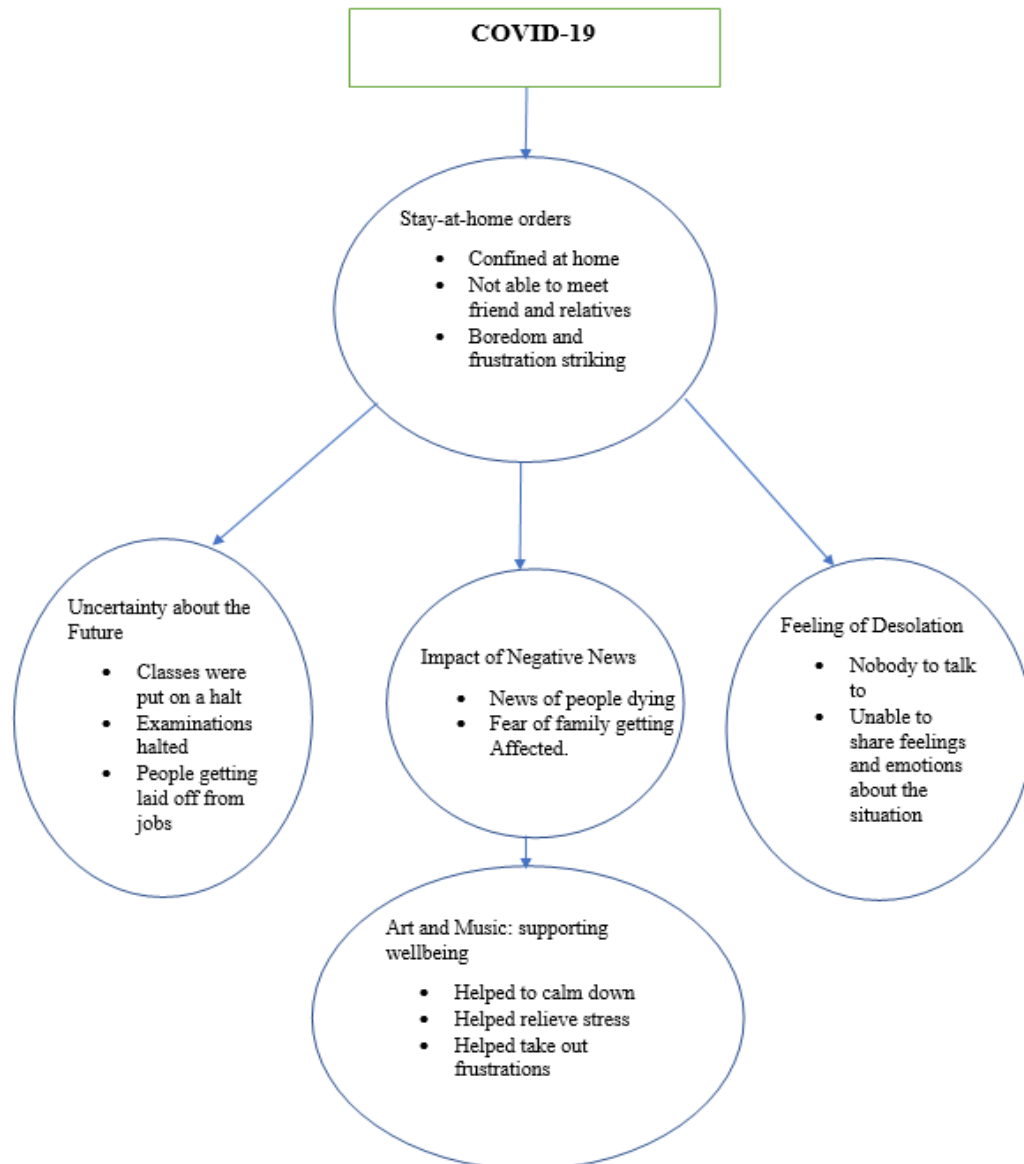
**Table 2 Details of the participants.**

No.	Age	Education
1	22	undergraduate
2	23	postgraduate
3	19	undergraduate
4	22	postgraduate
5	22	postgraduate
6	23	Postgraduate
7	23	postgraduate
8	22	postgraduate
9	23	Postgraduate
10	22	postgraduate
11	22	postgraduate
12	22	postgraduate
13	21	undergraduate
14	20	undergraduate
15	22	postgraduate
16	21	undergraduate
17	22	postgraduate
18	23	postgraduate
19	22	postgraduate
20	22	postgraduate

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After interviewing all the participants, the recorded audio was transcribed into written document and were read until an original idea was obtained. After familiarising with the data, we generated 62 initial codes which included concepts such as, feeling anxious, unsure about the future, not being able to go out, news of people dying, family members getting affected. The next step was to find appropriate themes among the codes. Analysis of all the 62 codes brought out 5 main themes. The main themes included: Stay-at-home orders, Uncertainty about the future, feeling of desolation and Negative news affecting mental health.

*Schematic diagram showing five different themes.*



**1. Stay-at-home orders:** After the sudden rise of the virus in the nation government put forward stay-at-home orders. Everything was shut down. Nobody was allowed to move out of the house except for frontline workers. People got locked inside the four walls of the house. These orders affected the students in a lot of ways.

Participant no.10: “I just had to stay with my confined family members and I couldn't meet my friends or anyone that one was a very difficult task for me”.



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Participant no.19: “So first of all, obviously we were in the four walls only. We were not allowed to go outside. And because of that I was so frustrated because all the time, usually I used to go out most of the time and during pandemic we were inside the four walls. Staying inside the four walls for a long period of time is not actually. Possible”.

Participant no.2: “Unable to work, basically unable to go to college and not being able to perform or work. So not being able to get out of home even while wanting to. That felt like you know basically and kind of in a jail basically”.

**2. Uncertainty about the future:** Due to COVID-19 pandemic all the educational institutions, workplaces, factories, shops, everything was shut down because of the rapid spread of the deadly virus. To adjust to the sudden change was a tedious task for everyone. Specially students because all the physical classes were turned into online classes and at the same time it was difficult to adjust to the new mode of learning. Exams were not happening properly; classes were also put on halt. There was also news where people were getting laid off from their jobs.

Participant no. 20: “so, since I was in college and I was about to graduate from a bachelor's, so the most thing that worried me was time was going out of my hand and I need to get an admission somewhere to, you know, either study further or get a job. So the most stressful part was this”.

Participant no.1: “So, the main thing is me being a college student back then, we weren't having any proper classes and also, we used to see, I used to see people on the news that people were getting laid off by their companies and that kind of made me scared because I was in my final year with no jobs and nothing at all and that used to trigger me a lot, especially anxiety”.

Participant no. 18: “One thing was I was uncertain about my future. I was like whether will we will I be able to meet people, can I go out, will I catch covid and will I be able to do my post-graduation or will I be able to work? That was my major concern, yeah”.

**3. Impact of Negative news:** The virus was so deadly that it left thousands of people dying. And all these news of people dying every day, every hour all around the world. Was itself very distressing. And on top that one's fear of any of the family members getting affected was it making more worse. This kind of news was not letting anybody cope with the situation in a good way. Everything was so distressing nothing remained normal anymore.

Participant no 17: “I mean something that stressed me out to us seeing other people, like people in my community going through this disease and then people like calling up my parents and telling them the news that their relatives have died or their relatives are in serious conditions. And also, in my family I have 2 elderly people who live. My grandparents live with us. So that was another thing to explain to them what was going on and to get them to understand that this is what's going on and you cannot go out”.

Participant no.12: “Instances when you say that, like my father felt sick, he got covid. So, during that time it was very serious. So, we got admitted to ICU and all this stuff happened. So, this was, this was over a period of a month and that really should feel bad”.

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Participant no.3: “That was the time when. Also, with the booming of social media, it was also it was a time when every negative news was in front of our face. All the number of deaths, the number of deaths that were rising each day and also the number of infected people that were right rising each day. And not only that, especially if there were elder members of the family and also if there are frontline workers in the family. Especially Umm frontline workers having an elder member of the family is a risk in itself”.

**4. Feeling of Desolation:** Remaining confined in the four walls of the house gave rise to a lot problem. The quarantine phase had such negative toll on everybody that people started feeling lonely and desolated. Because of the lack communication and not being able to see each other physically put aa lot of people into feeling lonely and isolated.

Participant no.1: “So, there was this phase during the pandemic where I had no one to talk to, none. All of my friends there were busy playing a video game hymns or like doing some others stuff, things like that and I had no want to talk to”

Participant no.2: “you know, you feel kind of lonely. You need somebody to talk to and then like when you feel attached to that one person, so and then you do not get to meet that person, it that really hurts”.

Participant no.11: “So, because of my family financial, financial thing makes me more anxious and sadder and I got into depression also. And then I never met my friends once because that makes me more anxious. I was in my room only. I was speaking to my father and mother and brother only. I went to terrace. OK that is. That makes me more stress”.

**5. Art and Music: supporting wellbeing** – All of the above-mentioned issues were so intense that it really affected the people mentally and emotionally. Because getting locked inside our homes, not getting to meet other people, not getting to go to schools, colleges or to work is something that nobody would prefer.

Thus, Students in order to take a break from the situation around used music and art as a very good coping mechanism to deal with the situation. Art and Music are a great way for expressing one’s feelings. Through Art we can express what we are not able to express with the help of words. Abstract knowledge, ideas, untold emotions can be brought out with the help of expressive Art. Music helps us De-stress, calms us down and rejuvenate us altogether. Student life can be a little overwhelming and especially during the time like COVID-19 pandemic in which music can do wonders.

Participant no.12: “I can recall indulging into music more because that was only way of escaping from whatever is happening in my house and shutting down for few hours or minutes and I need not thinking about anything else, so that's how music really helped me cope”.

Participant no.1: “music has helped me get through the pandemic a lot because it's not just about listening to me music, but it was also about playing musical instrument at the same time because that helped me calm down a lot during those days”.

Participant no.6: “So, I feel like drawing for me has been a very good thing because that's like it's all about me. I'm doing what I love doing and that makes me happier than anything. So, in a way it's really nice to do it for myself”.

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In response to the fourth question, there was a lot of positive response towards the question in regards of the incorporation of Art and Music into mental health and wellness programs for the students. Since students' life is full of assignments, examinations, deadlines, other related academic activities and lot more which makes it hectic and sometimes give rise to academic anxiety. Thus, through the incorporation of Art and Music into the curriculum will let students to calm themselves, explore their levels of creativity which will help the young adults to flourish in a holistic and a full-fledged manner.

There are also studies conducted by Dianna Vidas et.al (2021), Hernandez-Ruiz E (2022), Ridwan Islam Sifat, et.al (2022), Anthony chmeil et.al (2022) which supports the findings of the present study showing the positive effects of Art and Music in bringing mental wellbeing and managing stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Limitations**

The major limitation of the study is that the number of boys recruited for the study was much less than girls with 25% of males and 75% of females which shows a gender biasness in regards findings of the study.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present qualitative study shows the role of Art and Music in reducing the stress levels of college going students during the time of COVID-19 pandemic. This study has identified five themes which gives us a clear picture of the issues faced by the students and the role of Art and Music in helping students cope with the situation which was very stressful and harsh for the mankind. Art and Music can help people in many different ways such as helping in easing the feeling arising out of anxiety, improving mental and emotional wellbeing, increasing the creativity level of the students, building resilience in times of crisis. Some students even make use of music in order to make themselves mindful and aware while studying. Thus, we come to know that Art and Music are of utmost importance in the lives of students in bringing some relaxation and sense of comfort amidst the busy and hectic schedule.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Ghimire, P. & Sinha, A. (2023). Art and Music in Reducing COVID-19 Stress among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 11*(2), 780-791. DIP:18.01.081.20231102, DOI:10.25215/1102.081