

Prevalence of Generalized Anxiety Disorder among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterised by uncontrollable worry about everyday events and circumstances. The most prevalent mental health condition among college students is anxiety disorder. Many of these illnesses manifest for the first time in adolescence or the first few years of adulthood. In this study, purposive sampling technique was used. Total of 15 college going students from which 13 female and 2 male participants were recruited for this study to understand the prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder among college students. Semi-structured interview method was used for data collection. Five open ended questions were asked to each one of the participants. Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis technique. After analysing the data, four themes were identified. The themes that were identified are: (a) Academic pressure, (b) Degrading health, (c) Family and friend's support, and (d) Art and music: a saviour. The findings show that anxiety is a complicated condition that affects a person's emotions, thoughts, and physiological functions. There are several factors that contribute to generalised anxiety disorder among college students such as academic pressure, health, adjustment in a new environment, and past experiences.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, College Students, Mental Health.*

Anxiety is a common emotion that everyone faces in their day-to-day life and it is completely normal. We feel anxious now and then. For example, we get anxious before doing a new thing and that's completely normal. But when we add a word 'disorder' to it, it is a different thing. Anxiety disorder is one of the common mental health disorders; usually defined as a diffuse, vague, very unpleasant feeling of fear and apprehension. Here the individual remains anxious and gets nervous very easily. They have a feeling of likely to be in danger and always scan their environment for dangers (hypervigilance) and they constantly worry about the future. Along with these symptoms there are also some physiological symptoms too such as the person is restless, unable to relax, tense and visibly shaky. If we talk about cognitive symptoms; they usually lack concentration and overthinks a lot. (Otim, 2021).

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Received: May 04, 2023; Revision Received: May 14, 2023; Accepted: May 16, 2023

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Anxiety is a major problem faced by everyone in their day-to-day life, especially among college students. Poor mental health among college students has been a great cause of concern globally. Previous studies indicate that college students have a higher rate of anxiety and depression than the normal population. In accordance with the survey from Anxiety Disorder Association of America (ADAA), it is found that in universities and colleges there are more students seeking services for anxiety disorders. There are several studies done on the university/college students on this issue. And some studies tend to focus on common mental disorders among medical students it causes is mainly due to academic pressure, sleep disruption, drinking excess caffeine, loneliness and many other personal reasons. It is found that the most common concerns reported by college students in Counselling centres were anxiety, stress and depression. It's been noticed that severe mental health problems can be found among college students' population. Students also suffer from existential anxiety which refers to the feeling of uneasiness about meaning and choices ones makes in their life. College students frequently face stress as a result of growing workloads, poor time management, modifications to food and sleeping routines, and a lack of self-care pauses. The majority of first-year students report feeling stressed throughout the transition to college. Exam preparation, competition for admissions or internships, and attempting to master a lot of material in a short period of time are some situations that can be expected to be stressful. Unpredictable sources of stress can include sudden adjustments, unforeseen difficulties, or terrible experiences. During their time in college, students are expected to make decisions about their professions, academic lives, and the development of new, significant connections. It's common to experience stress and tension every now and then. However, people with anxiety disorders frequently have excessive and ongoing fear and worry about a variety of circumstances, including those that arise in daily life. Anxiety disorder like generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterised by a continuous feeling of fear or anxiety that might interfere with day-to-day activities. It is not the same as occasionally worrying or feeling anxious as a result of demanding life situations. (Alatawi, 2020). For months or perhaps years, people with GAD endure regular anxiety. Includes both physical and mental symptoms: Feeling tense, anxious, or restless, being susceptible to weariness and having trouble focusing, having a bad mood, experiencing headaches, muscular aches, stomach-aches, or other ailments without apparent cause, controlling worries is difficult, experiencing issues with sleep, such as trouble falling or staying asleep. Treatment options include psychiatrically prescribed drugs like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), as well as psychological therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Stressful situations are a significant risk factor for the development of anxiety symptoms and problems with emotion control. Additionally, generalised anxiety symptoms are linked to loneliness, intolerance of ambiguity, concern, and fear.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Farrer., et al (2016) conducted research which aims to study the psychosocial and demographic risk factors for severe depression and generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) among university students of Australia. At a mid-sized Australian university, undergraduate and graduate students were given access to an anonymous online survey. In order to identify significant predictors of major depression and GAD, a variety of psychological and demographic risk factors were evaluated. The result suggests that, in terms of demographic characteristics, students in their first year of undergraduate education were more likely to have depression, while female students, those who moved for college, and those who were under financial hardship were more likely to experience Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In terms of psychological factors, students who have struggled with their body image and lack of confidence are at a much higher risk of developing major depression, and

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GAD risk is also highly correlated with feeling too much pressure to succeed, lack of confidence, and difficulties coping with studies.

Son, C., et al (2020) did a research titled "Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study" was done using interviews with 195 students throughout the country to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students' mental health. Of the 195 students, 138 (71%) said that the COVID-19 pandemic had made them feel more stressed and anxious. Numerous stressors, which have been well-documented, contributed to the students' elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive thoughts. Due to physical distance, fewer social interactions occurred (167/195, 86%), academic performance was more of a concern (159/195, 82%), concentration was difficult (173/195, 89%), sleep patterns were disturbed (168/195, 86%), and fear and worry about one's own health and the health of those they care about (177/195, 91%).

Cao, W., et al (2020) conducted a research to analyse college students' mental health during the covid-19 epidemic. According to the poll, 24.9% of college students reported having anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic. 0.9% of these students reported having severe anxiety, whereas 21.3% reported mild anxiety. On the other side, the increasingly expanding spaces between people brought on by the quarantine might have contributed to the pupils' concern. It is understood that the absence of interpersonal communication increases the risk of anxiety disorders developing and deteriorating. When faced with public health problems, college students' mental health is profoundly impacted, necessitating the attention, assistance, and support of society, families, and institutions of higher learning.

Chrikov, I., et al (2020) conducted a research with the undergraduate and graduate students to analyze the prevalence of mental health disorder during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using the PHQ-2 and GAD-2 screening tools, it was determined that 35% of undergraduates, 32% of graduate and professional students, and 39% of undergraduate and graduate and professional students had major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder, respectively. The prevalence of major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder is higher among low-income students, students of colour, women and non-binary individuals, transgender individuals, gay or lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, asexual, and pansexual individuals, as well as students who are carers. Major depressive disorder and generalised anxiety disorder are more common among undergraduate and graduate students who struggled to adjust to distance learning. In addition, compared to prior years, the pandemic has increased the prevalence of mental health disorders in students. In fact, major depressive disorder is two times more common among graduate and professional students in 2020 than it was in 2019, and generalised anxiety disorder is 1.5 times as common.

Wang, X., et al (2020) conducted a research on "Anxiety and Sleep Problems of College Students During the Outbreak of COVID-19". The purpose of this study was to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected college students psychologically. 3,092 Chinese college students who were quarantined at home because to the COVID-19 pandemic participated in an online questionnaire survey. The Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-Item Scale (GAD-7), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), and the Self-Rating Scale of Sleep (SRSS) were among the survey instruments. 43.7% of the participants, who were college students, reported feeling more stressed than average. Reading the news more frequently (1-3 times; 4-7 times; more than 7 times), having sleep issues, experiencing higher levels of stress, and being careless with the quantity of masks still on hand were all factors linked to anxiety feelings. Postgraduates, reading the news more frequently each day (1-3 times),

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going out more frequently each week (1-3 times), experiencing anxiety symptoms, and experiencing more stress were all factors linked to sleep issues. The daily news being read more frequently (4–7 times), worrying about how many masks were still on the market (1–10; more than 20), experiencing anxiety symptoms, and having trouble sleeping were all factors linked to higher perceived stress. During the COVID-19 outbreak, college students had greater rates of anxiety symptoms, sleep issues, and felt stress. For college students isolated at home, extra consideration should be given to psychological support, especially for those who are at high risk of psychological issues.

Mohamad, N.E., et al (2021) did a research titled “The prevalence risk of anxiety and its associated factors among university students in Malaysia: a national cross-sectional study”. In Malaysia, a cross-sectional study was carried out at a few government and private universities. This study involved 1851 students in all. Self-administered questionnaires pertaining to sociodemographic, academic, and psychological factors were given to the students to complete. The prevalence risk of anxiety among the students was assessed using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) questionnaire. The link between the covariates and anxiety was examined using chi-square analysis, and the predictors were discovered using multivariate logistic regression. In this study, the prevalent risk of anxiety was 29%. The data showed that the academic year was the main predictor of anxiety, followed by financial support for the study, alcohol use, poor sleep, body mass index (BMI), having a close friend at the university, having doubts about the future, being actively involved in society, and having issues with other students and the lecturers.

Talbot, Reilly, and Dogra (2023) conducted a study to examine the rise in anxiety among college students. Interviews were conducted with twelve young women (18–25 years) about anxiety during their transition through university and into adulthood. Three themes were identified: 1) students in a modern world, (2) gendered demands and (3) anxiety of adulting. Analysis demonstrated numerous, transecting and discourse-informed anxieties about modern life. The derogatory term "snowflake" might have a negative effect on the social progress gained in understanding the value of caring for mental health and seeking help. Given that females are more likely than males to experience anxiety disorders, this is particularly concerning for females.

METHODOLOGY

Problem

- To analyse the prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder among college students.

Objective

- To understand the prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder among college students.
- To explore the factors that leads to anxiety among college students.
- To understand how anxiety effects the wellbeing of the students.
- To understand how different individuals cope with anxiety during stressful situations.

Research questions

- How prevalent is generalised anxiety disorder among college students?
- What are the factors that leads up to anxiety among college students?
- How anxiety effects the wellbeing of the students?
- How different individual cope with anxiety during stressful situations?

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Need and significance of the study

Anxiety is a significant issue that affects everyone on a daily basis, but it is particularly prevalent among college students. Globally, there has been a lot of worry about the poor mental health of college students. It was discovered that anxiety, stress, and depression were the top three issues raised by college students at counselling centres. Significant mental health issues have been reported to be prevalent among college students. Thus, the present study aims at understanding the reasons and causes behind the prevailing anxiety among college going students.

Research Design

The study was conducted on college going students whose age range falls under 18-25yrs. The study consists of individual semi structured interview which was conducted face to face. All interviews were conducted by one researcher. The data was analysed using Thematic analysis.

Participant description

The study was conducted using 15 college going students whose age range falls under 18-25yrs. Purposive sampling was employed.

Sampling technique

- The sampling technique used in this study is purposive sampling technique.
- A purposive sampling technique is a collection of non-probability sampling strategies which involve choosing units for your sample based on their possession of specific qualities.

Procedure

Informed consent form was circulated through google forms to those who were interested to participate. After eligibility was established and consent was obtained, participants were invited to the interview session. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before starting the session. The participants were asked open ended questions. The questions are mentioned below:

1. If you can think of an occasion when you have felt stressed, please tell the story of what happened, what lead up to the problem, what you felt during that time?
2. When you had this problem how did you cope with it or what help did you seek?
3. What sort of things made the problem worse?
4. In an ideal world, what sort of help should available according to you? Are there any new ways of coping with problems that you have heard about and might want to try out?
5. At the time of your own stress how could your own general practice have possibly helped you out?

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis was used for data analysis.

A technique for analysing qualitative data called thematic analysis is reading through a collection of data and searching for patterns in the meaning of the data to identify themes. There are five steps which we follow while doing Thematic Analysis. The steps are as follows:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Looking for themes in the codes.
3. Reviewing the themes

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4. Finalising the themes.
5. Writing the final report.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, 15 college going students age ranging from 18-25 were recruited for the study. The participants were 2 male (13.3%) and 13 females (86.7%). Then the participants were asked five open ended questions which gave us the data for further analyses.

The collected data was analysed using the Thematic Analysis technique, while following the steps firstly the recorded information was transcribed into written form. And while going through the data repeatedly, 48 codes were identified and most relevant codes were used as themes for the present study. Four main themes were identified and the themes are: Academic pressure, Degrading health, Support from family and friends and Art and music: a saviour.

Academic pressure: "An experience in which a student is burdened by the demands of time and energy to achieve specific academic goals," according to the definition of academic pressure. Numerous factors may contribute to the stress, which can affect students in a variety of ways both emotionally and academically. College is challenging for many young adults. Some students are concerned about completing their assignment requirements in time. Others are fixated on having a 4.0 GPA. The need for perfection, parental pressure, athletic activities, or a demanding course load can all contribute to academic stress. In young adults, nervous breakdowns, panic attacks, burnouts, and depression are on the rise. And also for staying away from their houses and comfort zones and getting adjusted to an environment where they are supposed to do everything on their own puts a toll in their mental health.

Participant 1: "I'm stressed all the time. First of all, because of academic. we have to do our assignments, projects, do everything, study for exams is the first pressure that makes me so tensed. Second, I've to manage my home as well as my academic. I have to do everything. I've to manage my home as well as my academic, I've to do a lot of stuff. As my brother is really small, I take care of everything and my father is no more so, obviously responsibilities are more...makes me so stressed. With all those stresses academic pressure is also more."

Participant 8: "I got a lot of stress while completing my degree, because we have research, we have so many of the things going around. Also, because of pandemic we have to do so many assignments, tests that made me so anxious ...I've gone through a lot of stress during the time."

Participant 13: "Last time I can vividly remember feeling stressed was when I flunked my test and I was scared that what I would do. how would my parents react to it and how to go about it basically."

Degrading health: Anxiety not only impacts an individual's mental health but it also impacts an individual physical wellbeing. Long-term emotional stress and worry can affect hormone levels and cause a number of health problems like insomnia, decreased immune system functioning, migraine and PCOS. All these health problems were reported by the participants during the interview.

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Participant 7: “So, the first thing is health. My health is not at all okay. I get head ache again and again, my periods are not normal. So, it made me more anxious that period. Because of anxiousness I don’t get periods.”

Participant 2: “I started having a strong headache. I started to have a huge migraine. Usually when I cry a lot and think about it, I get migraine. Recently, I was told that I stress too much about things and my doctor said that I might have an early stage of anxiety.’

Participant 11: “Because of stress I couldn’t sleep properly. I made my sleeping less and then I try to complete my work. I got sick. My migraine hit me and I had to be taken to the hospital. Being sick took more of my time that I could do my work.”

Family and friend’s support: While interviewing the participants it was found that Family and friends played a major role in managing the stress faced by them. It was found that spending quality time with family and friends helped in reducing stress and anxiety. Their support and guidance motivate them to not give up and also helps to calm down during a stressful situation.

Participant 6: “My mother helped me a lot. She is the one who motivates me to complete my work. She is like ‘you can do it; I know about you’. And my teachers are very nice. They help me too. Also, some of my friends motivated me. So, that makes me to do better.”

Participant 14: “I try to think positive that just like how good it has been all these times this time also it will be good only. So, I try to take all things in my control. I seek help generally from my mother. I try to tell her my problem and she is a bit supportive.”

Participant 4: “About my break up, I shared it with my mom and it was her who helped me to come up with it, also my sister. They helped me to come up with it. Because after breakup obviously my mood was not normal and also because it was in my examination time as well. My mom helped me a lot in order to not feel bad about it or think about my break up more rather than study and do well in my examination.”

Music and art: a saviour: There are many ways of coping with stress and anxiety. For each individual their ways of coping with stress are different. But when asked about their general practices of coping with stress, maximum of them reported that music and art therapy helped them a lot in relaxing during stressful situations.

Participant 5: “There are many kinds of art therapies that people can actually you know go and try it out. So, it helps a lot. I try to keep myself away from the thought that is disturbing because if I think about it a lot it will affect me a lot. So, instead of that I try to just shift my attention to a different thing so I start doing painting or instead if I don’t have much time, I rather prefer listening music.”

Participant 14: “Usually when I get stressed, I listen to songs. That’s what I do. When I’m stressed, I want to be left alone. I listened to songs and then I try to pamper myself when I’m stressed and all. Even today I had my exams and it didn’t go well. I was stressed a lot. The first thing I did after coming to my room was listening to songs and I started dancing.”

CONCLUSION

The present qualitative study identifies the potential factors leading to generalised anxiety disorder among college going students. From the above results we can find that there are a lot of factors which can lead to anxiety such as too much pressure young adults faced due to sudden shift in their lifestyle like moving away from their homes for their further higher studies, managing everything on their own, adjusting to a new environment. Along with that the pressure to maintain a decent GPA and other extra co-curricular activities including various assignments and their stressful deadlines. And also, other factors like maintaining interpersonal relationships and bonds with their peer groups and closed ones. Thus, the present study highlights the issues which needs to be looked after in order for the young adults to keep a check on their mental as well as their physical wellbeing.

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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.

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How to cite this article: Baruah, R. & Sinha, A. (2023). Prevalence of Generalized Anxiety Disorder among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(2), 994-1002. DIP:18.01.106.20231102, DOI:10.25215/1102.106