

Research Paper

Understanding Mental Health Related Issues of Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Background: A number of social determinants and pressures, including finances, academic and social inclusion, accessibility to services, embodied belongings, maladaptive and/or harmful behaviours, chronic pain, and mental trauma, have been linked to having a disability and experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and higher instances of mental health related issues or illness (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2012:109; Aneshensel et al., 2013; Dashiff et al., 2009; Groce, 2004; McGorry et al., 2007; Mulvany, 2000; Rose, 2018; Webb et al., 2008; Zaffar, 2021; Zito et al., 2001). Research has demonstrated that providing appropriate supports and services can improve both mental health and academic outcomes for students with disabilities (SwDs) (Emerson, Honey, Madden, & Llewellyn, 2009; Stumbo, Martin, & Hedrick, 2009), but little is known about the specific mental health related issues of this population and strategies to overcome it. This research into the intersections between mental health related issues and disability gives us the opportunity to acknowledge a fundamental social problem and take steps to better the lives of all SwDs. **Objective:** The purpose of the study is to identify the mental health related issues of SwDs and propose possible overcoming strategies. **Method:** This is an exploratory study. The researcher collected data to serve the objective of the study by exploring various secondary literature including books, research papers, thesis, dissertations and periodicals from valid and reliable sources. **Results:** Data revealed that the SwDs, both visibly and invisibly, experience large number of mental health related issues. Data also revealed that compared to students without disabilities, students with disabilities experience more anxiety and academic-related distress, as well as higher rates of suicide ideation, suicide attempts, non-suicidal self-injury and alike problems. **Conclusions:** Students with disabilities experience higher levels of distress in areas that could affect their academic progress, even while SwDs show similar levels of concern in some areas as students without disabilities. Self-harming inclinations are more prevalent generally among SwDs, but more so among particular types of disabilities. Need based support service, counselling and adequate inclusive policy can help us to address the mental health related issues of SwDs.

Keywords: Disability, Mental Health, Intersectionality, Academic Inclusion

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Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It encompasses an individual's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and overall mental state. Good mental health doesn't just mean the absence of mental illness; it also involves the presence of positive factors that contribute to a person's ability to cope with life's challenges, build and maintain relationships, work productively, and make sound decisions (Aneshensel et al., 2013; McGorry, 2007). Mental health can be influenced by various factors, including genetics, brain chemistry, life experiences, and environmental stressors. Just like physical health, mental health exists on a spectrum, ranging from optimal well-being to various levels of distress or mental disorders. Common mental health disorders include anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and more (Mulvany, 2000; Rose, 2018).

Mental health is an essential aspect of overall health and impacts every aspect of a person's life, including their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and relationships. Good mental health is characterized by the ability to handle stress, maintain positive relationships, adapt to changes and challenges, and make informed decisions. It involves having a sense of purpose, self-esteem, and resilience (Aneshensel et al., 2013). Mental health is not just the absence of mental illness; it is about thriving and experiencing a state of well-being. Mental health can be influenced by various factors, including biological, genetic, psychological, and environmental factors. Life experiences, such as trauma, abuse, loss, and discrimination, can also impact mental health. Some common mental health conditions include anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and eating disorders (Aneshensel et al., 2013; Inhorn et al., 2012). However, it's important to remember that mental health exists on a spectrum, and everyone's experiences and challenges are unique. Taking care of mental health involves self-care practices, seeking support from trusted individuals or professionals, and accessing appropriate treatment and resources when needed. This can include therapy, counseling, medication, support groups, and lifestyle changes to promote well-being (Inhorn et al., 2012; McGorry, 2007).

Promoting good mental health is a collective responsibility that requires creating supportive environments, reducing stigma and discrimination, and ensuring access to quality mental health services for all individuals (Inhorn et al., 2012). It is essential to prioritize mental health as part of overall health and well-being, recognizing that it is a fundamental component of leading a fulfilling and meaningful life. Additionally, promoting good mental health involves maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle, seeking support when needed, practicing stress management techniques, engaging in meaningful activities, nurturing relationships, and, if necessary, seeking professional help from mental health professionals such as therapists, counselors, psychologists, or psychiatrists. Awareness and understanding of mental health have grown over time, leading to reduced stigma around seeking help and greater recognition of the importance of mental well-being in overall health and quality of life (Inhorn et al., 2012; McGorry, 2007).

Mental Health: A Global Concern

Mental health is indeed a global concern. Mental health issues impact people across cultures, age groups, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted the significance of mental health on a global scale, and it has been recognized that mental health challenges can have far-reaching implications for individuals, families, communities, and societies as a whole. Several factors contribute to mental health being a global concern:

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- **Prevalence:** Mental health disorders are widespread globally. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health issue at some point in their lives.
- **Impact on Well-being:** Mental health directly affects an individual's overall well-being, quality of life, and ability to function effectively in daily life.
- **Economic Impact:** Mental health issues can lead to decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher healthcare costs, which can impact economies at large.
- **Stigma and Discrimination:** Stigma surrounding mental health often prevents people from seeking help, leading to untreated conditions and increased suffering.
- **Human Rights:** Access to mental health care and treatment is a human right, and ensuring equitable access to services is a global challenge.
- **Conflict and Disasters:** Global events such as conflicts, natural disasters, and public health crises (like the COVID-19 pandemic) can exacerbate mental health issues and create new challenges.
- **Child and Adolescent Mental Health:** The mental well-being of young people is of particular concern as it impacts their development, education, and future potential.
- **Cross-Cultural Considerations:** Different cultures have unique beliefs, practices, and stigmas related to mental health, necessitating culturally sensitive approaches to addressing mental health concerns.
- **Global Collaboration:** Since mental health is a universal issue, collaboration between countries, organizations, and stakeholders is essential to develop effective strategies, policies, and interventions.

Efforts are being made globally to raise awareness about mental health, reduce stigma, improve access to quality mental health care, and incorporate mental health considerations into broader public health and policy initiatives. Advocacy, education, research, and destigmatization are all crucial aspects of addressing mental health as a global concern.

Impact of Good Mental Health on Students with Disabilities

Good mental health has a significant impact on students with disabilities in several ways. Good mental health positively affects academic performance for students with disabilities. It helps them manage stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges that may arise from their disability or the academic environment. Students with good mental health are better able to concentrate, focus, and engage in their studies, leading to improved learning outcomes. It promotes self-confidence and self-esteem in students with disabilities. It helps them develop a positive self-image, recognize their strengths, and believe in their abilities. This, in turn, enhances their motivation, self-advocacy skills, and willingness to take on challenges in their academic pursuits. It contributes to the social and emotional well-being of students with disabilities. It helps them build and maintain positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other members of the school community. Good mental health also supports the development of emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience, enabling students to navigate social interactions and conflicts effectively (Mulvany, 2000). Good mental health equips students with disabilities with effective coping skills and resilience. It enables them to manage the unique challenges they may face due to their disability, such as discrimination, stigma, or physical limitations. Good mental health empowers students to persevere, bounce back from setbacks, and adapt to change, fostering their overall well-being and success. It enhances students' engagement and participation in school activities. It promotes a positive attitude towards learning, active involvement in class discussions, and willingness to participate in extracurricular activities. Students with good mental health are more likely to feel connected

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to their school community and have a sense of belonging. Further, it increases the likelihood that students with disabilities will seek and access the support services they need. It reduces barriers to seeking help, such as stigma or shame, and improves their ability to navigate the school system, advocate for their needs, and access appropriate resources. Good mental health supports students in utilizing accommodations, assistive technologies, and other support services effectively. Good mental health also facilitates personal growth and development for students with disabilities. It enables them to explore their interests, talents, and aspirations, fostering a sense of purpose and direction in life. Good mental health supports students in developing a positive mindset, setting goals, and pursuing their dreams. Thus, by promoting good mental health among students with disabilities, we create an inclusive and supportive educational environment that values their holistic well-being and maximizes their potential. It is essential to prioritize mental health support, provide accessible resources, and foster a culture of understanding and acceptance to ensure the success and overall well-being of students with disabilities.

Disability and Mental Health: Intertwined and Interrelated

Students with disabilities are more likely to experience mental health problems compared to the general population. Several factors contribute to this increased vulnerability. Persons with disabilities often face barriers to social participation, which can lead to social isolation and feelings of loneliness. This isolation can contribute to the development or exacerbation of mental health issues (Inhorn and Wentzell, 2012:109; Aneshensel et al., 2013). Persons with disabilities may face stigma and discrimination, which can negatively impact their self-esteem, self-worth, and mental well-being. This can lead to feelings of shame, exclusion, and a sense of being undervalued by society. Living with a disability can present physical and emotional challenges that can contribute to mental health problems. Chronic pain, limitations in mobility, difficulties in performing daily activities, and the need for ongoing medical interventions can all impact mental well-being (Emerson et al., 2009). Limited accessibility to healthcare, mental health services, and support can make it more challenging for persons with disabilities to access the necessary resources and support for their mental health needs (Zaffar, 2021). This lack of accessibility can further exacerbate their mental health problems. Persons with disabilities are at a higher risk of experiencing trauma and abuse, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and neglect (Zaffar, 2021). These traumatic experiences can lead to the development of mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Persons with disabilities often face barriers to employment and financial independence. The stress of financial instability and dependence can contribute to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Dashiff et al., 2009).

It is important to address the mental health needs of persons with disabilities by providing accessible and inclusive mental health services (McGorry et al., 2007). This includes ensuring that mental health professionals receive training in working with individuals with disabilities, providing accommodations for communication and accessibility, and creating support networks and resources specifically tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities (Mulvany, 2000). Additionally, promoting social inclusion, reducing stigma and discrimination, and advocating for the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities can contribute to better mental health outcomes for this population. It is crucial to recognize and address the unique challenges and barriers faced by persons with disabilities to ensure their mental health needs are effectively met.

Mental Health Related Issues Experienced by Students with Disabilities

Mental health can have a significant impact on students with disabilities, as they often face unique challenges and stressors that can exacerbate mental health issues. Here are some ways in which mental health affects students with disabilities:

- **Stress and Anxiety:** Students with disabilities may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety due to the challenges they face in academic settings. These challenges can include navigating physical barriers, dealing with negative attitudes, managing accommodations, and coping with the additional demands of their disability.
- **Social Isolation:** Students with disabilities might struggle with social isolation and feelings of loneliness. They may encounter difficulties in forming relationships, participating in social activities, and connecting with their peers.
- **Stigma and Discrimination:** Students with disabilities can face stigma and discrimination, which can negatively impact their self-esteem and self-worth. These experiences can contribute to feelings of shame and isolation, leading to mental health struggles.
- **Academic Pressure:** Balancing academic demands with managing a disability can be overwhelming for some students. The fear of not meeting expectations or falling behind academically can contribute to anxiety and stress.
- **Lack of Support:** Inadequate support systems, both within educational institutions and at home, can contribute to mental health challenges for students with disabilities. If they don't receive the necessary accommodations and assistance, it can lead to frustration and a sense of helplessness.
- **Low Self-esteem:** Students with disabilities may struggle with low self-esteem due to the challenges they face in comparison to their peers. They may feel inadequate or stigmatized, which can impact their overall mental well-being.
- **Adjustment Difficulties:** Adjusting to the academic environment, navigating accommodations, and coping with the impact of their disability on their studies can be overwhelming for students with disabilities. This adjustment process can lead to increased stress and anxiety.
- **Social Challenges:** Students with disabilities may encounter difficulties in social interactions and forming relationships with peers. This can contribute to feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and a sense of not belonging.
- **Co-occurring Mental Health Conditions:** Students with disabilities may be at a higher risk of developing co-occurring mental health conditions such as ADHD, anxiety disorders, or mood disorders. These conditions can further impact their academic performance and overall well-being.
- **Transition Periods:** Transitioning between educational levels or from school to post-secondary education or employment can be particularly stressful for students with disabilities. These transitions can disrupt routines and support systems, leading to increased anxiety and uncertainty.
- **Depression:** The combination of disability-related challenges, societal attitudes, and academic pressures can increase the risk of depression for students with disabilities.
- **Body Image and Self-Esteem:** Disabilities that affect physical appearance can lead to body image issues and lower self-esteem, contributing to mental health difficulties.
- **Lack of Access to Resources:** Limited access to mental health resources, such as counseling services or therapies tailored to the needs of students with disabilities, can make it challenging to address mental health concerns effectively.

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It's crucial for educational institutions, families, and society at large to recognize and address the intersection of disabilities and mental health. Creating supportive and inclusive environments, providing appropriate accommodations, fostering peer relationships, and promoting mental health awareness are all essential steps in ensuring the well-being of students with disabilities. Additionally, seeking professional help from counselors, psychologists, and disability support services can provide students with the tools they need to navigate their mental health challenges successfully.

Need to Address Mental Health Issues of Students with Disabilities

Addressing the mental health issues of students with disabilities is crucial for several reasons:

- **Well-being and Quality of Life:** Just like any other students, those with disabilities deserve to experience good mental health and overall well-being. Addressing their mental health needs contributes to a higher quality of life, increased happiness, and a sense of belonging.
- **Improved Academic Performance:** Mental health directly impacts a student's ability to learn, concentrate, and engage in educational activities. By addressing mental health issues, students with disabilities can better focus on their studies and achieve their academic potential.
- **Holistic Development:** Supporting mental health promotes holistic development. Emotional well-being is closely tied to social, emotional, cognitive, and physical growth. By addressing mental health, students with disabilities can thrive in all areas of their lives.
- **Effective Accommodations:** A student's mental health can impact how they interact with and benefit from accommodations. Addressing mental health needs ensures that the provided accommodations are optimally utilized and contribute to their success.
- **Reduction of Stigma:** Addressing mental health issues among students with disabilities helps break down stigma surrounding both mental health and disabilities. This promotes a more inclusive and accepting environment for everyone.
- **Long-Term Outcomes:** The skills and coping mechanisms learned through addressing mental health challenges in school can have positive effects on a student's future. These skills can help them navigate life's challenges, pursue higher education, and enter the workforce successfully.
- **Prevention of Escalation:** Untreated mental health issues can escalate over time, leading to more severe challenges. By addressing these issues early on, schools can prevent potential crises and provide timely support.
- **Social Interaction and Relationships:** Mental health affects a student's ability to build and maintain relationships. Addressing mental health can improve a student's social skills, foster friendships, and reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Equitable Access to Education:** Ensuring students with disabilities have their mental health needs addressed is essential for equitable access to education. It helps create an inclusive learning environment where all students can thrive.
- **Positive School Climate:** When schools prioritize mental health and provide support, it creates a positive and inclusive school climate. This benefits not only students with disabilities but the entire student body.
- **Legal and Ethical Responsibility:** Many laws and regulations, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States, emphasize the importance of addressing the mental health needs of students with disabilities. Schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to provide appropriate support.

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- **Promotion of Mental Health Awareness:** Addressing mental health issues in students with disabilities contributes to a broader societal understanding of the intersection of disabilities and mental health. This can lead to reduced stigma and improved support systems outside of the school environment as well.

Ultimately, addressing mental health issues among students with disabilities is a fundamental step toward creating an inclusive, supportive, and nurturing educational environment that allows every student to reach their full potential.

Strategies to Address Mental Health Related Problems of Students with Disabilities

Addressing the mental health needs of students with disabilities requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that takes into account their unique challenges and circumstances. Here are some strategies to consider:

Promote Inclusivity and Awareness:

- Educate teachers, staff, and students about various disabilities and mental health challenges to foster empathy and understanding.
- Raise awareness about the intersection of disabilities and mental health through workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns.

Provide Accessible Support:

- Ensure that mental health resources, information, and support materials are accessible to students with disabilities. This includes providing information in different formats (e.g., Braille, large print, digital) and using accessible platforms.

Individualized Support:

- Develop individualized mental health support plans for students with disabilities, considering their specific needs and accommodations required.
- Collaborate with disability support services to create a holistic plan that addresses both academic and mental health needs.

Counseling Services:

- Offer counseling services that are sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities. Counselors should have training in disability awareness and accommodations.
- Provide counseling in accessible formats (e.g., sign language interpreters, captioning) and consider the preferences of the student.

Peer Support Programs:

- Create peer mentorship programs where students with disabilities can connect with and receive support from peers who have similar experiences.
- Foster a sense of community and belonging among students with disabilities to reduce feelings of isolation.

Inclusive Activities and Spaces:

- Organize inclusive social activities and events that promote interactions and friendships among all students.
- Design and modify physical spaces to be accessible and accommodating for students with disabilities.

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Collaboration with Families:

- Maintain open communication with families to understand the home environment and provide consistent support.
- Share resources and strategies that families can use to support their child's mental health.

Training for Staff:

- Train teachers, support staff, and administrators on recognizing signs of mental distress in students with disabilities.
- Provide strategies for addressing mental health concerns in the classroom and referring students to appropriate support.

Holistic Approach:

- Address both the mental health and academic needs of students with disabilities, as these aspects are interconnected.
- Collaborate with special education professionals, counselors, therapists, and medical professionals to provide a holistic support system.

Anti-Stigma Campaigns:

- Launch campaigns that challenge stereotypes and reduce stigma around disabilities and mental health.
- Encourage open conversations and create safe spaces for students to discuss their experiences.

Feedback and Evaluation:

- Regularly gather feedback from students with disabilities about their mental health support experiences.
- Use feedback to improve and tailor support services to meet their evolving needs.

Accessible Mental Health Services:

- Ensure that mental health services are accessible and inclusive, providing accommodations for communication and physical accessibility.

Disability-inclusive Counseling:

- Train mental health professionals to understand the unique experiences and challenges faced by students with disabilities and provide appropriate support and interventions.

Peer-support Networks:

- Establish peer support networks or student organizations that promote connection, understanding, and support among students with disabilities.

Accommodations and Support Services:

- Ensure that students with disabilities have access to necessary accommodations, such as extended time for exams, assistive technology, and accessible materials. Additionally, provide support services, such as disability support offices, to assist with navigating the academic environment.

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Education and Awareness:

- Raise awareness among students, faculty, staff, and parents about the mental health challenges faced by students with disabilities. This includes understanding the specific mental health issues that may arise and the potential impact on their academic performance and overall well-being.

Accessibility of Mental Health Services:

- Ensure that mental health services are accessible to students with disabilities. This includes providing accommodations for communication, physical accessibility of counseling offices, and availability of assistive technology and accessible materials.

Disability-inclusive Counseling:

- Train mental health professionals to have an understanding of disabilities and their intersection with mental health. This training should focus on providing appropriate support, interventions, and accommodations to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities.

Collaboration and Communication:

- Foster collaboration and communication between faculty, staff, mental health professionals, and disability support services. This collaboration can help ensure that the unique needs of students with disabilities are understood and accommodated in academic settings.

Prevention and Early Intervention:

- Implement proactive measures to prevent mental health issues and provide early intervention when needed. This can include awareness campaigns, stress management programs, and promoting self-care practices among students.

Inclusive and Supportive Campus Environment:

- Create an inclusive and supportive campus environment that values diversity and promotes understanding and acceptance of students with disabilities. This can include anti-stigma campaigns, promoting inclusive language, and fostering a culture of respect and support.

Collaboration with External Resources:

- Establish partnerships with external resources such as community mental health organizations, disability advocacy groups, and government agencies to ensure comprehensive support for students with disabilities.

By implementing these strategies, educational institutions can create a supportive and inclusive environment that addresses the mental health needs of students with disabilities, promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

CONCLUSION

To conclude it is to submit that mental health is indeed an asset for students with disabilities. By addressing the mental health needs of students with disabilities, educational institutions can equip students with disabilities with resilience, which is the ability to bounce back from challenges and setbacks. Resilience helps students navigate the barriers they face due to their

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disability and persevere in their academic pursuits. A positive mental state can significantly impact a student's outlook and attitude towards their disability and education. It allows them to focus on their strengths, abilities, and potential, fostering a mindset of growth and possibility. Good mental health empowers students with disabilities to advocate for themselves effectively. It helps them develop the confidence and assertiveness to express their needs, seek accommodations, and access the support services necessary for their academic success. Mental well-being enhances students' motivation and engagement in their education. Sound mental health positively influences a student's ability to think critically and solve problems effectively. It enhances their cognitive functioning, decision-making skills, and ability to adapt to new situations, which are essential for academic success. It facilitates positive social connections and relationships for students with disabilities. It also helps them build supportive friendships, connect with peers, and develop a sense of belonging within their school community. Social support contributes to their overall well-being and academic progress. Furthermore, it plays a crucial role in managing and regulating emotions. It allows students with disabilities to understand and express their emotions appropriately, reducing the risk of mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. Emotional well-being positively impacts their overall quality of life and academic performance. Furthermore, good mental health supports students with disabilities in their personal growth and development. It fosters a sense of self-worth and self-acceptance, enabling them to embrace their disability as a part of their identity and pursue their goals with confidence. Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment that values and nurtures their mental health as a valuable resource.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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