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Research Paper

Prevalence of Mental Health Problem and Its Associated Factors among College Students

Kavanashri Vijaykumar[1]*, Dr. V. A. Aminabhavi[2]

ABSTRACT

Stress and depressive symptoms have a great impact on mental health. It is even more challenging in various levels like academics, changing culture, career, parental expectations, relationship issues etc. These factors can be overwhelming at some point where managing them becomes a struggle and can disrupt their daily functioning. The current study aims to understand the prevalence rate of stress and depression and gender difference among college going students and to see if there is a significant gender difference in their level of stress and depression. The sample consisted of 150 (73 boys and 78 girls) emerging adults attending college and aged between 18-22 years. The DASS 21 scale was administered to check the severity of stress and depression. Descriptive analysis of stress levels showed that a higher proportion of male students (65.75%) reported normal stress compared to females (55.84%). In contrast, elevated stress levels were more prevalent among female students, with 14.28% exhibiting mild, 11.68% moderate, and 15.58% severe stress, compared to 10.95%, 8.21%, and 8.21% respectively among males. Extremely severe stress was observed in 6.84% of males and 2.59% of females. Findings on depression revealed that 43.83% of males and 33.76% of females reported no depressive symptoms. However, females demonstrated higher proportions of moderate (22.07% vs. 16.43%), severe (19.48% vs. 15.06%), and extremely severe depression (9.09% vs. 6.84%) compared to males. Mild depression levels were comparable across genders. This shows that, the results highlight meaningful gender variations, with female students showing comparatively higher levels of both stress and depression. These findings underscore the importance of implementing gender-sensitive mental health interventions and preventive strategies within higher education settings to support student well-being.

Keywords: *Stress, Depression, Emerging Adults*

In recent decades, scholars have observed that the transitions which happen in late adolescence are much more complicated than thought otherwise. The age between 18-25 years no longer suits the traditional label of "late adolescence" or "young Adulthood" (Riggs, 2009). The period between 18-25 years is proposed as a new developmental stage called "Emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2009). It's observed that (Munsey, 2006), people belonging to this age group, despite having different social and economic prospects shared

[1]Research Scholar, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka, India
[2]Assistant Professor, Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka, India
*Corresponding Author

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similar thought patterns. They shared the perception of "feeling in between", where they felt like they were responsible for themselves but also felt that they were still closely knit with the parents and family. Emerging adulthood is an age of exploration, instability, self-focus, opportunities and possibilities, along with feeling in between (Munsey, 2006). These important life changes can be difficult to handle and can cause instability and uncertainty which can affect their mental health (Matud, et al, 2020). Often, emerging adults can manage these life changes, but for some, this transitioning period can be stressful when it comes to academic, social and occupational functioning (Taylor et al, 2005). Kuwabara (2007) suggests that the individuals between the age groups of 18-25 years have the highest incidence and cumulative prevalence of depression compared to other age groups. Research shows that the risk of depression among emerging adults has increased significantly in the last half century (Kuwabara et.al, 2007). Studies have shown that life stressors like academic pressure, social strain and financial pressure can create uncertainty about their future which can make them vulnerable to physical and psychological concerns (Lee & Dik, 2017). Despite the challenges, not every individual is susceptible to mental health problems, but it's important to identify the factors that can enhance the well-being among the emerging adults which can influence both successful and maladaptive development during this stressful transitioning period (lee & Dik, 2017). A study investigating the predictors of stress showed that majority of the students who were assessed for life satisfaction, optimism, psychological distress, self-esteem and self-efficacy showed psychological distress, anxiety and depression symptoms among the college students. Hence proving that these were important predictors of stress where male showed higher self-efficacy compared to females. (Saleh et, al, 2017).

The college life had common stresses like scoring high grades, clearing interviews for placements, being in new environment, relationship issues and meeting parents expectations can be stressful (Bulo, J.G. & M.G. Sanchez, 2017).This particular study aimed to see the effect of stressors like intrapersonal, interpersonal, academic and environmental stressors and the results revealed that, interpersonal stressors like handling people especially with whom they work, trouble with parents and relationship issues ranked the highest and environmental stressors ranked the least. These aspects indicate that surely there is a greater need to help the students in exploring this stage of transition. According to the study done by Baghurst and Kelley (2013), stress reducing interventions can reduce the levels of stress among college students. Certain changes like providing stress management and engaging them in physical activity had shown significantly lower level of personal burnout, and perceived stress. Research has shown that stressful events are linked with depression and interpersonal stressors like parental divorce and stepfamily formations are proven to be strong predictors of depressive symptoms among children and adults (Shafer et. al, 2016). From a socio-psychological point of view, research suggests that lesser or weaker control over one life in aspects such as employment, education, marriage and career shows strong correlation with depressive symptoms especially when it's linked with unfulfilled expectations. (Mossakowski, 2011). A study done by Davids E.L, (2024) tried to examine the importance of decision making in reducing anxiety and depression in emerging adults. The study revealed that adaptive decision making showed reduction in anxiety and depressive symptoms, whereas the maladaptive decision making showed the opposite result. This shows that life skills like decision making and problem-solving skills enhance the stress management and aid in reducing depressive symptoms. Evidence shows that there are many predictors associated with elevated stress and depression among emerging adults, but they also emphasize that with the right intervention and training given at a college level can have a positive impact in reducing stress and depression among the emerging adults.

Research gap

While extensive research has established that emerging adulthood (18–25 years) is a period marked by heightened vulnerability to stress and depression due to academic, social, and occupational transitions, much of the existing literature has focused primarily on identifying risk factors contributing to poor mental health outcomes. However, comparatively fewer studies have emphasized the protective factors that can buffer against these challenges and promote psychological well-being during this transitional phase. Protective factors such as self-efficacy, optimism, decision-making ability, and problem-solving skills have been found to reduce the impact of stressors and enhance resilience (Davids, 2024; Saleh et al., 2017). Despite this, there remains a lack of systematic intervention-based research that strengthens these protective mechanisms among emerging adults, particularly within the Indian context. Moreover, while Problem-Solving Therapy (PST) has demonstrated efficacy in reducing depression and enhancing coping in clinical populations, its potential as a preventive, skill-based intervention for non-clinical emerging adults remains underexplored. Addressing this gap could contribute to the development of effective, resilience-building programs that equip young adults with adaptive coping strategies to manage stress and depression more effectively.

Relevance of the study

Research across diverse cultural settings has highlighted that mental health among young adults is influenced not only by individual factors but also by socio-demographic characteristics such as age and gender.

By exploring these variables, the present study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the psychosocial determinants of mental health among emerging adults. Identifying high-risk groups based on socio-demographic factors can help educational institutions, counselors, and policymakers design targeted preventive and intervention programs. Moreover, this study can contribute to developing culturally relevant frameworks for promoting emotional well-being and resilience in young adults. Ultimately, the findings may inform the design of student-centered mental health initiatives that address both individual and contextual factors contributing to stress and depression.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample comprised of 150 (73 boys and 77 girls) college going students belonging to the age group of 18-22 years were selected for the study. The sample belonged to various colleges located in Bangalore city.

Instruments

DASS 21 is a 21-item self-report questionnaire developed by Lovibond & Lovibond in 1995 designed to measure the severity of a range of symptoms common to both Depression, Anxiety and Stress. In completing the DASS, the individual is required to indicate the presence of a symptom over the previous week. Each item is scored from 0 (did not apply to me at all over the last week) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time over the past week). The essential function of the DASS is to assess the severity of the core symptoms of Depression, Anxiety and Stress.

Scoring the DASS The scale to which each item belongs is indicated by the letters D (Depression), A (Anxiety) and S (Stress). For each scale (D, A & S) sum the scores for identified items. Because DASS 21 is a short form version of the DASS (the Long Form has

42 items), the final score of each item groups (Depression, Anxiety and Stress) need to be multiplied by two (x2)

Procedure

The DASS-21 scale which is a self-report questionnaire was administered to college students who are pursuing their degree in various colleges in Bangalore. The data was collected both by administering the questionnaire and with the help of google forms. Later the results were scored and interpreted based on the norms.

RESULTS

The study involved 150 students across Bangalore who are pursuing their graduation course. The gender distribution showed slightly high proportion of girls compared to boys with 77 girls and 73 boys. The age distribution shows that most of the students fall within the age group of 19-20 years.

Table1. Shows the distribution of the level of severity of stress and depression among male and female students.

Fig 1a and b: Shows the summary of the prevalence of normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe level of stress among male and female college students. The results revealed that among male students 65.75% (48 students) of them showed normal level of stress, 10.95% (8 students) of showed mild level of stress, 8.21% (6 students for moderate and 6 for severe) of students exhibit moderate and severe level of stress and 6.84% (5 students) showed extremely severe level of stress. Among females the results showed that 55.84% (43 students) had normal level of stress. Whereas 14.28% (11 students) exhibited mild level of stress, 11.68 % (9 students) had moderate level of stress, 15.58% (12 students) were having severe level of stress and 2.59% (2 students) showed extremely high level of stress.

Fig 2a and b: Shows the summary of the prevalence of level of severity of depression under the normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe level among male and female college students. Among the male college students, the results revealed that 43.83% (32 students) showed no depression, while 17.8% (13 students) showed mild level of depression, 16.43% (12 Students) had moderate level of depression, 15.06% (11 students) exhibited severe level of depression and 6.84% (5 Students) showed extremely high level of depression.

Among females, the data showed that 33.76% (26 students) had no depression. However,15.58% (12 students) exhibited mild level of depression, 22.07% (17 students) showed moderate level of depression, 19.48% (15 students) showed severe level of depression and 9.09% (7ss students) showed extremely severe level of depression.

Table No. 1 Showing the level of severity of stress and depression among male and female college students

Variables	N	Gender	Level of severity	Frequency	Percentage
Stress	73	Male	Normal Stress	48	65.75
			Mild Stress	8	10.95
			Moderate Stress	6	8.21
			Severe Stress	6	8.21

Variables	N	Gender	Level of severity	Frequency	Percentage
			Extremely severe Stress	5	6.84
	77	Female	Normal Stress	43	55.84
			Mild	11	14.28
			Moderate	9	11.68
			Severe	12	15.58
			Extremely severe	2	2.59
Depression	73	Male	Normal	32	43.83
			Mild	13	17.8
			Moderate	12	16.43
			Severe	11	15.06
			Extremely severe	5	6.84
	77	Female	Normal	26	33.76
			Mild	12	15.58
			Moderate	17	22.07
			Severe	15	19.48
			Extremely severe	7	9.09

Fig 1a: Showing the percentage of severity of stress among male college students

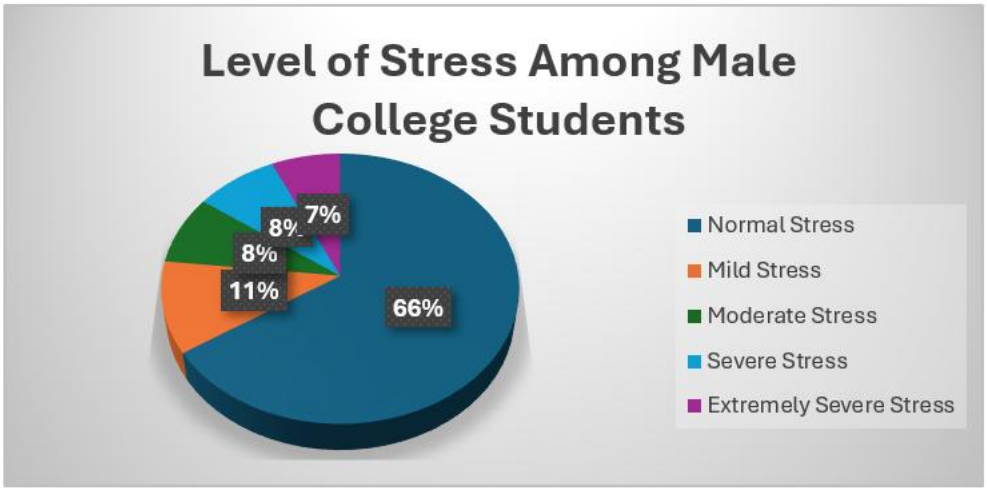

Fig 1b: Showing the percentage of severity of stress among female college students

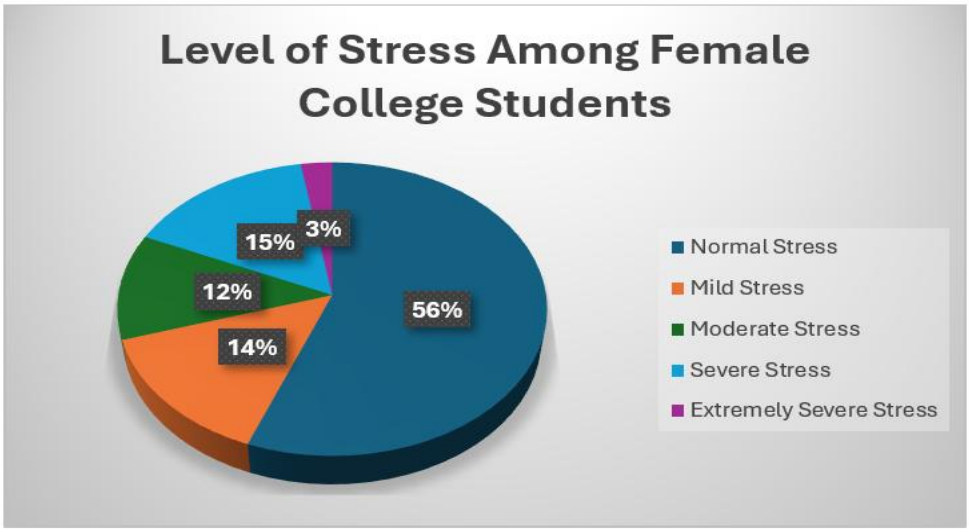

Fig 2a: Showing the severity of depression among male college students

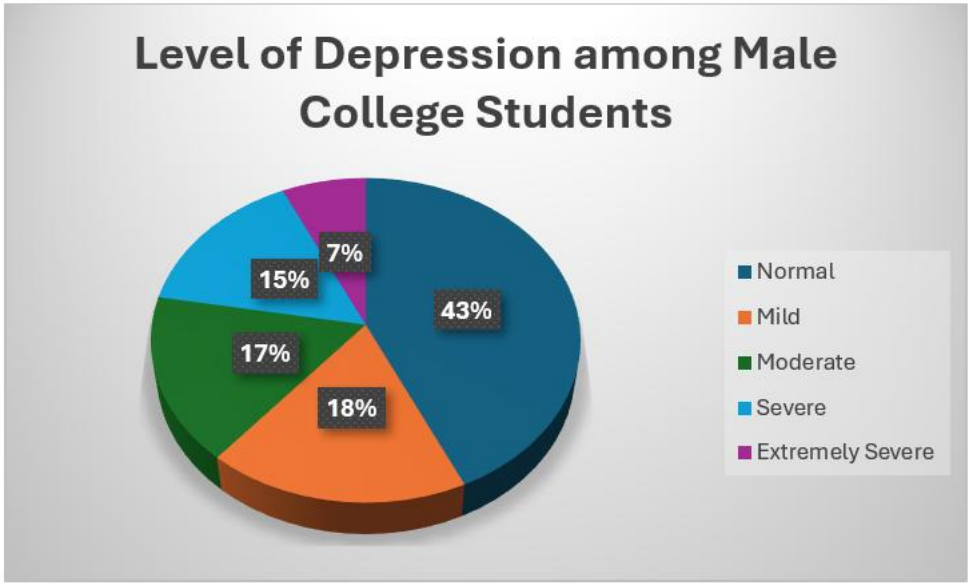

Fig 2b: Showing the severity of depression among female college students

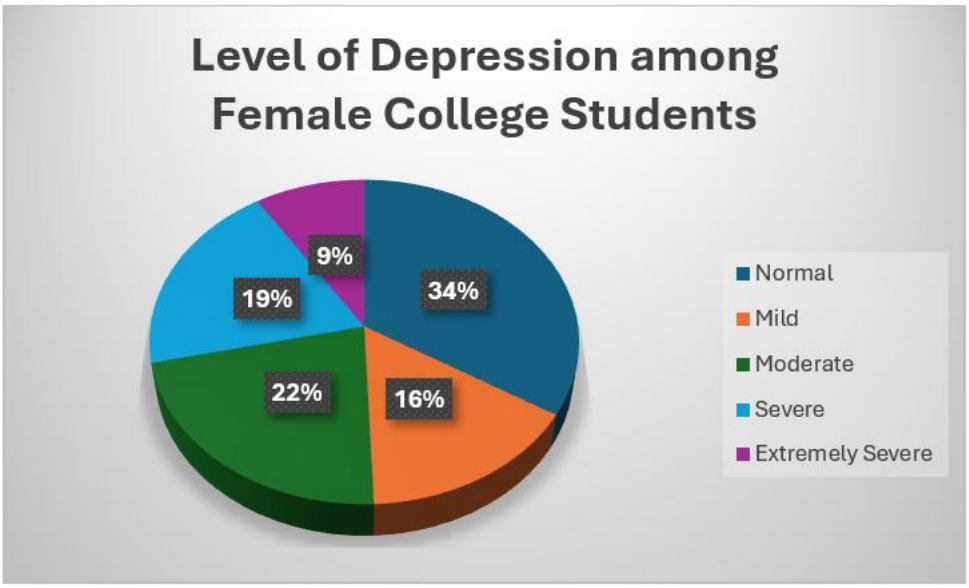

Table 2: Mann Whitney U- test for gender difference in the level of stress and depression among male and female college going students

Variables	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	U	p
Stress	Male	73	70.77	5166.5	2465.5	0.193
	Female	77	79.98	6158.5		
Depression	Male	73	71.13	5192.5	2491.5	0.229
	Female	77	79.64	6132.5		

Table 2: Presents the data of the gender difference in the level of stress and depression. The findings of the Mann–Whitney U tests indicate that although descriptive statistics showed observable differences in the distribution of stress and depression severity levels between male (n = 73) and female (n = 77) college students, these differences were not statistically

significant. For stress, females had a slightly higher mean rank (79.98) compared to males (70.77); however, this difference did not reach statistical significance (U = 2465.50, Z = –1.30, p = .193). A similar pattern emerged for depression, where females again showed a higher mean rank (79.64) than males (71.13), but the difference was non-significant (U = 2491.50, Z = –1.20, p = .229). These results suggest that although females appeared to report somewhat higher levels of stress and depression at a descriptive level, the overall levels of psychological distress did not differ significantly between genders in this sample. This indicates that both male and female students experience comparable mental health challenges, emphasizing the importance of universal, gender-inclusive mental health support strategies rather than interventions targeted solely by gender.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings indicate that while females appeared to report somewhat elevated severity levels descriptively, both male (n = 73) and female (n = 77) students experience comparable levels of stress and depression when examined statistically. This suggests that psychological distress is a shared concern across genders within this student population. These results highlight the need for universal mental health promotion efforts, accessible support systems, and preventive interventions targeting all college students, rather than gender-specific approaches. Strengthening campus-based counseling, stress management programs, and resilience-building initiatives may play a crucial role in enhancing the overall well-being of the student community.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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