STRESS AND MENTAL OF UNDERGRADUTE STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Malaysia has an uprising trend in mental health problem among tertiary level students based on statistics which shows there is an increase in the number cases registered from 2011 to 2016. Mental health problems among students are caused by anxiety and also depression and at same time the influence of drugs as a factor is also a possible plausible cause. Hence, this study was aimed to seek some confirmations to the statement and determine the overall state of the students' mental health. Apart from that the study also wanted to single out what is the most influential factor that affects their mental health and how they manage these issues. A total of 350 respondents participated in this study and findings revealed that 50% of them suffered some kind of depressions triggered by various factors. It was found that the students do seek professional help available at the college to help them deal with their mental health issue. There was no significant different based on gender seeking help from the professional services provided even though it was reported that each experiencing different kind problem. From the

academic aspect on the other hand, program enrolled and the semester they are in do not pose any problem to the respondents.

Keywords

Malaysia, Students' mental health, Depression, Counselling, Support

1. Introduction

"Mental health is the condition that influences our mind in our daily activities. It determines how we handle stress, how we relate to others and how do we make our choices (mentalhealth.gov, 2017). Therefore, if the wellness of the mental is maintained, theoretically one should be living a stress free life. Mental condition transcends throughout one's lifespan as the brain which is the control centre for all the activities dictates how one acts and reacts to specific situation and condition.

Mental health is influenced by factors such as biological (genes and brain chemistry), life experiences and family history. Going through life experiences, one will definitely be exposed to situations and conditions that force the mind to respond appropriately to the ideal outcome required. If the mental state is not in a healthy condition, this may lead to an unfavorable outcome as the production of the thinking process. Such situation will lead to unruly behaviors, miscalculation of steps to be taken or a mismatch between the action and reaction. This often results to dire consequences of one's life, the society or the nation eventually.

Mental health needs to be kept checked at all times to make sure that everyone in the community is able to contribute positively to the society. Perhaps the most critical stage of mental health that needs to be checked is the adolescent stage (Winters and Arria, 2011). This is a stage where the brain is still in the process of maturing. The maturing brain may help explain why adolescence sometimes make decision that are risky and may lead to safety or health concern including unique vulnerability to negative outcome (Winters and Arria, 2011). This is the miscalculated steps mentioned in the previous paragraph.

When discussing adolescence the focus will definitely be on the teenagers. As the brain maturing, rapid changes takes place both physically and cognitively where this leaves the teenagers facing countless problems and challenges that influence their emotions. Teenagers' life at the adolescent stage is normally related to their college life. College life is regarded as the most important stage of teenagers' life because college is where they forge their future. At this

period everything needs to be properly thought of in deciding the right direction to be taken by them. Hence the mental health needs to be at the healthiest level possible.

Syndromes typically had onsets in early middle adolescence and persisted into the year of the survey. Although relatively modest, the strongest correlates of screening positive were older age, female sex, unmarried-deceased parents, no religious affiliation, non-heterosexual identification and behavior, low secondary school ranking, and extrinsic motivation for college enrollment. The weakness of these associations means that the syndromes considered are widely distributed with respect to these variables in the student population. Although the extent to which cost-effective treatment would reduce these risks is unclear, the high level of need for mental health services implied by these results represents a major challenge to institutions of higher education and governments (Auerbach, et al., 2018)

A 2015 survey by the Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Penn State University revealed that 20 percent of college students seeking mental health treatment were taking up half of the appointments at campus counseling centers which are clear indicators that college students are experiencing what is called "mental health crisis" (www.healthline.com).

WHO World Mental Health International College Student survey on 18 colleges across eight countries namely Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern-Ireland, South-Africa, Spain, United States which involves 13,984 respondents consists of full-time students showed 35% of them are positive for at least one common lifetime disorders and 31% positive for at least one 12-month disorder. This study is aimed at estimating prevalence and basic socio-demographic correlates of common mental disorders among first-year college students shows that first-year students (45.5%) screened for six common lifetime and 12-month DSM-IV mental disorders: major depression, mania/hypomania, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, alcohol use disorder, and substance use disorder.

As the future torch bearers teenagers need to make the correct and sound decision. This places the importance of checking their mental health even more crucial.

1.1 Problem Statement

College life is the most pressing stage in the teenagers' lives that can sometimes impose major challenges to study, play, socialize and live at the same time. Failure to manage these challenges effectively may lead to poor mental health in the teenagers and negative repercussions. Among them teenagers can be harried and overly anxious for their future. Some extreme cases may lead to depression, extreme anxiety and even suicide.

Pro-active assessments on the teenagers' mental health need to be carried out periodically in order to overcome such possible incidences. This is important to determine the product of the educational system may not only excel academically but also possess a healthy mental state when living the college to face their post-education lives. For the purpose of this study poor mental health is referred to the stress level experienced by the respondents.

1.2 Hypotheses

This study was carried out to support these hypotheses:

Ho_1 The students are not suffering from any kind of mental distress.

Ho_2 There is no significant difference between male and female students' level of mental health problem.

Ho_3 Students do not seek support/help to manage their mental health problem.

H_{o4} There is no significant difference between gender of students with mental stress who seek help/support.

H_{05} There is a positive correlation between students' stress level and family income.

H_{o6} There is a positive correlation between students' level of mental stress and programs

H_{07} There is a positive correlation between students' level of mental stress and semester they are in.

2. Literature Review

In September 2016, the national newspaper reported that the Malaysian Ministry of Health is concerned about the state of Malaysian students mental health as statistics revealed that mental health problems among Malaysian students has reached a state where it needs to be addressed immediately in preventing further negative repercussion. The report showed that there is an increase of one in 10 individuals in 2011 to one in five in 2016. Experts cite anxiety and depression as the main causes of mental health problems among students although not ruling out the influence of drugs as a factor (The NST, 2016).

According to Dr Mohd Suhaimi Mohamed, an expert of mental health at the University of Malaya, if this problem is not addressed immediately it may lead to students withdrawing from the public, delusions and in certain extreme cases suicide. The time period that triggers such situation is within the first two years of the condition which was often neglected. There are many factors identified as the triggers to anxiety and other emotional disorders. These can range from bulimia, developmental disorders like hyperactivity, behavioral disorders, severe stress due

to family problems to pressure of examinations that might instill fear in students. Others can be low self-confidence which led the student to be in a state of worry and stressed, pressure from parents and teachers for them to be competitive are among those factors. Fear of embarrassment over matters related to studies also at times pushes students towards extreme consternation or anxiety.

In a study conducted by Mas Anom, Mohd Noor Azman and Abdul Razak (2017) among undergraduate students at a private higher learning institution in Kuala Lumpur, they found that students stress are due to basically academic related matters and financial requirement. Studies concerning mental health among college students have been an area that received quite an interest among phycology researchers as the number of fatal cases involving college students especially in the US has created the urge to initiate a proactive measure to such problem. There are increasing concerns globally about the mental health of students (Kadison, & Digeronimo, 2004) as mental health problems are now has become an institutional problems rather than personal.

The common expression by the undergraduates with mental health issues are they are unable to function due to feeling depressed and also lingering suicidal thought that flashes in their mind especially when reflecting their previous semester performance. One in three undergraduates experienced this at least once in the previous year, and nearly one in 10 for the later. This puts the needs to investigate this phenomenon further has to be given serious concern (ACHA-NCHA, 2008). According to psychologytoday.com college students in the U.S are experiencing serious mental health issues where evidence shows that the stress level faced by them is the highest of all time (www.psychologytoday.com). The Spring 2014 National College Health Assessment reported from a survey that in a period of 12 months 33 percent of students felt so depressed that they could not function (www.healthline.com).

If remains unattended, poor mental health will lead to even serious consequences. Findings from study recorded 17% of the respondents had positive depression markers and out of that 9% demonstrated major depression symptoms while another 10% of anxiety disorder. This study was carried out between 2007 and 2009 involving 26 colleges (the Healthy Minds Study, Blanco et al, 2008). Hence preventive actions need to be taken by determining the mental health risk factors among students.

One of the negative repercussions is anxiety. In a survey conducted by American Psychological Association found that the number of students with serious psychological

problems has increased. 95% of college counsellor agreed to such findings (APA, 2013). The survey ranked anxiety (41.6%) as the main concern that needs to be addressed followed by depression (36.4%) and relationship problems (35.8%). Waghachavare, Dhumale, Kadam, and Gore (2013) based on their study stressed among the contributing factor to stress was academic factors. Measures need to be taken in order to reduce the impact of academic factors on the stress issues among college students.

Studies proved that there are many factors that trigger depression. This does not rule out the influence of genetics. People with such genes have demonstrated cases where there were relation between gene and depression. Apart from possible genetically induced depression can also be caused by stress based on environmental issues such as surroundings and life experiences. Stresses in college life may result from feeling home sick. Students who have never been away from their family will the most hit with such phenomenon and this will make the process of blending in with the environment takes longer time and will lead to depression. Adding to this will be the challenges of completing study tasks and concern about finance. These issues should be addressed and managed effectively in fencing away depression among the students.

Perhaps the most common solution to psychological problems is to provide counseling sessions for the victims. Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, many colleges have taken the proactive measures by improving the counseling department at their respective colleges. Kitzrow (2003) stated that counseling centers have taken proactive measures in their effort to counter mental health issues by introducing a myriad of creative steps to improve the situation faced by the students. These ranges from immediate and accessible appointments to phone consultations and evening and drop-in appointments. Among the other new approaches introduced are peer counselors and graduate interns to help serve more students, group therapy and self-help programs (e.g., books, pamphlets, videos, Internet resources about mental health issues).

3. Methodology

A survey was conducted on 350 respondents at a private university college in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The respondents were students from various programs at the university college. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to the students by the college counsellors.

The questionnaire consisted of an instrument adopted from a study conducted in Singapore in 2016. It consisted of five (5) sections which were the demographic, self-diagnose mental health, symptoms of mental distress, type of stressors, support system (who do students confide with when they are distressed) and professional help. There were a total of 54 items altogether in the questionnaire.

4. Results

Demographic factors

Table 1: *Demographic factor*

No.	Factors	Freq	%
1.	Gender		
	Male	147	43.2
	Female	193	56.8
2.	Age Group		
	18 – 20 years old	210	61.8
	21 – 22 years old	68	20.0
	23 - 25 years old	54	15.9
	26 and above	8	2.4
3.	Place of Birth		
	Kelantan	21	6.2
	Terengganu	21	6.2
	Pahang	23	6.8
	Johor	35	10.3
	Melaka	9	2.6
	Negeri Sembilan	19	5.6
	Selangor	117	34.4
	Perak	15	4.4
	Pulau Pinang	11	3.2
	Kedah	15	4.4
	Perlis	3	9.0
	Sabah	6	1.8
	Sarawak	9	2.6
	Kuala Lumpur	31	9.1
	Others (overseas) : USA, UK	5	1.5
4.	School:		
	Boarding	62	18.2
	Daily	258	75.9
	Religious Boarding	10	10
	Religious Daily	10	10
5.	Family Income:		
	Below RM1,000	38	12.1
	RM1,001 – RM3,000	117	34.4
	RM3,001 – RM6,000	99	29.1

	RM6,001 – RM9,000	49	14.4
	RM9,001 – RM12,000	17	5.0
	RM12,001 and above	17	5.0
6.	Program:		
	AA101	70	20.6
	AA102	3	0.9
	AA201	25	7.4
	AA211	1	0.3
	AB101	14	4.1
	AB201	44	12.9
	CC101	84	24.7
	CC201	16	4.7
	BK101	47	13.8
	BK201	23	6.8
	BE101	4	1.2
	BE201	5	1.5
7.	Semester:		
	Semester 1	44	12.9
	Semester 2	196	57.6
	Semester 3	31	9.1
	Semester 4	39	11.5
	Semester 5	30	8.8
	TOTAL	339	100.0

Based on Table 1, it was found that majority of the respondents were female and most of them were between the ages of 18 to 20 years old. This is very crucial to the study as this age period shows that they just left high school and would definitely face problem in adapting themselves to college life.

In terms of place of birth and type of school attended, the majority of the respondents was born in Selangor and came from daily schools. This may influence the study outcome as they may have issues in adapting to living with others at the hostels and away from home.

The majority of the respondents also came from middle class income socioeconomic background which may influence the financial element in the study. The area of study showed that respondents studied various academic programs which consist of business management, computer science and social sciences. Even though the relation between academic programs studied and stress level was not the main focus in this study an analysis was also carried out to determine if there is a possibility it could be one of the stressors among college students. Meanwhile the semester that the respondents were at during the study did correspond to the majority of the respondents' age range as stated earlier.

Table 2: *Stress level one-sample t Test*

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 0					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
stress level	49.572	338	.000	5.546	5.33	5.77

Table 2 indicated that the students are suffering from mental stress as the t-test indicated a significant p = .000 thus rejecting the H_{o1}. The mean for stress level is 5.55.

Table 3: *Independent t test – difference in the level of mental health problem between gender*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
Independent Samples Test										
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
stress level	Equal variances assumed	.817	.367	-1.076	337	.283	-.243	.226	-.687	.201
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.065	300.854	.288	-.243	.228	-.692	.206

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference in the level of mental health among the male and female undergraduates p = .283, therefore H_{o3} has to be accepted. The stress level mean for male is 5.41 and for female are 5.65.

Table 4: *One-sample t Test – seek help/support/advice*

					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
One-Sample Test						
	Test Value = 0					
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
self_diagnosed MHP	58.610	338	.000	2.36747	2.2880	2.4469

Findings in Table 4 indicated that students do seek help/support/advice from to manage their problems. Thus, H_{o2} is rejected.

Table 5: *Independent t-Test – difference in gender of students with mental health problem who seek help/advice*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								Std. Error Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Independent Samples Test										
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference		Lower	Upper
Seek help/advice	Equal variances assumed	1.881	.171	2.713	336	.007	.25800	.09509	.07095	.44505
	Equal variances not assumed			2.679	295.969	.008	.25800	.09632	.06844	.44757

Table 5 indicated that there is a significant difference between gender of students who suffers from mental health problem who seek the help/support/advice. Thus, this finding rejected H_{o4}.

Table 6: *Correlation – mental stress and family income*

Correlations			
		Family income	stress level
Family income	Pearson Correlation	1	.116[*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.033
	N	339	339
stress level	Pearson Correlation	.116[*]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033	
	N	339	339
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

Table 6 showed that there was a positive correlation between mental stress level and family income, p < .05, however, it was only a weak correlation that was at .116. Thus, H_{05} was rejected.

Table 7: *Correlation – stress level and program*

Correlations			
		stress level	Program code
stress level	Pearson Correlation	1	.014
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.792
	N	339	339
Program code	Pearson Correlation	.014	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.792	
	N	339	339

Table 7 indicated that there was a positive correlations between students' stress level and the program that they were in, $p < .05$ and the it was a strong correlation at .792.   With this result, thus, H_{06} was rejected.

Table 8: *Correlation – stress level and semester*

Correlations		stress level	Semester
stress level	Pearson Correlation	1	.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.310
	N	339	339
Semester	Pearson Correlation	.055	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.310	
	N	339	339

Table 8 indicated that there was almost a significant relationship between stress level and semester the students were in ($p > .05$ (.310), therefore, H_{o7} has to be accepted.

5. Discussions

This study was carried out to investigate the mental health condition of students from a private university college in Kuala Lumpur. As mentioned earlier, mental health has become an issue that needs to be given extra attention by all the parties involved in the education industry. This is even more pressing as these youngsters are the ones who will decide the country's future direction. The study was carried out with the main aim to identify whether the students are suffering from mental health problem, to identify whether they seek help/support from their friends, family, college counsellor or professionals and to to gauge whether there is a significant correlation between mental stress between gender, family income, programs and semesters they are in.

From the findings it was evident that the students are suffering from some kind of mental stress and there was no significant difference between male and female. This is rather an interesting finding as the normal assumption would be female have more mental health issues compared to male. In order to help them manage the stress level the respondents do seek help/advice and support by friends, family, college counsellor and professionals. The findings also showed that there is no significant difference in gender who seek help/support. This tends to corroborate to the finding stating that there was no significant different for both sexes in experiencing stress and both seek help to manage the issue.

Furthermore, the findings also showed that there was a significant positive correlations between students' mental stress and family income which was evident from the previous studies. In addition, there was also a significant positive correlations between mental stress level and programs that the students were in, as the respondents come from various academic programs, such as accounting, computer science, human resource, TESL and communication. Lastly, the results also showed that there was a positive correlations between students' stress level and the semester that they were in. The results also supported the previous studies reported by the Malaysian Ministry of Health (2016) and statistic reported by Huibee.com.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings it could be concluded that the students at this private university do suffer from certain kind of stress which contributed to the mental health problems.

The students also seek help/advice/support from their friends/families/counselors/professionals help, but there is no significant difference between the gender of the students which indicate that whether the students are males or females, they all seek certain kind of help and supports from someone.

The results of the study also found that there is a significant correlations between student's mental stress to their families income as today's fees and expenses are always on the rise which may have given certain pressure to the students in maintaining their campus lifestyles. Furthermore, results indicated that the program the students enrolled also has an influence on the students' mental health as well, and this further stamped by the finding of the semester they were in indicated certain level of influence their mental stress.

Even though the college counsellor and advisors have done a good job at the college, it is recommended that they would organize events and workshops to create better rapport with students, especially with those who were shy and timid in voicing out the problems they were facing. This method could help more students from being terminated or dropped out from the college. Or, it may also help students to graduate on time (GOT) thus meeting the objective of the college.

If the college can give adequate supports and advice to the students on time, students' termination and dropped out cases can be reduced thus, saving resources such as money (scholarships/loans), time and energy. It is better to prevent than to cure before it turned out to be a crisis in maintaining the students' mental health from increasing.

Even though this study has yielded quite interesting findings yet it is not yet exhaustive in gauging the elements involved in this matter. Perhaps study on the assistance provided by the colleges in dealing with students' mental health issues could be carried out in triangulating the findings in this study. If this could be done the findings will further strengthen the arguments put forward in this discussion and also setting the appropriate research parameter for mental health study. This actually one of the research limitations as it did not really focus the feedback from the assistance provider as its focus.

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