

# Impact of Viral Epidemic Outbreaks on the Mental Health of Students: A Rapid Research Paper

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**Abstract:** *The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has dramatically changed students' day-to-day lives. Teaching is moving online, there are significant changes to assessment, and many students are no longer living in their term-time housing. While the physical health and safety of students is critical at this time, looking after their mental health is also necessary for helping students to succeed and benefit from their higher education. Recently, we noted that all students are likely to require increased support and resources to support their psychological needs during this period, and made clear our expectation that universities and colleges should take reasonable steps for such support for all students [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-for-providers-about-quality-and-standardsduring-coronavirus-pandemic]. Staffs in many universities and colleges have responded quickly to the need to deliver mental health support in different ways, and student unions are showing resourcefulness and resilience in helping their peers. This rapid review looks at some of these ideas and practices, and it does not defend particular approaches of specific institutions. Its purpose is to highlight the practical steps universities and colleges are taking to support their students' mental health in challenging circumstances. And to do that, it considers how they are supporting the mental health of the general population, students with a declared mental health condition, and others who may be particularly vulnerable during this time.*

**Keywords:** Coronavirus (COVID-19), mental health issues, practical steps of universities and colleges, physical health, the safety of students

## 1. Introduction

All students will be facing additional challenges during the pandemic. They may catch the virus or have caring responsibilities for friends and family who fall ill by the virus. They may struggle to learn remotely or have financial problems due to lockdown. Students in their final year may be facing the most challenging graduate jobs market. Postgraduate students may have had to make significant changes to their program or to pause research activity.

Supporting students' mental health can start with the provision of clear, accessible, and timely communications about new arrangements for learning and teaching.

Universities and colleges are working with their student communities and students' unions to understand what questions students want to be answered and to ensure that their communications are relevant, appropriate, and accessible to the whole student. For example, Mansoura University in Egypt is carrying out engagement through established staff/student relationships, particularly where this has been requested by individual students through social media platforms.

### Effects of mental health crisis on student during the pandemic

The recent changes in the education process due to the corona virus pandemic, such as campus-wide closures and the transition to online learning, have forced many students to neglect their physical health with possible food insecurity, stress, depression, and lack of resources to complete their academic work.

In April 2020, I have created an online survey of 500 college students, the vast majority indicated that covid-19 have negatively affected their mental health.

**Table 1:** College students' mental health symptoms

Variable <sup>a</sup>	Percentage (%)
Stress	91%
Depression	81%
Loneliness	80%
Difficulty functioning	75%
Overwhelmed	40%
Confused thinking	32%

Note. Data represent a sample of undergraduate students from different colleges in Egypt (N=500). Adapted from "online survey, April 2020"

<sup>a</sup> students' mental health symptoms.

### Adaption of mental health and well-being support for students

Many universities and colleges are adapting their existing mental health and wellbeing support to meet the needs of their students during the pandemic. This has included moving face-to-face service online platforms or via phone, or buying new services. Although these changes have needed to be implemented quickly, it has been necessary for universities and colleges to continue to ensure the quality of their service through evidence-based practice and clinical validation and to evaluate responses to understand the impact.

As with the shift to online learning and teaching, sudden changes in methodology of Information delivery that could affect different groups of students in different ways. International students who have returned to their home countries may find it difficult to access mental health and wellbeing services that are being promoted through social media platforms.

**Preparation of existing early intervention protocols**

Changes to the transmission of support mean that universities and colleges can no longer rely on their established systems and processes.

Student engagement analytics based on lecture attendance which can be early indicators of mental health issues that cannot be applied as they were disengaged. However, virtual attendance and engagement can still be monitored. Universities and colleges are thinking now about how they can adapt their protocols so that they can identify early threat signs that a student may be struggling with their mental health.

Similarly, recommendations for building and sustaining good mental health through exercise or socializing with friends cannot now be facilitated in the same way following the closure of university and sports clubs and any social gathering.

Many universities and colleges are working with their students' unions to offer alternative forms of mental health support<sup>1</sup>.

As an example, Egyptian Association of Dental Students - EADS has promoted a Mental health awareness campaigns in partnership with IFMSA, EPSF, Y-Peer, as they are considered the biggest non-governmental organizations in Egypt, includes videos and curated articles to support psychological and spiritual mental health with advice for help and self-isolation during the coronavirus lockdown, to put all the students for on wellbeing matters.

Furthermore, EADS has promoted timetable of activity runs alongside online teaching and learning activities, and care has been taken to ensure students are not overwhelmed by a plethora of activities and opportunities. And the online platform usage statistics for thesis mental health campaigns show continued uptake by students, with noticeable peaks on Sunday to Fridays.

**Supporting afflicted students**

Some students may lose a family member or friend during this period or become a victim of coronavirus themselves. Universities and colleges are needing to be ready to respond to affliction and student death, for example by having appropriate grief support for afflicted students, including through suggesting to external support.

During this time, there are further considerations to ensure that support is responsive to the additional challenges of suffering affliction during the pandemic, for example, social isolation, and restrictions,

And being attentive to international students whose home countries may be at different stages of pandemic outbreak and response<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/membersupport-services/counselling-service/covid-19-and-yourmental-wellbeing>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/coronavirus-will-increase-race-inequalities>

**Directing mental health support to the most vulnerable students**

While universities and colleges will already be engaging with students who are particularly exposed to mental health issues during the pandemic, others may not be known to them, for example students experiencing domestic violence and abuse. These students may be more difficult to identify due to a lack of face-to-face contact because of new learning and teaching arrangements. In these circumstances, making all students aware of the support available to them and providing information about support services or helplines becomes even more important.

Universities and colleges are considering now how mental health support can respond effectively to the needs of students from different communities. This includes tailored support based on social and cultural needs. By engaging with students in vulnerable groups and relevant specialist organizations, universities and colleges can ensure that provision is appropriate and supports students with diverse values, beliefs, and needs.

**Challenges facing final-year healthcare students**

Some final year healthcare students may be moving into clinical practice earlier than expected to support medical staff. Other healthcare students, particularly student nurses, will spend more time in clinical placements than previously expected. Some healthcare students may not be taking up positions as they are at increased risk of developing complications from the coronavirus infection<sup>3</sup>.

Working in a clinical hospital during a pandemic may have a negative impact on a student's mental health. The reasons for this might include concerns about how they will be monitored, personal protective equipment, and fear of catching coronavirus, trauma from dealing with death, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**Persistence of mental health care for students**

Universities may themselves be providing mental health support for students with declared mental health conditions, for example mentoring support, counseling or cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which they will now be delivered online or through a phone service. In doing so, they are focusing on:

- Ensuring appropriate confidentiality in new, remote systems and processes.
- Ensuring staff is appropriately trained to provide emotional support online or by phone.
- Confirming with students whether they have a safe space to participate in counseling or therapy.

**What can be done to reduce the consequences?**

The current issue for universities is on the immediate and urgent needs of their students during the pandemic. They are also, though, beginning to consider what the return to study post-pandemic might look like and how it will be managed. Some students may have some problems, serious illness, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Different student

<sup>3</sup><https://www.hcpc-uk.org/covid-19/advice/advice-for-students/>

groups will be impacted in different ways, depending on where they are in their higher education journey.

- 1) New students: The transition from school to higher education in the 2020-21 academic year will be very different from the usual pathway. The closure of schools from March 2020 and the cancellation exams means that students entering higher education over the coming years may have missed out on key aspects of their academic and personal development. Some may struggle academically in their first term or beyond. This may be a particular issue for students from underrepresented groups, as much of their outreach activity will have been delivered in different ways during this period.
- 2) Current students: Depending on how a university learning and teaching arrangements are running during the lockdown period, students may have missed out on academic learning or other student experiences. This group includes:
- 3) Students returning from planned placement years, or years abroad, may have missed key elements of their courses<sup>4</sup>.
- 4) Healthcare students (non-final year) may experience significant changes to their clinical positions during the pandemic and beyond. Those undertaking placements may have been exposed to challenging and distressing situations.
- 5) Postgraduate research students may have paused their studies because it has not been safe to conduct research activities anymore
- 6) Graduating students are likely to face high competition for employment, potentially the withdrawal of job offers, and potential delays to the start of postgraduate courses.

Most countries will see new patterns in their students' mental health, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the disruption to study patterns and potential changes on the longer-time to higher education.

### Looking ahead

Universities are to actively work for providing weekly online live sessions for afflicted and miserable students who may be feeling lonely and suffering from post-traumatic disease disorder. And these are well attended and have received positive feedback from the students. Students can also make one-to-one engaged interviews and consultation sessions to discuss mental health support and any issues they are facing.

Furthermore, it is recommended that all relevant services and departments of universities are to work to ensure that

- Established an email and online groups to encourage afflicted and estranged students to socialize and share their experiences of the current situation of the pandemic.
- Set up a weekly check-in email, and a monthly newsletter with advice and opportunities.
- Sent out Easter gifts.

## 2. Conclusion

This rapid review circumstantiates some of the ways universities and colleges are having to change their provision of mental health support for their students. It has particularly focused on students who are most vulnerable during the period of the coronavirus pandemic and those with existing mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder.

It is not exhaustive, and student mental health and wellbeing challenges will continue to evolve as the pandemic develops. During and after this time, universities will no doubt continue to share practice, resources, and evaluations within their networks.

In order to support the protocols in responding effectively to this unprecedented situation, we are working with mental health organizations to share practice, including a robust evaluation to understand the impact of interventions and responses during this period. There is an impressive range of work being carried out by corresponding organizations responds to the coronavirus pandemic and a wide range of support for students locally and nationally; we have included some links below.

### Appendix

- 1) The NHS has provided guidance on mental wellbeing while staying at home:  
<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips>
- 2) The Mental Health Foundation has published guidance for looking after mental health during the coronavirus outbreak:  
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-yourmental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>
- 3) Mental Health UK has developed information and tips for managing mental health during the coronavirus outbreak:  
<https://mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/covid-19-and-yourmental-health>
- 4) Mind, the mental health charity, has developed information resources in response to COVID-19:  
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-yourwellbeing>
- 5) The UK Government has developed guidance for the public on the mental health and wellbeing aspects of coronavirus:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing>
- 6) World Health Organization has published mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak:  
<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/mental-health-andpsychosocial-considerations-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>
- 7) Student-focused mental health and wellbeing resources and support Papyrus, the national charity dedicated to the prevention of young suicide: <https://papyrusuk.org>
- 8) Student Minds, the UK student mental health charity, has developed information for the higher education community to look after wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak:  
<https://www.studentminds.org.uk/coronavirus>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-sees-calls-andcontacts-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-rise-by120-overnight/>

- 9) Association of Colleges, the membership organization for further education, sixth form, tertiary and specialist colleges in England, has produced a coronavirus resource hub:  
[https:// www.aoc.co.uk/covid-19-resources-coronavirus](https://www.aoc.co.uk/covid-19-resources-coronavirus)
- 10) Guild HE, a representative body for 50 higher education providers, has developed general advice and guidance for members in response to coronavirus:  
[https://guildhe.ac.uk/ coronavirus-general-information-and-guidance-for-members/](https://guildhe.ac.uk/coronavirus-general-information-and-guidance-for-members/)
- 11) Independent HE, the UK membership organization and national representative body for independent providers of higher education, professional training and pathways, has developed a coronavirus information hub for independent providers:  
<http://independenthe.com/activities/covid-19-hub>
- 12) General Medical Council has published information for medical students, including provisional registration for those in their final year: <https://www.gmc-uk.org/news/newsarchive/coronavirus-information-and-advice/information-for-medical-students>
- 13) The General Dental Council (GDC) has published <https://www.gdc-uk.org/information-standards-guidance/covid-19/covid-19-guidance-from-the-gdc>

## Author Profile

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