

# **Prevalence of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression among the Undergraduates during Covid-19 Pandemic: The Role of the Counsellor**

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## **Abstract**

*The study examined prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among the undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic: The role of the counsellor. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. The study made use of the descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consists of 8,675 first year undergraduates and counsellors. The simple random sampling technique was used to select 360 respondents used for the study. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The instrument was validated by two experts from Benson Idahosa University, Benin. Spearman rank order was used to determine the reliability of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.76. The 360 questionnaires administered 350 were retrieved and used for analysis. Mean and standard deviation were descriptive statistical tools used to analyze the two research questions while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. For the research questions, the decision was based on the criterion mean of 2.50. While for the hypotheses, since the calculated value of t (t-cal) was less than the table value of t (t-crit), the null hypotheses were accepted. The findings of the study revealed that to a high extent, stress, anxiety and depression are prevalent among undergraduates during the pandemic; and most undergraduates do not utilize the services of counsellors. The study recommended among other things that since majority of undergraduates experience stress, anxiety and depression, there was an immediate need for healthcare professionals and university administrative personnel to provide the necessary support to this vulnerable student population.*

**Keywords:** *Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Undergraduates, COVID-19, Psychological Distress.*

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## **I. Introduction**

The Corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the lives of many individuals, adversely impacting the global economy and sources of livelihoods of individuals. The pandemic particularly brought significant and unpredicted changes to undergraduate students in various tertiary institutions around the world. In a bid to safeguard and check students, faculty, and staff members from the virus, tertiary institutions were mandated to shut down their various campuses in the first quarter of 2020 and make a quick transition to online or virtual classes. Undergraduate students were asked to pack and go home almost immediately and adjust to new online learning environments, some were forced to give up their jobs and businesses in the middle of the semester, until further notice. The pandemic also elevated issues among undergraduate students about their own health as well as the health of their family members and friends (Brown & Kafka, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Speaking of health issues, an online survey administered by Active Minds in mid-April of 2020 submitted that 80% of undergraduate students across the country reported that COVID-19 negatively affected their mental health, with 20% reporting that their mental health had significantly worsened (Horn, 2020). This was as a result of the fact that the variations in health brought about by the pandemic were unprecedented, unexpected and severe, it further triggered psychological distress among undergraduates, especially during the first few months of the global endemic.

Psychological distress including stress, anxiety, and depression are current global issues (Bilgel & Bayram, 2018). Psychological distress can be viewed as an emotional disorder that may affect the lives of the individuals on a daily basis. Based on many published studies (Horn, 2020; Luo, Guo, Yu, Jiang & Wang, 2019; Holm-Hadulla, & Koutsoukou-Argyriaki, 2020), due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the routine of undergraduate students can be affected by stress, anxiety and depression which are common among the students. Many undergraduates felt increased stress levels, anxiety and depressive symptoms due to change and uncertainty of tertiary education, technological concerns of online courses, being far from home, social isolation, decrease in family income, and future employment thoughts. Holm-Hadulla and Koutsoukou-Argyriaki (2020) however pointed out that even before the pandemic, undergraduates across the globe experienced increasing levels of

stress, anxiety, depressive moods, lack of self-esteem, psychosomatic problems, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies. Most undergraduate students transitioning to adulthood encounter unprecedented situations that may be responsible for a high rate of stress, anxiety and depression. As a result, Patterson, (2016) argued that stress, anxiety, and depression have been identified as prevalent conditions related to psychological distress among undergraduates.

Stress is the indiscriminate, non-specific response of the body to any element that overwhelms or engulfs, or threatens to overwhelm the body's compensatory abilities to maintain homeostasis. Stress that increases physical or mental function is known as eustress. Conversely, distress is persistent stress that results in cognitive, behavioural, and emotional disturbances like anxiety and depression (Marcus, Yasamy, Ommeren, Chisholm & Saxena, 2012). Clinically, anxiety is characterized by intense feeling of fear, joined by somatic signs that indicate hyperactive autonomic nervous system, while depression displays as loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt, sadness or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, extreme tiredness, and poor concentration (Mythri, Manjunath, & Girish, 2016). Excessive amount of stress, anxiety and depression among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic had led to grave concerns such as attraction to cheat in exams, decreased attention, difficulties in solving interpersonal conflict, poor academic performance, increased incidence of errors, negligence, sleep problems, low self-esteem, excessive alcohol intake, loss of appetite or sudden increased appetite and choose to seclude themselves from the society (Oboh & Oboh, 2020).

Notwithstanding the prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression, low treatment rates have long been reported in the literature. In a study by Hunt and Eisenberg (2016), over one third of American undergraduate students reported being depressed to the extent of finding it difficult to function, and one in ten undergraduates recounted that they considered suicide in the previous year. Garlow, Rosenberg and Moore (2018) in a study at Emory University submitted that only 15% of the students with moderately severe or severe depression or with suicidal ideation received treatment. Despite all the efforts to increase awareness and tackle psychological distress among undergraduate students, there is still an increasing number of stress, anxiety and depression among the students (Dyrbye, Thomas & Shanafelt, 2015), indicating a lack of effectiveness of the measures adopted. The awareness about prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression and its attendant negative consequences has increased the demand for considering counselling services offered by professionally qualified and trained personnel for undergraduate students.

A counsellor or counselling psychologists help students to adjust to change or make changes in their daily lifestyles. A counsellor assist students in areas related to personal well-being, interpersonal relationships, work, recreation, health, and crisis management (Dalky, & Gharaibeh, 2018). Student counselling has proven to be effective in actually helping and reassuring students in both academic and in practice. Additionally, a research study by Harris (2013), have also proven that not only is student counselling in schools compulsory in many countries it is also very prevalent across the world. There are also many different theoretical approaches, such as the person-centred counselling approach, that have been developed over time and are in use in use. Student counselling is something that has been recognised and accepted all around the world. In developed countries such as the UK and the US, literature has shown not only that student counselling as a profession has significantly developed, but that at the same time undergraduate students in schools are facing more social, emotional, behavioural, and psychological problems. In developing countries such as Nigeria, undergraduate students will likely face many of the same difficulties as students in developed countries, and they may even face more difficulties perhaps because of poor socio-economic backgrounds and lack of adequate and proper facilities.

Despite the availability of counsellors in tertiary institutions, most undergraduate students who have psychological distress fail to receive any therapeutic or counselling services (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2020). It is very unfortunate that 56% of undergraduate students did not know where to go if they had immediate needs for professional mental health services (Horn, 2020). A nationwide survey conducted from late May to early June further revealed that 85% of undergraduate students felt increased anxiety and stress during the pandemic, but only 21% of respondents sought a licensed counsellor or a professional (Dalky, & Gharaibeh, 2018). According to the Healthy Minds Network's survey (2020), which collected data from 14 university campuses across the country between March and May of 2020, the percentage of students with depression increased by 5.2% compared to the year before. However, 58.2% of respondents never tried mental health care and about 60% of students felt that it became more difficult to gain access to mental health care since the pandemic. These survey results clearly illustrate that an overwhelming majority of undergraduate students have experienced mental health problems during the early phase of COVID-19, but far fewer students utilized professional help.

Even when students had visited a counselling center, about one-fourth of them did not return for a scheduled appointment, and another 14.1% of students declined further services (Center for College Mental Health, [CCMH], 2021). When asked what prevented them from seeking mental health services, students reported a lack of supposed need for help (41%), preference to deal with mental health issues on their own or

with families and friends (27%), a lack of good time (23%), financial difficulties (15%), and a lack of information about where to go (10%). Nonetheless, studying stress, anxiety and depression is particularly important among undergraduate students who are future representatives and leaders of a country. In addition, most undergraduate students enter university and other tertiary institutions at an early age; and dealing with stress, anxiety and depression early in life can have long-term undesirable consequences on the mental and social life of students (Mythri, Manjunath, & Girish, 2016). Indeed, the prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression among undergraduates are getting more serious and even more complicated, and there is a need for counselling services.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A number of studies supported the conclusion that the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV2) and its corresponding disease (COVID-19) have dramatically impacted people's mental health and behaviour (Da-Silva, Rocha, Buheji, Jahrami, & Cunha, 2020; Vindegaard, & Benros, 2020), with very few studies suggesting otherwise (Gijzen, Shields-Zeeman, Kleinjan, Kroon, Van der Roest & Bolier, 2020). Although impacts are felt across populations and especially in socially-disadvantaged communities; individuals employed as essential workers, undergraduate students are among the most toughly affected by COVID-19 because of uncertainty regarding academic success, future careers, and social life during school amongst other concerns. These issues heralded by the pandemic have brought about mental health disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression among the undergraduate students. Stress, anxiety and depression have been associated with a lower quality of life and the development of many life-threatening diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and cancers. Inadequate efforts to recognize and address undergraduate students' mental health challenges, especially during a pandemic, could have long-term consequences on their health and education as well. It is against this background that this study set out to examine prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among the undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic: The role of the counsellor.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The major purpose of the study was to determine prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression among the undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic: The role of the counsellor. Specifically, the study sought to;

1. Determine the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression are prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-10 pandemic.
2. Find out the extent to which undergraduates utilized the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

1. To what extent are stress, anxiety and depression prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic?
2. To what extent do undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses are stated for the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression is prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic based on qualification.

### **The Role of School Counsellors in Supporting Students with Stress, Anxiety and Depression During COVID-19 Pandemic**

According to the Council for Accreditation of Counselling and Related Educational Programmes (CACREP, 2016), school counsellors demonstrate the professional knowledge and skills necessary to promote the academic, career, and personal/social development of all undergraduate students through data-informed school counselling programmes. School counsellors are the leaders, advocates, and change agents within schools that have the qualities for supporting students with mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression within the school setting. CACREP (2016) further asserted that school counsellors can identify characteristics, risk factors, and warning signs of students who at risk for mental health and behavioural disorders. Counsellors also possess the expertise to cautiously observe the relationship between social, emotional, and academic accomplishment. According to the National Association of Mental Illness (2016), school counsellors are trained within their programmes to collaborate and consult with mental health professionals to ensure that the social, emotional, and academic needs of students are meant.

Carlson and Kees (2013) stated that undergraduate students needing mental health support are more likely to pursue services within the academic setting than through a local mental health agency. Thus, it is vital

that schools be equipped to provide the necessary support. Within the school setting, certain mental health professionals are typically available to help reduce the difficulties that are affecting students' overall mental health. Within the school setting, school counsellors have an obligation to support the social and emotional well-being of students. This obligation requires school counsellors to collaborate with other stakeholders because of the many mental health challenges students are facing within the academic setting. Since students needing mental health support are more likely to pursue services within the academic setting than through a local mental health agency (Carlson & Kees, 2013).

## II. Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consists of 8,675 made up of 8,466 first year undergraduates and 209 counsellors from both Federal and State Universities in Edo State. A sample of 360 respondents (counsellors – 200, students – 160) were selected for this study using simple random sampling technique. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire on a four (4) point rating scale as Very high extent (VHE) High extent (HE) Low extent (LE) Very Low Extent (VLE)

The instrument was validated by two experts from Benson Idahosa University, Benin City. Spearman rank order was used to determine the reliability of the instrument which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.76. Three hundred and fifty (350) copies of the questionnaire were retrieved from the respondents by the researcher with the help of two research assistants who helped to retrieve same. The data collected were subjected to statistical means and standard deviations while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. For the research questions, the decision was based on the criterion mean of 2.50. Thus, any item whose mean value is 2.50 or above were accepted while any item having a mean value lower than 2.50 was rejected. For the hypotheses, if the calculated value of t (t-cal) is greater than the table value of t (t-crit), the hypothesis will be rejected; whereas, if the calculated value of t (t-cal) is less than the table or critical value of t (t-crit), the hypothesis will be accepted.

### Presentation of Results

**Research Question 1:** To what extent are stress, anxiety and depression prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic?

**Table 1:** Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Responses on the Extent which Stress, Anxiety and Depression are Prevalent Among Undergraduates During COVID-19 Pandemic.

S/N	STATEMENTS	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	$\bar{x}$	SD	REMARK
1.	Insufficient financial support is prevalent among undergraduates leading to stress, anxiety and depression.	238	46	56	10	3.46	0.86	High Extent
2.	Social isolation is prevalent among undergraduates leading to stress, anxiety and depression.	15	45	201	89	1.96	0.74	Low extent
3.	Academic pressure such as insufficient mastery of subject(s) taught and fear of poor grades etc. are prevalent among undergraduates leading to stress, anxiety and depression.	230	87	33	0	3.56	0.66	High Extent
4.	Underlying mental health condition and physical problems before entering the university are prevalent among undergraduates leading to stress, anxiety and depression.	312	6	32	0	3.80	0.59	High Extent
5.	Lack/inadequate information about counselling services are prevalent among undergraduates leading to stress, anxiety and depression.	89	258	3	0	3.25	0.45	High Extent
<b>Grand</b>						<b>3.21</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>High Extent</b>

*Source: Researcher's field survey data, 2022.*

From table 1, a grand mean of 3.21 which is above the cut-off point of 2.50 (High Extent) and a standard deviation of 0.66 clearly indicates that to a high extent stress, anxiety and depression are prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the grand standard deviation of 0.66 which is less than 1 indicates that the opinion of the respondents do not differ much.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic?

**Table 2:** Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of Responses on the Extent which Undergraduates utilize the services of the counsellor during COVID-19 pandemic.

S/N	STATEMENTS	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	$\bar{x}$	SD	REMARK
1.	Undergraduate students make use of counselling services when they have mental challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression.	12	4	278	56	1.92	0.55	Low Extent
2.	Undergraduates feel comfortable talking with counsellors face to face or over the phone when they have mental challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression.	9	3	302	36	1.96	0.46	Low Extent
3.	Undergraduates are aware of where to get professional help when they are stressed, anxious or depressed.	1	76	67	208	1.63	0.83	Low Extent
4.	Undergraduates who visited counselling centers always return for scheduled appointments.	45	42	186	77	2.16	0.91	Low Extent
5.	Stigma or students' view about getting psychological help for themselves do not prevent undergraduates from using counselling services.	98	3	192	57	2.41	1.06	Low Extent
<b>Grand</b>						<b>2.02</b>	<b>0.76</b>	<b>Low Extent</b>

Source: Researcher's field survey data, 2022.

From table 2, a grand mean of 2.02 which is below the cut-off point of 2.50 (Low Extent) and a standard deviation of 0.76 clearly indicates that to a low extent undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the grand standard deviation of 0.76 which is less than 1 indicates that the opinion of the respondents do not differ much.

### Hypotheses

**Ho<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression is prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender.

**Table 3:** T-test Analysis of Respondents on the extent to which Stress, Anxiety and Depression is Prevalent among Undergraduates during COVID-19 Pandemic based on Gender.

Respondents	N	$\bar{x}$	S <sup>2</sup>	Df	t.cal	t.crit	$\alpha$	Remark
Male	140	3.14	0.68	348	-3.549	1.966	0.05	<b>Retain Ho</b>
Female	210	3.39	0.59					

Source: Researcher's field survey data, 2022.

From table 3, since t-cal (-3.549) < t-crit (1.966), we retain Ho. The null hypothesis is hereby retained that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression is prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender.

**Ho<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic based on qualification.

**Table 4: T-test** Analysis of Respondents on the Extent to which Undergraduates Utilize the Services of Counsellors During COVID-19 Pandemic Based on qualification.

Respondents	N	$\bar{x}$	S <sup>2</sup>	Df	t.cal	t.crit	$\alpha$	Remark
Counsellor	200	1.98	0.76	348	-0.385	1.966	0.05	<b>Retain Ho</b>
Student	150	2.01	0.69					

Source: Researcher's field survey data, 2022.

From the t-test table, since t-cal (-0.385) < t-crit (1.966), we retain Ho. The null hypothesis is hereby retained that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic based on qualification.

### III. Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1 sought to find out the extent which stress, anxiety and depression are prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study revealed that to a high extent, stress, anxiety and depression are prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic. This is true due to the fact that insufficient financial support; academic pressure such as insufficient mastery of subject(s) taught and fear of poor grades; underlying mental health conditions and physical problems before entering the university; lack or inadequate information about counselling services are prevalent among undergraduates and

all these factors drive undergraduates into stress, anxiety and depression. This finding is in consonant with Oboh and Oboh (2020) who stated that excessive amount of stress, anxiety and depression among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic had led to grave consequences such as temptation to cheat in exams, poor academic performance, difficulties in solving interpersonal conflict, decreased attention, increased incidence of errors, negligence, sleep problems, low self-esteem, excessive alcohol intake, loss of appetite, among other things.

Research Question 2 sought to examine the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study revealed that to a low extent, undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic. This is true because the respondents rated low extent to all the statement raised in the questionnaire. This goes to show that most undergraduates do not make use of counselling services when they have mental challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression; they do not feel comfortable talking with counsellors face to face or over the phone when they have mental challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression; most of them are unaware of where to get professional help when they are stressed, anxious or depressed; and even those who visited counselling centers do not return for scheduled appointments; and it was also found that stigma or students' view about getting psychological help for themselves further prevent undergraduates from using counselling services. This findings correlates with the submission of Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, and Golberstein (2020) that despite the availability of counsellors in tertiary institutions, most undergraduate students who have psychological distress fail to receive any therapeutic or counselling services.

Hypothesis 1 focused on the t-test analysis of undergraduate students on the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression is prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender. The analysis revealed that the null hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) was accepted that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which stress, anxiety and depression is prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic based on gender. While hypothesis 2 focused on the t-test analysis of undergraduate students on the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic based on qualification. The analysis revealed that the null hypothesis ( $H_{02}$ ) was accepted that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of respondents on the extent to which undergraduates utilize the services of counsellors during COVID-19 pandemic based on qualification.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This study focused on the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among the undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic: the role of the Counsellor. Psychological distress in the form of stress, anxiety and depression is real concern. Where counselling centers and resources exist within the university campus, if there is little or no awareness of these resources it will result to less access of them. From the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that to a high extent, stress, anxiety and depression were prevalent among undergraduates during COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, most undergraduates did not utilize the services of counsellors when faced with psychological issues as these. On the role of the Counsellor, available literature shows that within the school setting, it is the responsibility of the school counsellors to help sustain the social and emotional well-being of students. This obligation however requires school counsellors to collaborate with other stakeholders because of the many mental health challenges students are facing within and outside the academic setting.

#### **V. Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

- Since majority of undergraduates experience stress, anxiety and depression, there was immediate need for healthcare professionals and university administrative personnel to provide the necessary support to this vulnerable student population.
- Government as well as tertiary institutions administrators should increase students' awareness of counselling and mental health resources both within and outside the campus.
- Counsellors on their part would need to organise seminars for students to sensitize or create awareness about the dangers of stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.
- The counsellor would invite experts like mental health consultants to talk to undergraduates about their mental health, such programmes would provide first-hand information that would change students' negative perception towards seeking psychological help.

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