

Psychological Well-Being among University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract—Unexceptionally for university students, the occurrences of psychological distress are believed to be higher for them to encounter. There has been an increase among the international public concerning the mental health and the impact of unidentified and untreated mental illness among university students. The aim of this study is to identify the level of psychological well-being of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) students. Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) were used for data collection together with the socio-demographic questionnaire. Data were collected from 443 UniSZA students. This study used descriptive analysis to obtain accurate results. The findings of this study showed that depression, anxiety, and stress found among UniSZA students were 42.2%, 73.7%, and 34.8% respectively. Findings revealed that students who faced psychological distress level possessed relatively high tendency for depression, stress, and anxiety. Psychological distress poses negative impacts on the physical, mental and academic. What is more worrying is that students who faced this kind of problem do not seek help or treatment because of the public stigma against mental illness.

Keywords—Psychological well-being, university students, depression, anxiety, stress

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental health studies particularly conducted among university students have successfully grabbed the attention of many due to the greatest new concern society has to faced which is psychological distress [1]. The transition from high school to higher education resulted in changes to the academic, social and emotional needs which also lead to psychological adjustment [2]. Higher education levels bring higher academic stress, reduce the level of academic support, also caused social segregation during the alteration period and potentially involved in long-term financial debt [3]. Continuous pressure could bring upon the downfall of academic performance of university students [4]. In addition, they also need to be separated from family and friends [5].

Although academic achievements are important to university students; without a positive attitude, students can experience stress in fulfilling academic goals [6]. Academic achievements such as in exams, quizzes, time management and the number of subjects taken at one time have proven to be the sources of stress for students [7]. Students have reported dealing with the stress caused by difficulties in adapting to the new environment [8], [6]. The challenges that had to be faced by them are living far away from home, managing personal

finance, building friendships and learning to adapt to the new system [2].

University students from a low socioeconomic background with financial problems have a greater level of depression, anxiety and stress [3]. Students from rural areas also had been reported notching high level of depression, anxiety and stress unparalleled to those students from an urban area [9], [10]. Depression, anxiety and stress were concomitant with unhealthy lifestyles such as smoking, unhealthy diet, lack of exercise and poor sleep habits [7].

According to a Public Health perspective, it is crucial to detect and provide early deterrence of mental health problems among university students [9]. Therefore, understanding psychological impairment such as depression, anxiety, and stress allow various intervention programs that can be implemented [7]. Thus, university students should be familiar with various psychosocial changes than dealing with the demands of academic and social preparation towards their professional careers [9], [11].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental health and psychological well-being have a variety of definitions that are vague in various fields [12], [13]. A combination of positive circumstances in all spectrums of life such as contentment, both physically and spiritually; plus optimal function is recognized as psychological well-being [2]. In addition, psychological well-being refers to how individuals control their life and activities [5]. Psychological well-being does not just make us feel good all the time but also involves negative emotions such as frustration, failure, and grief which are normal things in life [2]. Therefore, managing negative emotions are important for long-term well-being [14], [15].

Positive emotional and social support plays a fundamental role in building the psychological well-being [16]. An individual who has a high psychological well-being will lead a happy life and will be satisfied with their professional and personal life, capable and well-supported [17]. Based on the theory of psychological well-being, psychological health of an individual is determined by its function in certain aspects of life [5]. An individual should have a good relationship with others, appreciate the environment, accepting themselves and the past, have a goal in life, strive to develop and make their own decisions [16].

An understanding of psychological well-being is difficult because of the usage of various terms interchangeably [18]. For example, some of the terms used are happiness, mood, affect, subjective well-being, quality of life, life satisfaction and emotional health. The diversity of these terms in its understanding had caused changes to the measurement of psychological dysfunction and difficulty in understanding the mental health and well-being [18]. Although there are differences in opinions, psychological well-being has been agreed as a multi-dimensional concept [19]. Six factors of psychological well-being are being identified which includes self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery and autonomy [2].

Positive psychology is important in mental health and psychological well-being because it emphasizes psychological dysfunction and protective factors [9]. Positive psychology has an insightful mastery by saying that a healthy individual, mentally or psychologically, is not only free from anxiety and depression but also have a high level of resilience [20]. Positive psychology examines factors that support individual development and helps to reveal positive aspects in the most effective way [16]. Psychological well-being is a protection factor of psychological problems. Meanwhile, psychological distress showed signs of severe mental condition [16].

Depression and anxiety are the effects of stresses and the inability to overcome stress which has become one of the characteristics of psychological distress [21]. The current study uses this approach in measuring the level of psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety and stress to give a better understanding of psychological distress among university students. Psychological distress has been considered as a major and critical issue occurred among university students globally [22]. Five out of the top six health-related problems are psychology based on the study conducted in the United State [5], [22]. The indication of university students that are suffering in a high level of mental illness can be referred in two classifications that are parallel with each other which are high psychological distress and low psychological well-being [23].

The study by [24] has stated that university students in Australia found that high levels of psychological well-being led to a lower level of depression. Meanwhile, the low level of psychological well-being is leading to higher depression. Psychological well-being was measured using a scale to measure psychological well-being and psychological distress DASS-21 item. This study shows the relationship between psychological distress and psychological well-being.

[25] found a remarkable discrepancy between the opposite gender, specifically between male and female students, in psychological well-being aspect. Some studies have found that women have higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress [9], [22]. The differences in well-being between men and women have led to many initiatives in modern society to

empower all individuals to achieve self-realization and fulfill their potential to promote optimum psychological well-being [26]. There is a study that has found men with higher income and having powerful jobs than women, have a relationship with higher subjective well-being [27]. Gender differences in psychological well-being support the perception that men tend to score higher than women [25].

A study conducted by [28] investigated the degree of personality and contextual factors contributing to the psychological well-being and psychological distress among students throughout the semester. They examine whether the skills to build resilience as a positive dialogue with the self, self-management awareness, meditation can help reduce stress and improve psychological well-being. The study found that personalities such as emotional resilience and ability to recover as important predictors of psychological well-being and psychological distress. [29] examined a total number of 222 university students in identifying the correlation between hope and optimism and its influence on mental health. The results of this study showed positive optimism and hope related to psychological well-being. Optimism also negatively related to psychological distress. The result of this study also found out that optimism and hope can affect the student's mental health.

According to [30] optimism, health value and religiousness have positive relationships with psychological well-being and distress. Optimism is the best predictor of psychological well-being and lower psychological distress levels [30]. An optimistic attitude is one of the factors that encourages university students to succeed in academics and helps to increase the positive impact on individual psychological health [31]. Therefore, prevention which acts as an intervention that emphasizes optimism, such as behavioral therapy is useful to overcome depression and anxiety among university students [32]. Health value is the concept of more people appreciating their health, more likely they will stay away from behavior that may affect their health [29]. In previous studies, health values have been linked to the promoting physical health behavior, such as exercise and reduced use rates of alcohol, marijuana, and nicotine [30], [31].

III. METHODOLOGY

The data were collected from 443 UniSZA students. The first section was based on socio-demographic information, such as gender. DASS-21 items have been used as a measurement of psychological well-being on the dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress. DASS-21 is an abbreviation for 'Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale' composed of the original 42 indicators for negative emotional conditions [33]. There are five distinct states ranked from the normal, mild, moderate, severe and extremely severe that can be found in the DASS-21 levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The ability to score for each subscale of depression, anxiety, and stress is one of the reasons DASS-21 uses as a measure of

psychological well-being. Therefore, respondents were required to evaluate 21 statements on a 4-point Likert scale by illustrating their condition over the past week. All subscales consist of seven items each. Items in each subscale are summed up to score for that subscale, a higher score indicates a higher level than each subscale. The scores for DASS-21 depression, anxiety, and stress subscales are as follows:

Table 1 Score for Depression, Anxiety and Stress subscale DASS-21

Item	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely severe
Depression	0-4	5-6	7-10	11-13	14+
Anxiety	0-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10+
Stress	0-7	8-9	10-12	13-16	17+

IV. RESULTS

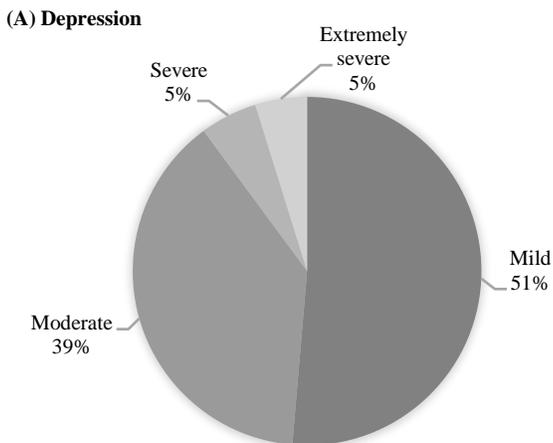
A total of 443 respondents were UniSZA students. Respondents consisted of 95 male students (21.4%). Meanwhile, the number of respondents for a female is 348 (78.6%).

Table 2 Gender

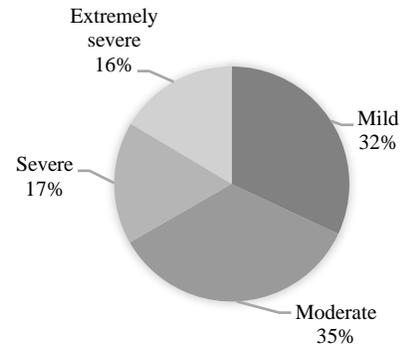
Gender	Frequency	%
Male	95	21.4
Female	348	78.6

The DASS-21 scale is used to measure the psychological well-being of the respondents. The findings of this study found that depression subscales are: mild (51.0%), moderate (39.0%), severe (5.0%) and extremely severe (5.0%). The anxiety subscale result are: mild (32.0%), moderate (35.0%), severe (17.0%) and extremely severe (16.0%). Furthermore, the stress subscale are: mild (51.0%), moderate (33.0%), severe (13.0%) and extremely severe (3.0%).

Fig. 1 The proportion of psychological well-being of students detected having depression (A), anxiety (B) and stress (C) using DASS-21



(B) Anxiety



(C) Stress

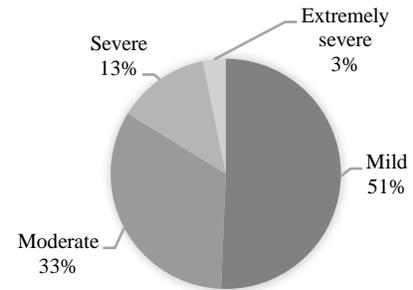


Figure 2 shows the current stressors experienced by students in UniSZA. There is six current of stressors that most frequently reported by respondents. The most frequently reported by the respondents is an examination (62.1%). A total of 53.0% respondents were reported to be stressed out due to assignments, followed by financial problems (34.9%) and relationships with friends (31.3%). Additionally, final year projects and facilities each contribute to the same percentage rate of 29.6%.

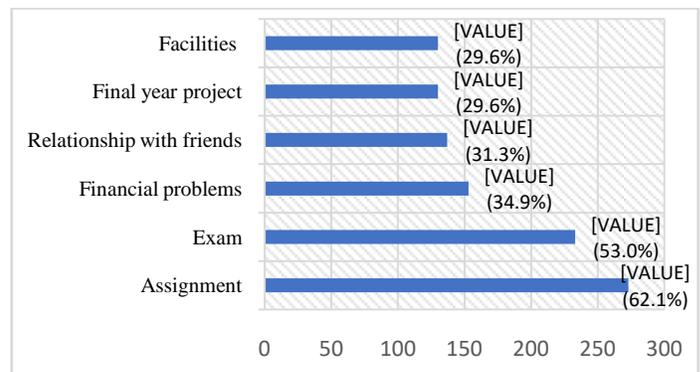


Fig. 2 Current stressors experienced by students

V. DISCUSSION

Higher education students have repeatedly shown a higher risk of mental illness compared to the general population [21], [34]. Stress is an inevitable part of life and commonly happened among university students [22]. Depression, anxiety,

and stress can also affect the life of university students, thus in-depth research in the future is needed to help students [7].

This study was conducted to identify the psychological well-being among UniSZA students. The measurement of psychological well-being is done using the instrument of DASS-21 to measure depression, anxiety, and stress. The results showed that 42.2% of respondents were detected to be in a depression. Meanwhile, most respondents were diagnosed with anxiety with a percentage of 72.7%. The number of respondents that deals with stress is 34.8%. Although the DASS-21 is not a tool for diagnosing psychological well-being, it is often used clinically to explore the psychology symptomatology to indicate psychology distress with scores above normal values [33].

The current study shows a higher percentage for depression and anxiety compared to the study conducted by [35] on Baccalaureate nursing students in Hong Kong which shows a total of 35.8% experiencing depression, 37.3% suffering from anxiety and 41.1% faced with stress. Meanwhile, research conducted by [36] using 400 Punjab university students, Chandigarh showed higher results for each dimension than this study. A total of 59.2% of students were depressed, anxiety amounted to 86.5% and stress with a percentage of 52.7%.

In psychological research, stress is one of the variables that affect people's health and well-being [8]. Meanwhile, for university students, academic stress is the biggest factor that contributed to the psychological distress and causing a lower psychological well-being [37]. The results of this study found that mutual and common stressors amongst respondents are being attributed from examination, assignment, financial problems, relationships with friends and facilities.

In addition, the financial problem is one of the most frequent causes of stress that were reported by 34.9% of respondents. A study conducted by [7] elucidated that the symptoms of depression and anxiety are more apparent to students who come from impecunious family with pejorative financial situations. As such, socioeconomic status correlated with higher mental health. Hence, academic achievement in accordance to financial problems could be adversely affected and inevitably inviting psychological distress namely anxiety and depression [15],[38].

Similarly, a survey conducted on university students in Australia. They found out that financial problems are associated with increased stress [39]. The study also found that students who suffer from depression, anxiety and stress are susceptible to academic problems, impaired relationships with friends and family members. The failure to overcome this state of anxiety would cause panic disorder. As a result, self-confidence and ability to deal with the problem will be reduced, which can affect a student's academic achievement [40].

VI. CONCLUSION

The study has found that most of the respondents which consisted of UniSZA students have faced depression and stresses in which it is relatively high especially for anxiety. Academic pressure such as assignments, examinations, final year project, and facilities are the major causes of stresses that the students have to bear. Therefore, the universities must play a vital role in helping to raise the level of psychological well-being of students so that they can adapt in facing the challenges in the university life. In addition, the university also needs to improve their student support services, especially counseling services.

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