

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of on-Campus Community

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Abstract: This paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of on-campus students in China, with a focus on the pre-, during, and post-pandemic periods. The pandemic has disrupted traditional college life, as students faced prolonged isolation, online learning, and limited social interaction. Drawing on mental health criteria, including self-security, emotional stability, and social connectedness, the paper explores the primary psychological issues affecting students, such as anxiety, social withdrawal, internet dependency, and stress from online education. The study highlights that while social media has helped maintain peer connections, it cannot fully substitute for in-person interactions essential to students' development. Findings underscore that pandemic-related disruptions led to increased stress and a mix of fear and anticipation for offline experiences. Consequently, the study recommends enhancing both online and offline mental health support, along with improving early warning systems for psychological issues. Despite limitations related to data scope and regional disparities, this paper provides insights into the unique mental health challenges faced by students and calls for future research on the long-term effects of "virtual contact" on student mental well-being.

Keywords: Covid-19, Mental health, On-campus community.

1. Introduction

Since the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a major global public health crisis. There are 6 ways to stop the virus from spreading, those include the infectious agent, reservoir, portal of exit, mode of transmission, portal of entry, and susceptible host. Due to the highly contagious nature of the virus, quarantine and isolation have become an effective measure to curb its spread. This global home quarantine and isolation has posed an unprecedented challenge to people's mental well-being, especially for the on-campus community. Therefore, research on their mental health has become particularly important [1]. This paper aims to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the on-campus community. The criteria for mental health are as follows: According to American psychologist Maslow and others, there are ten standards: A sufficient sense of self-security. A thorough understanding of oneself and an appropriate evaluation of one's abilities. Realistic life goals. Staying connected to the reality of the environment. Maintaining the integrity and harmony of one's personality. The ability to learn from experience. Maintaining good interpersonal relationships. Proper expression and control of emotions. Limited individual expression of

personality. Appropriately meeting personal needs without violating social norms. In common sense, the main goal of the on-campus community is to study. However, their mental health issue is seldom a concern, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a vulnerable group, students have not yet fully matured mentally. Therefore, their psychological state is fragile compared to adults who have stable incomes and complete autonomy. College life normally consists of staying overnight in the library to complete a group project, getting up early to secure a spot in a favorite class, and getting into a relationship with someone. All these have changed during the pandemic. Since January 23, 2020, China has implemented a "Level 1 Public Health Emergency Response" nationwide. Schools were closed for an extended period, learning shifted to online platforms, and students were isolated from their peers during the mandatory quarantine [1]. This paper will first discuss the characteristics and influencing factors of mental health in the on-campus community. Secondly, humans are social animals, relationships are especially important. Thirdly, in addition to attending classes, online classes could be extra stressful for many students. Finally, the environmental factor could also lead to mental health issues. These are the factors this paper will discuss and analyze. This paper will focus on the pre-, during, and after pandemic. As an unexpected public health event, COVID-19 has both sudden onset and significant social harm [2]. Many college students lack experience in coping with such emergencies. To prevent the escalation of the pandemic, universities postponed the start of classes, and students were required to limit going out, which prevented them from attending classes and participating in social activities as usual. This situation may affect their academic progress and exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression, making it crucial to address the mental health of college students.

2. Characteristics and influencing factors of mental health among the on-campus community

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, various aspects of college students' lives, including their learning environment, daily activities, study methods, and social interactions, have undergone significant changes. These shifts have made students more prone to experiencing cyclical mood swings, lethargy, pessimism, social withdrawal, and a lack of self-confidence [3]. These issues are difficult to quickly resolve even in the post-pandemic era. This article will begin by discussing characteristics and influencing factors of mental health. Modern college students need to meet the following requirements to be considered mentally healthy: maintain a strong interest in learning and a desire for knowledge; maintain correct self-awareness and accept oneself; manage and control emotions, maintaining a positive mood; maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships and be willing to socialize; maintain an integrated and consistent personality; maintain good environmental adaptability, including understanding the environment accurately and handling personal relationships with the environment; and ensure that psychological behavior matches age characteristics. Research has observed that 75% of the individuals experienced their first mental health issue before the age of 25 [4]. Anxiety disorders are the most prominent mental health issue among the on-campus community, while depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental issues tend to happen later in life. From 2010 to 2020, a total of 9,662 research articles on college students' mental health issues were published. Among them, 3,126 articles focused on anxiety, and 3,844 articles focused on depression [5].

3. Social relationship

Fulfillment of the need for social interaction is a prerequisite for the healthy development of one's personality. If this need is met, it will give the individual a sense of belonging and security, enhancing the affirmation of self-worth and thereby increasing self-confidence. Otherwise, individuals may feel

lonely and anxious, experience frustration, and develop low self-esteem. This disconnection may also result in frustration and diminished motivation, further hindering personal growth and development [3]. Over time, a lack of social support and interaction can erode self-esteem, making individuals more vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness.

3.1. Social background

In China, primary and secondary education often focuses on exam-oriented learning, lacking the necessary training and development of basic social practice and life skills for students. As a result, many college students lack the ability to live independently and take care of themselves. This is especially true as the proportion of only children among today's college students has further increased, leading to poor adaptability after leaving the family environment for the first time and difficulty in adjusting to collective living [6]. The following data reference uses the UPI (University Personality Inventory) scale, which is a self-assessment tool for evaluating the mental health status of college students. Originally developed by the University of Tokyo in Japan, the UPI scale aims to help identify potential psychological and emotional issues faced by university students. This scale consists of multiple items covering various aspects such as emotional state, social adaptation, stress response, and self-evaluation. The scoring range is from 0 to 56, with higher scores indicating more severe psychological symptoms and lower levels of mental health. According to research conducted by Sang Zhiqin, Fu Gan, and others, among 3,180 surveyed first-year students, 2,397 were only children, while 783 were non-only children. The results showed that the average UPI score for only children was lower than that of non-only children [7]. College students come from different regions with varying cultural backgrounds, leading to significant differences in personality [8-10].

3.2. Emotional relationships

As relationships among new social circles are closer and the distance is smaller, it is easier for conflicts and mental health issues to arise. Thus, establishing a new social circle with mutual support has a positive impact on mental health. Interaction with different genders is also an important part of social relationships. As college students gradually mature both psychologically and physiologically, they desire interaction with the opposite sex and yearn for friendship or even love. However, due to their still-developing psychological maturity, lack of life experience, and overly romantic views of love, conflicts often arise between idealized relationships and real-life challenges, leading to psychological confusion. If these emotional pressures are not alleviated and adjusted in a timely and effective manner, they may lead to psychological issues, and in severe cases, even mental disorders.

3.3. COVID-19 transition

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students under home quarantine mainly interacted with their families, while those under campus lockdown were limited to interacting with roommates. As a result, college students' methods of communication gradually shifted from face-to-face interactions to online platforms, negatively impacting their ability to adapt to social life both inside and outside of school. The transition from self-directed campus life to life constrained by parents at home or within the dormitory, along with the shift from face-to-face emotional communication to an online environment, has led to increasing conflicts within families, among roommates, and in romantic relationships. With the reduction in external activities and diminishing interpersonal interactions, students became increasingly unfamiliar with the outside environment, which over time led to a fear of life beyond campus [11,12].

4. Environmental factors

Environmental factors are also one of the contributing causes of mental health issues among college students. These factors include family perceptions, economic status, whether the student is the only child, and their place of origin [7]. The following data utilize SCL-90 (Symptom Checklist-90), a self-report psychological assessment tool designed to measure the extent of an individual's psychological symptoms and distress over a recent period. This method was developed by American psychologist Leonard R. Derogatis in the 1970s and has been widely used in clinical psychology, psychiatry, and related research. Each item on the scale is rated from 1 to 5, representing "none," "mild," "moderate," "marked," and "severe." By calculating the scores for each dimension and the overall average score, it is possible to assess the level of distress in different psychological dimensions. The total possible score is 450, and a total score greater than 160 or any single factor score of ≥ 2.5 is considered significant. According to research conducted by Zhao Lin, and others, The mental health level of college students from small towns and rural areas is significantly lower than that of students from large cities (larger percentage of SCL -90 score ≥ 160), while students from medium-sized cities have better mental health compared to those from large cities [13]. This could be because the family environment is embedded in the local social environment, and due to the advancement in social development, the material conditions, housing, employment, and urban transportation in medium-sized cities are not much different from those in large cities. When living standards are similar, people in environments with less pressure tend to have a higher sense of subjective well-being, resulting in better mental health. Family conditions can greatly impact the psychological state of adolescents. Teenagers exposed to domestic violence are more likely to have mental health issues, which may lead to fear of social life and a decline in social skills during middle and high school. Additionally, changes in parental roles within the family, such as divorce or separation, can result in behavioral issues and psychological effects that differ from those of their peers. Globally, around one billion minors have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse (WHO, 2004). Physical, sexual, or emotional violence is often perpetrated by parents, relatives, or teachers. Such abuse can have a significant impact on a child's psychological state and is highly likely to cause mental health problems in later life. During the pandemic, adolescents faced numerous stressors, such as fear of infection, boredom, information overload from the internet, changes in family economic conditions, and restrictions on daily activities. These challenges could lay the groundwork for future unpredictable harm, affecting the mental health of the children themselves [14-16].

5. Suggestions

Enhancing college students' awareness of COVID-19 is beneficial for their mental health. The more comprehensive their understanding of COVID-19 and preventive measures, the better they can cope with the challenges of the pandemic with a positive mindset. Therefore, relevant government departments and universities should use social media platforms and other new media to encourage college students to voluntarily get vaccinated and receive health education related to COVID-19 [14]. In the post-pandemic era, it is crucial to integrate online and offline approaches to mental health education. Regular stress testing or psychological assessments can help to improve the quality of life of many psychological symptoms. Early detection and timely intervention can have significant effects. Teachers or counselors should use online platforms for appointments or alerts to promptly arrange face-to-face meetings with students who may have issues, helping them overcome difficulties. For students who are unwilling to meet in person, it is important to leverage online platforms to engage in active communication while ensuring their privacy is protected, thereby enhancing their willingness to participate in mental health education. Utilizing online platforms, mobile applications, and other online chat programs as tools for psychological counseling can enhance the efficiency and

accessibility of mental health services. Promoting community-based psychological emergency services and other community-appropriate psychological intervention measures aims to prevent long-term mental health issues triggered by the pandemic [15,16].

6. Conclusion

This paper first provides a brief description of the development of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, then focuses on the changes in the mental health of the on-campus student population before, during, and after the pandemic, as well as the impact of the pandemic on mental health. Explores the most common psychological issues faced by the on-campus community, their underlying causes, and how these issues evolved during the pandemic. Finally, the paper offers suggestions to address these situations. By studying and comparing data on college students' mental health across different periods (before, during, and after the pandemic), it is evident that the pandemic has had a profound impact on contemporary students' mental well-being. This calls for schools and society to make timely and appropriate judgments and provide necessary support in the post-pandemic era.

Adolescents' use of social media not only helps them build connections with peers but also enhances brain connectivity. However, social media cannot replace school and offline social activities. The psychological issues faced by college students in the post-pandemic era and the challenges in current mental health education need to be addressed promptly. It is essential to continuously improve mental health early warning systems. This paper suggests that prolonged online teaching and virtual social interactions have led to a mix of fear and longing for offline life among students. When difficulties arise in offline learning or social situations that cannot be promptly resolved, students are prone to issues such as rapid mood changes, cognitive and behavioral problems, internet dependency, and social withdrawal. Therefore, reinforcing both online and offline psychological counseling is essential.

This paper does have some limitations, such as the relatively large period of the data, variations in the development levels across different provinces in China affecting psychological factors differently, and the use of secondary data sources. Future research will focus on the mental health issues of the student population in the post-pandemic era and how to provide psychological counseling to this group better. What the long-term impact of this shift towards "virtual contact" on interpersonal interactions will be remains a question for future studies.

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