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(March to October 2024)

Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education: A Collaborative Imperative

Written by Dr. Farah Adilla Ab Rahman

The mental health and wellbeing of university faculty and students have become critical areas of concern in recent years. Depression, anxiety, stress, burnout, isolation, lack of support, an overwork culture, and a highly competitive environment are increasingly linked to careers in university education. These issues are exacerbated by growing pressures from university structures, increasing student numbers, diverse student needs, and the heavy burden of research (Hammoudi Halat, Soltani, Dalli, Alsarraj, & Malki, 2023). To counter these challenges, a collaborative effort at the organizational level is essential, with strategic initiatives aimed at leadership and implemented by faculty to promote their wellbeing.



Picture 1: University Student's Juggle with Academic and Personal Demands

Significant efforts are still needed to establish clear frameworks for maintaining faculty wellbeing and understanding the factors, consequences, and implications associated with their mental health. While qualitative and quantitative investigations in this field are essential, advanced technological tools such as digital mental health interventions (Pemovska et al., 2021) and AI-guided therapy and life-crafting (Dekker, De Jong, Schippers, De Bruijn-Smolters, Alexiou, & Giesbers, 2020) also show promise. These tools could be integral to the broader strategies and actions that higher education institutions must implement to support faculty mental health. Research and practice should focus on exploring the feasibility and effectiveness of these interventions, particularly digital technology, to build the necessary evidence base for improving mental health outcomes.

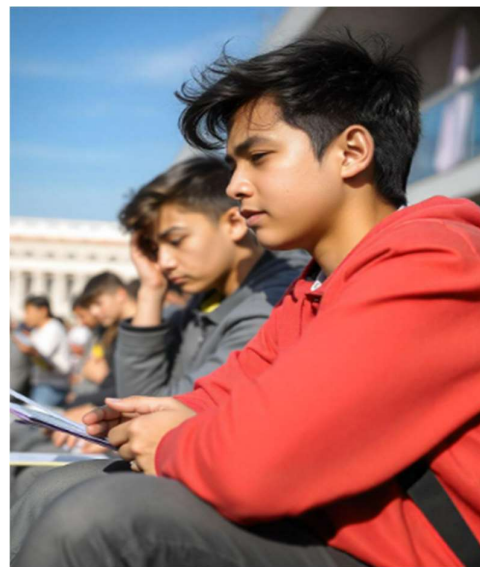
Universities should be environments where faculty can develop, learn, teach, and thrive without compromising their wellbeing. Transforming universities into genuinely healthy settings requires a fundamental shift in working culture, where creative and unbiased strategies rooted in solid research are applied to promote mental health.

Evidence suggests that these interventions can effectively reduce common mental health difficulties among students. However, evidence on other interventions,

such as organizational and structural changes, remains limited. It is currently impossible to determine which interventions work best due to the lack of comparative studies or reviews. Most existing studies do not consider the distribution of intervention impacts across different subgroups, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Universities must select interventions based on the best available evidence, considering the methodological strength and effectiveness of the evidence (Worsley, Pennington, & Corcoran, 2022). Thus, a robust primary evidence base needs to be developed and systematically reviewed to draw confident conclusions about what works best for sustaining positive mental health and wellbeing in today's diverse and growing post-secondary student population.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for effective mental health support for university students. During the pandemic, more than half of the students reported experiencing mild to severe depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. Factors such as exercise frequency, satisfaction with online learning, screen time, and a history of depression were significant predictors of these mental health issues. These findings underscore the need for accessible and effective interventions to improve students' mental health, even as we move into the endemic phase (Wong, Wong, Ng, Bostanudin, &

Tan, 2023). Online education on mental wellness, regular screening, and free online therapy sessions for high-risk groups identified during screening should be consistently offered through health awareness programs and incorporated into academic structures. Further clinical assessments are necessary to confirm the presence of mental health disorders, and large-scale longitudinal studies are needed to understand better the risk factors for depression, anxiety, and stress among university students in Malaysia (Wong, Wong, Ng, Bostanudin, & Tan, 2023).



Picture 2: University Student's Struggle with Stress and Mental Health

Perceived stress is strongly negatively associated with mental wellbeing, with academic and family pressures being significant stressors. These pressures directly impact mental wellbeing, beyond what is explained by perceived stress alone. To protect students' mental

wellbeing, it is urgent to reduce perceived stress and enhance their resilience. According to Slimmen, Timmermans, Mikolajczak-Degrauwe, and Oenema (2022), this can be achieved by reducing academic pressure and equipping students with coping strategies and resilience skills. Further research is needed to understand why academic and family pressures have a direct impact on mental wellbeing, as well as to explore the underlying factors in this relationship through longitudinal studies.

In conclusion, promoting mental health in higher education requires a multifaceted approach involving strategic planning, advanced technological tools, targeted interventions, and ongoing research. By addressing these challenges, universities can create a healthier, more supportive environment for both faculty and students.

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