

Assessment Of Psychological Distress Among Nursing Undergraduate Students In Malaysia

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ABSTRACT:

Introduction: Studies among undergraduate students in Malaysia have assessed the impact of stressors on the mental health of students. Nursing students are subjected to a variety of stressors during their study. Severe and prolonged stressors may lead to psychological distress which may affect students' academic performance, physical health and quality of life. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the rate of psychological distress and its relationship with stressors faced by the students. **Methodology:** A sample of 174 nursing students from International Islamic University Malaysia participated in this study. The psychological distress was assessed using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire. The sources of stressors were identified by giving the students a list of the most possible source of stressors which were chosen depending on previous studies, and then the severity of stressors and their relationship with psychological distress were assessed. **Results:** The prevalence of psychological distress was 31.6%. No significant differences between the gender and age of students in relation to psychological distress. Regarding the source of stressors, the top five stressors decided by the students were fear of failing, examination and grades, study pressure and obligations, fear of unemployment after graduation and academic overload. **Conclusion:** psychological distress is present among nursing students which require early intervention. Academic and psychological factors can be considered as sources of stressors that may precipitate emotional disturbances among the nursing students.

Keywords: psychological distress, nursing students, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Recently mental health has become one of the most grave issues among individuals of all ages. A mentally healthy student is the one who thinks clearly and rationally, able to initiate proper social relationships, enthusiastic to learn with substantial ambition to implement his/her plans in the future. Since the students are at a crucial stage of development, being in the transition from adolescence to adult, they are more subjected to experience mental illnesses.¹

Psychological distress is the state of poor psychological well-being that is characterized by undifferentiated mixtures of symptoms extending from depression and anxiety symptoms to personality traits, functional disabilities and behavioral problems.^{2,3}

University is considered as a stressful period in students' life which they have to deal with as they are facing a variety of demands such as living away from their families, a heavily loaded curriculum, and inefficiency in both mentor- mentee and health education programs. This will make them more vulnerable to psychological distress. Studies among undergraduate students in Malaysia have assessed the impact of stressors on students' mental health as it may precipitate to psychological distress and emotional disturbances including depression, anxiety and stress⁴⁻⁹

The General health questionnaire (GHQ) which was developed by Goldberg,¹⁰ has been extensively used in various cultures as a screening tool to determine whether an individual is at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder. It was designed to assess psychological distress in population surveys and epidemiological studies, and to screen for non-psychotic mental disorders in clinical setting is widely

used by researchers and has been found to be reliable and well-validated.¹⁰⁻¹²

Nursing students are subjected to different levels of stressors during various stages of their study and these stressors may affect their psychological well-being leading to serious psychological distress that may hinder their academic performance. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the prevalence of psychological distress nursing undergraduate students.

METHODOLOGY

This is a cross sectional study which was conducted among undergraduate nursing students, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2017.

A research grant sponsored by the International Islamic University Malaysia was obtained for conducting this research. Ethical approval was obtained from Research Ethics Committee, International Islamic University Malaysia prior conducting the study. The participation was entirely on a voluntary basis and confidentiality was insured.

Consent was obtained from the students. The study was conducted in middle of the course before the examination period so as to minimize the extra stress symptoms. The inclusion criteria were students who agreed to participate in the study and the students should be registered as undergraduate students of Kulliyyah (faculty) of Nursing, IIUM. Students who fail to give consent, and those who were not conversant in English were excluded from the study. The socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were obtained; the gathered information was about the nationality, age, marital status, gender, year of study, accommodation during study and household income. The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)^{10, 11} was used to determine the prevalence of psychological distress among medical undergraduate students. The items on the GHQ- 12 represent 12 manifestations of psychological distress, and respondents were asked to rate the presence of each of these manifestations in themselves during their study.

Subjects responded to each question by choosing from four typical responses: ‘not at all’, ‘no more than usual’, ‘rather more than usual’ and ‘much more than usual’. A binary scoring method is used to evaluate responses. This method assigns a score of zero to the two least symptomatic answers and a score of one to the two most symptomatic answers (i.e. 0-0-1-1). Thus, responses can only be scored as zero or one. The minimum GHQ-12 total score was 0 and the maximum GHQ-12 total score was 12 ‘Caseness’ was defined as a total questionnaire score of 4 or more. The students were also given a list of the most possible source of stressors which were chosen depending on previous studies.¹³⁻¹⁷

Statistical Analysis: We used the statistical package for social science program, version 22.0 (SPSS 22.0) for analyzing the data. The analysis of the variables such as age group, gender, nationality, monthly household income, marital status, year of study and type of accommodation were presented in numbers and percentages. Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test were used to determine the effects of the socio-demographic characteristics on the psychological distress among undergraduate students. Mann-Whitney U test was also used to assess the association between the ten stressor factors and the psychological distress among nursing students. A P-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

The overall response rate in this study was 95.6% (174 out of 182 nursing students). The students were distributed as following; 47, 30, 55 and 42 students were from year 1, year 2, year 3, year 4, and year 5 respectively.

Table 1: Factors Determine Significant psychological distress level

Factors	No.	Mean Psychological Distress score	P Value
Gender			
Male	31	2.48	0.59
Female	143	2.79	
Age			
≤ 22	79	2.67	0.78
>22	95	2.79	
Household income			
≤ RM1500	3.10		0.27
RM 1501-5000	2.32		
>RM 5000	2.74		
Marital status			
Single	170	0.75	0.16
Married	4	2.80	
Social interaction			
Active	114	2.55	0.25
Inactive	60	3.08	
Accommodation			

Hostel	169	2.73	0.96
Non-Hostel	5	2.80	

The prevalence of psychological distress among the students was 31.6%. The rate was higher among year 3 nursing students (45.5%) and it was statistically significant than other years of study (P=0.039). Although the mean score of the female students (2.79) was higher than males' mean score (2.49) but it was not significant. There were no significant differences in comparing mean scores of other factors such as age, monthly house income, marital status, social interaction, and accommodation (Table 1).

Regarding the source of stressors, the top ten stressors decided by the students were fear of failing, fear of unemployment after graduation, examination and grades, academic overload, study pressure and obligations, time management problems, reduced holidays, fear of employment after graduation, limitation of entertainment time and lack of time for relaxation. (table 2)

Students with who were psychologically distressed were having significantly higher mean scores of seven stressors namely fear of failing, fear of unemployment after graduation, examination and grades, academic overload, study pressure and obligations, time management problems, and fear of employment after graduation (Table 3).

Table 2: The Ten Most Frequently Cited Stressors

NO.	Stressor	Mean (SD)
1.	Fear of failing	2.78 (1.05)
2.	Fear of unemployment after graduation	2.76 (1.08)
3.	Examination and grades	2.70 (1.08)
4.	Academic overload	2.67 (1.02)
5.	Study pressure and obligations	2.56 (1.02)
6.	Time management problems	2.51 (1.07)
7.	Reduced holidays	2.45 (1.22)
8.	Fear of employment after graduation	2.44 (1.07)
9.	Limitation of leisure and entertainment time	2.42 (1.11)
10.	Lack of time for relaxation	2.41 (1.11)

Table 3: The Mean scores of top ten stressors in relation with psychological distress

Stressor	Psychologically distressed	Not distressed	P Value
Fear of failing	3.16	2.60	0.001
Fear of unemployment after graduation	3.16	2.57	0.001
Examination and grades	3.07	2.52	0.002
Academic overload	3.12	2.46	0.00
Study pressure and obligations	3.07	2.32	0.00
Time management problems	2.96	2.30	0.00
Reduced holidays	2.61	2.38	0.24
Fear of employment after graduation	2.85	2.26	0.001
Limitation of entertainment time	2.61	2.33	0.17
Lack of time for relaxation	2.56	2.35	0.24

DISCUSSION

The prevalence of psychological distress among nursing students in this study was found to be 31.6% which is slightly higher than other studies in Malaysia found the rate to be 29.6%, 30.1% and 38.8 respectively^{4, 13} but it is lower than other study done among dental students in which the rate was 41.1%.⁹

These differences in rates may be due to different courses or sample size or due to using different methods to assess the distress for example type of questionnaire and the cut off score used to indicate caseness.

Gender-wise, this study revealed that there was no significant difference in mean scores on GHQ-12 between female and male students, this is consistent with previous studies^{12, 16, 18} While other studies revealed that the rate is higher among female students.^{4, 5, 9}

Since both genders were living in similar environment and generally facing similar stressors during their academic period, authors believed that there was no difference in the rate of psychological distress between male and female students

Academic and psychological factors played an important role as a source of stressors since most of the top ten stressors chosen by the students were related to them. This finding is comparable with other studies in which the academic related factors were considered as the main sources of stressors.^{13, 14, 19, 20}

In this study, the analysis had shown a significant association between seven stressors and psychological distress among nursing students.

The result of this study may serve in initiating appropriate intervention strategies and regularly reviewing the curriculum to enhance the students' learning abilities and their life style.

CONCLUSION

Psychological distress is present among nursing students, no gender differences in relation to psychological distress. Academic and psychological factors can be considered as sources of stressors that may precipitate for psychological distress in nursing students. To enhance the academic performance and psychological well-being of the students, it is important to highlight the necessity of regular assessment and reviewing the academic curriculum especially in the aspect of difficulty and frequency of the assignment given to the students so that the students will not be overloaded which will exhaust them physically and mentally.

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