
Depression among Nigerian University Students: Causes, Symptoms, Impact, and Solutions

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Abstract

Depression is increasingly affecting Nigerian university students, disrupting their academics, emotional well-being, and overall life satisfaction. This paper reviews scholarly literature on depression among university students, including its causative factors, symptoms, impacts, and possible solutions to offer better support to struggling students. Major contributing factors include academic pressure, financial difficulties, lack of awareness about mental health, and inadequate access to counselling services. Depression in university students manifests through symptoms such as ongoing sadness, exhaustion, and withdrawal from social interactions. These challenges can severely affect academic performance, making concentration and motivation difficult, while also straining friendships and support networks. The emotional toll can lead to isolation, further deepening the struggle. Addressing depression among university students requires proactive measures such as raising awareness about mental health, strengthening campus counselling services, fostering peer support networks, implementing stress management initiatives, and advocating for policy changes. These strategies can help alleviate the negative impact of depression and create a more supportive environment for affected students. By addressing these challenges, universities can create a more supportive environment that promotes students' academic growth and emotional well-being, helping them thrive both in their studies and personal lives.

Keywords: Ddepression, University uundergraduates, Causative factors, Symptoms, Impact

Introduction

A sound mental state is crucial for a fulfilling and productive life. A balanced state of mind supports overall well-being, enabling individuals to function effectively. Without it, both personal growth and societal stability can be significantly impacted. It is a widespread and serious mental health challenge that has been acknowledged throughout history, affecting people of all backgrounds and age groups. Depression among Nigerian university students is a pressing issue, with rising cases in higher education posing serious challenges. This condition affects both academic performance and personal well-being, disrupting social interactions and overall quality of life (Afu, 2023; Deng, 2022; Tang, 2023). It can range from brief periods of sadness to deep emotional turmoil that disrupts daily life and hinders one's ability to cope effectively (Oyadeyi, 2020).

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Depression is often referred to as the "common cold" of mental health disorders (Goodwin, 2008), and is recognized as one of the most widespread and costly psychiatric conditions affecting over 280 million people globally (WHO, 2021). It impacts individuals across various age groups, with a particularly increasing prevalence among adolescents and young adults. A thorough understanding of depression among Nigerian university students is essential for creating effective solutions. Early detection of symptoms and robust mental health support systems are key to addressing this issue. This paper reviewed the existing literature on depression by identifying its causes, symptoms and impacts on the students. Some preventive measures were also examined.

Concept of Depression

Depression is a mental health condition characterized by prolonged periods of sadness, diminished interest in previously enjoyable activities, and difficulty managing daily responsibilities for at least two weeks (Pan American Health Organisation, 2023). It involves persistent low mood, withdrawal from social interactions, and challenges in carrying out routine tasks over an extended period (WHO, 2023). Unlike normal mood variations, depression can significantly disrupt relationships, academic performance, and overall quality of life.

Depression, as reported by the National Mental Health Institute (2024), can result in serious symptoms that impact emotions, thought processes, and essential daily activities such as sleeping, eating, and working. Studies indicate a rising prevalence of depression among students worldwide (Isara et al., 2022; Elechi & Okoye, 2023). A recent survey conducted across 133 college campuses found that 44% of students showed signs of depression, with 15% having suicidal thoughts (Bowe, 2023).

A study conducted in 2020 by Awadalla et al. found that 34.2% of university students in the UAE showed symptoms of major depression. In Nigeria, mental health challenges among undergraduates continue to rise, signaling a deepening crisis. Research by Adewuya et al. (2006) and Adewuya et al. (2018) highlights the growing prevalence of depression among university students worldwide.

Maintaining good mental health is vital for overall well-being, as it plays a key role in an individual's ability to function effectively. When mental health is compromised, it can lead to challenges that affect both personal development and society as a whole. Depression, a serious and widespread mental health issue, has been acknowledged throughout history. In the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel (King James Bible Version, 2019, Genesis 4:3-8), Cain's response to the rejection of his offering exhibits traits linked to depression, illustrating its deep-rooted existence in human experience.

Depression among Nigerian students frequently goes unnoticed or unaddressed until it becomes severe. Many undergraduates silently endure this challenge, often hindered by stigma, lack of awareness, and inadequate support systems. The reluctance to seek help worsens the situation, resulting in serious outcomes such as poor academic performance, substance dependency, and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts or actions.

Causes of Depression among Nigerian University Students

Factors contributing to depression among Nigerian undergraduates are numerous. They include the following.

- 1. Financial difficulties and economic hardship.** The increasing cost of education places a heavy financial burden on Nigerian undergraduates and their families (Oyadeyi, 2020). Many struggle to afford tuition, textbooks, housing, and daily expenses, leading to frustration, stress, and emotional distress. These

financial pressures can contribute to feelings of helplessness and, in some cases, depression.

2. **Academic Stress and Underachievement:** Consistent academic pressure and struggles with performance can lead to feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and inadequacy. Without effective ways to manage stress, these challenges may escalate, resulting in severe emotional strain and, in some cases, depression.
3. **Psychological and Traumatic Experience:** Experiencing traumatic events such as violence, accidents, or the loss of a loved one can deeply affect a person's mental well-being. These distressing experiences may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), increasing vulnerability to depression (Jones et al., 2022).
4. **Relationship Breakdowns:** Students are often engaged in romantic relationships. When a relationship ends, individuals may struggle with feelings of low self-worth and emotional distress, which can contribute to depression (Oyadeyi, 2020).
5. **Home-Related Factors and Homesickness:** Family issues such as parental conflicts, neglect, or a lack of emotional support can contribute to depressive symptoms (Oyadeyi, 2020). Homesickness is also prevalent among students who were prematurely transitioned into higher education.
6. **Security Concerns and Exposure to Disturbing News:** The fear of violence, kidnapping, and terrorism creates persistent anxiety among students. Continuous exposure to unsettling news increases stress levels, making individuals more vulnerable to depression (Oyadeyi, 2020).
7. **Unrealistic Expectations and Excessive Competition:** Students often experience immense pressure to meet demanding academic and career goals set by their parents (Oyadeyi, 2020). The persistent push for high achievement, along with intense competition among peers, can result in stress, loss of confidence, and mental exhaustion, increasing vulnerability to depression.
8. **Substance Abuse:** Some students turn to alcohol and drugs as a means of coping with academic stress and social challenges (Çelik, et al., 2019, Ladi-Akinyemi, et al. 2023, Oyadeyi, 2020). However, reliance on these substances often worsens depression and negatively impacts mental health over time.
9. **Chronic Health Conditions:** Students with long-term illnesses or disabilities often face added stress due to their health challenges (Liu, et al. 2022, Çelik, et al., 2019). The physical and emotional strain of managing their conditions can lead to depression, affecting their overall well-being and academic success.
10. **Family History of Depression:** A genetic tendency toward depression can raise the risk of developing the condition (Harvard Health Publishing, 2024). Individuals with a family history of depression may be more vulnerable due to inherited biological factors and shared environmental influences.

Symptoms of Depression among Undergraduate Students

Depression is a serious mental health condition that impacts emotions, thoughts, and daily activities. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and may include:

1. **Persistent Sad, Anxious, or "Empty" Mood:** Students experiencing depression often endure overwhelming emotional distress, fear, and hopelessness.

These feelings may linger for extended periods, affecting their ability to focus, interact socially, and manage daily responsibilities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

2. Loss of Interest or Pleasure in Activities: Students experiencing depression may struggle with anhedonia, losing interest in activities they once found enjoyable. This can affect their participation in extracurricular events, clubs, spiritual engagements, sports, and social interactions (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

3. Changes in Appetite and Sleep Patterns: Depression can lead to noticeable shifts in eating habits, resulting in significant weight gain or loss. Sleep disturbances, such as difficulty falling asleep or excessive sleeping, are also common, affecting overall health and daily functioning.

4. Psychomotor Agitation or Retardation: Depression can affect physical movement and speech. Some individuals may experience restlessness and excessive, purposeless activity, while others may have slowed movements and speech, making daily tasks more challenging.

5. Fatigue or Loss of Energy: Students experiencing depression often struggle with a noticeable decline in energy levels. They may feel constantly tired or drained, even without engaging in strenuous activity, making daily responsibilities more difficult to manage.

6. Feelings of Worthlessness or Excessive Guilt

Inappropriate guilt or feelings of worthlessness are common cognitive distortions experienced by depressed students (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

7. Difficulty Thinking and Impaired Focus

This condition can affect brain functioning, causing challenges with focus, decision-making, and memory (NHS, 2023).

8. Thoughts of Death or Suicide

Suicidal ideation or attempts can be a serious manifestation of depressive symptoms that require immediate attention (American Psychiatric Association, 2024; Mayo Clinic, 2022).

9. Cognitive Function: Impaired Concentration and Decision-Making

Depression can lead to difficulties in concentrating, making decisions, and remembering information, ultimately impacting academic performance (NHS, 2023).

10. Social Withdrawal

Depressed students often experience social withdrawal, isolating themselves from friends, family, and activities, which can worsen feelings of loneliness.

11. Decreased Productivity

Depression can lead to reduced efficiency and productivity in academic settings, resulting in decreased motivation and poor academic achievement

12. Difficulty with School Work and Decline in Grades

Depressed students often struggle with concentrating on school work, completing assignments, and meeting deadlines, leading to decreased motivation and poor academic achievement.

13. Increased Absenteeism

Students with depression may struggle with attending classes regularly, further hindering their academic progress.

The Impact of Depression among Undergraduate Students

The consequences of depression among learners are profound, affecting their scholastic achievement, social interactions, and overall well-being. The following are some key effects of depression on students in higher education.

1. Academic Underperformance

Depression significantly impairs cognitive function, resulting in reduced concentration, memory deficits, and difficulties in decision-making. Consequently, students experiencing depression often exhibit lower Grade Point Averages (GPA), increased absenteeism, and diminished motivation to engage in academic activities (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

2. Social Withdrawal: Depression frequently leads to social isolation, causing students to disengage from social activities, friendships, and familial relationships. This withdrawal can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and make it challenging to form and maintain interpersonal relationships.

3. Physical Health Problems

Depression can affect physical well-being, contributing to chronic health conditions and impaired immune function (Irwin et al., 2016).

4. Suicidal behaviour

Depression plays a major role in increasing the likelihood of suicidal thoughts and actions among students. WHO (2024) reports that suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death worldwide for youngsters below 30 years.

5. Reduced Quality of Life

Depression significantly impairs daily functioning, leading to diminished participation in extracurricular activities, reduced enjoyment of social engagements, and overall dissatisfaction with life (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

6. Diminished Self-Esteem and Confidence

Depression can lead to negative self-talk, self-blame, and decreased self-esteem, causing students to doubt their academic abilities and future prospects.

7. Substance Abuse

Depression can increase the risk of substance abuse among students. Individuals with depression are more likely to be involved in substance abuse. The National Institute on Mental Health (2019) reports that individuals suffering from depression are more likely to develop substance use disorders.

8. Higher Risk of Academic Dropout

Depression is associated with an increased likelihood of academic disengagement and dropout among tertiary institution students (Eisenberg et al., 2009). Depression can increase the risk of dropout among students.

9. Decreased Resilience

Students experiencing depression often exhibit reduced resilience, making it more difficult for them to manage stress, adversity, and trauma effectively.

10. Physical Health Complications

Depression has significant physiological effects, including altered appetite and sleep patterns, weakened immune function, and increased susceptibility to health conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (Irwin et al., 2016), and obesity.

11. Increased Risk of Self-Harm

Depression can increase the likelihood of self-harm among students, including cutting, burning, and other forms of self-injury which may serve as maladaptive coping mechanisms for emotional distress.

Strategies for the Prevention and Management of Depression

The following effective strategies are crucial to mitigate the effects of depression and promote overall well-being.

1. Self-Care Strategies

The first source of solution to any human problem is the person himself/herself. The affected must first believe that the problem exists in his life and be ready to take some actions. Self-care is a vital component of managing depression. Individuals can employ several strategies to alleviate symptoms, including:

- i. Engaging in activities previously enjoyed, despite decreased interest.
- ii. Maintaining social connections with friends and family.
- iii. Regular exercise, even brief walks.
- iv. Adhering to regular eating and sleeping habits.
- v. Avoiding alcohol and illicit substances, which can exacerbate depression.
- vi. Seeking help from trustworthy individuals, such as counsellors, doctors, and psychologists.
- vii. Practicing self-awareness, recognizing persistent negative thoughts and self-criticism, and replacing them with positive affirmations.

2. Parental Involvement

Parents play a crucial role in identifying and addressing depressive symptoms in their children. It is essential for parents to openly discuss depression with their children, avoid hiding identified symptoms or blaming their children for depression, encourage their children to express their feelings in a supportive environment, and refer their children to counsellors and mental health practitioners for professional help.

3. Counsellor Support

Counsellors and psychologists within the school system have a lot to offer students to address diverse mental health issues. The counsellors have been trained to employ different therapeutic strategies to assist those having mental health issues, such as the topic under discussion. School counsellors are vital in addressing mental health issues, including depression. Counsellors can offer guidance and support through educational, vocational, and personal-social counselling. Students can also employ therapeutic strategies, such as behavioural activation (participating in enjoyable activities to boost their mood), practicing relaxation techniques and mindfulness to manage stress, and challenging negative thought patterns to support emotional well-being. Developing problem-solving skills can help them navigate challenges more effectively, while strengthening relationships with family, friends, and mentors provides emotional support. When necessary, counsellors should refer students to medical professionals or hospitals for further mental health care.

4. Peer Support: Students can play an essential role in supporting their peers who are experiencing depression. By offering encouragement, listening without judgment, and promoting a positive and understanding environment, they can help affected individuals feel less isolated. Additionally, students should encourage their peers to seek professional help from counsellors or mental health specialists when needed.

5. Lecturers/Educator Roles: Educators have a crucial responsibility in recognizing and addressing signs of depression in students. They should be attentive to shifts in student mood and behaviour, cultivate a compassionate and supportive classroom environment, and avoid actions that may contribute to emotional distress. When necessary, educators should guide students toward professional counselling or mental health support to ensure they receive appropriate assistance.

Conclusion

Depression among Nigerian undergraduates is a significant issue that requires urgent attention. Various factors, including financial difficulties, academic pressure, psychological trauma, and social challenges, contribute to its prevalence. Its impact extends beyond academics, affecting students' relationships, physical health, and overall quality of life. Identifying early warning signs and applying effective intervention strategies is essential in addressing this growing concern. A holistic approach that includes mental health education, accessible counseling services, and institutional support can help alleviate its effects and improve student well-being.

Suggestions

1. There is the need to implement awareness campaigns on mental health issues, especially depression, within tertiary institutions in Nigeria. These campaigns should aim at educating students about the causes, symptoms, and prevention of depression.
2. Organize workshops and seminars that focus on reducing the stigma surrounding mental health problems and encourage open discussions on mental well-being.
3. Managements of the various tertiary institutions in the country should invest in accessible and confidential mental health services that provide students with the necessary resources to cope with depression. Increase the number of trained mental health professionals on campus to offer counselling, support groups, and psycho-education.
4. Peer educators should be trained to identify signs of depression in their fellow students and offer initial support while guiding them to professional help.
5. Counsellors should develop and incorporate stress management and resilience-building programmes, time management, study skills, and mindfulness techniques to mitigate stress's impact on students' mental well-being.
6. Faculty and staff should be sensitive to the mental health challenges faced by students and create an environment that fosters open communication about well-being.
7. Government should develop financial aid programs to alleviate the financial burdens that contribute to depression, such as scholarships, grants, and low-interest loans, etc.
8. There should be integration of mental health services in tertiary institutions, with adequate funding and proper infrastructure.

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