

**The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological well-being of
Pakistani students**

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Annotation: The author of the paper presents the results of a study conducted in the summer of 2023, during which students from three Pakistani universities demonstrated their attitudes towards psychological problems associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. 644 people took part in the survey. 75% of subjects experienced fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Low indicators of subjective well-being were identified in 32.4% of respondents. It was found that risk factors for the formation of negative subjective well-being are: low monetary income, being female, high anxiety and the presence of chronic diseases.

Key words: COVID-19, subjective well-being, students, Pakistan.

**Влияние пандемии COVID-19 на психологическое благополучие
пакистанских студентов**

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Аннотация: Автор статьи представляет результаты исследования, проведенного летом 2023 года, в ходе которого студенты трех пакистанских университетов продемонстрировали свое отношение к психологическим проблемам, связанным с пандемией COVID-19. В опросе приняли участие 644

человека. 75% испытуемых испытывали страх, связанный с пандемией COVID-19. Низкие показатели субъективного благополучия были выявлены у 32,4% респондентов. Было установлено, что факторами риска формирования негативного субъективного благополучия, являются: низкий денежный доход, принадлежность к женскому полу, высокая тревожность и наличие хронических заболеваний.

Ключевые слова: COVID-19, субъективное благополучие, студенты, Пакистан.

Introduction

In March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, stating that the disease had affected populations in more than 160 countries. COVID-19 has become a serious threat to both the physical and mental health of the population [6]. Mental health refers to a state in which people are aware of their ability to cope with life stressors. The mental health of the population is influenced by such factors as: fear associated with the disease, social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine. Since February 2020, Pakistan has introduced measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent the spread of the disease [1]. The government subsequently imposed a complete lockdown, closing mosques and businesses, restricting movement and working from home to promote social distancing. Precautionary measures such as social distancing, staying at home and isolation can lead to psychological and mental health problems. Research has confirmed that the COVID-19 outbreak is associated with various psychological problems, and these may continue even after the outbreak ends. It is therefore important to assess the burden of psychological problems and identify high-risk groups in the population who may require psychological support during this crisis.

Materials and methods

We conducted an online survey among students of three Pakistani universities: Aga Khan University (Karachi), Loralai University (Loralai) and Islamic University of Bahawalpur (IUB) (Bahawalpur). Due to the quarantine in Pakistan, social

distancing measures were introduced, and it was decided to conduct an online study using the "snowball" technology. Students received a web questionnaire to fill out anonymously in Google forms. A total of 644 students took part in the study, who answered questions from a structured questionnaire in English and Urdu. The questionnaire contained questions of socio-demographic information: gender, age, city, education, marital status, employment, type of employment, type of family and financial viability and language choice.

The subjects' attitude to COVID-19 was assessed according to the following aspects: belief in successful control of COVID-19, belief that the COVID-19 pandemic will end, and belief that unverified information disseminated through forwarded messages increases panic about COVID-19. A five-point Likert scale was used for all these questions (from "totally agree" to "totally disagree"). Anxiety about possible COVID-19 infection, fear of death from COVID-19, etc. were also assessed. The World Health Organization's (WHO-5) Well-being Index, consisting of five points, is one of the most frequently used questionnaires to assess subjective psychological well-being.

Results

The average age of the participants was 22.5 years, more than half of the surveyed students - 56.8% were men. More than half (58%) had higher or professional education. About 25% were first-year students, 32% were second- and third-year students, and 43% were graduate and master's degree students. About 80% of the participants believed that COVID-19 would be brought under control worldwide, as well as in Pakistan. 58% of respondents believe that avoiding news about Covid-19 can help reduce the fear of a pandemic. 86% of the surveyed students believe that unreliable information on social networks can increase panic about COVID-19. 55% of respondents admitted that they are worried about possible COVID-19 infection, even if preventive measures are followed.

10% of the students felt very anxious at the thought that there was no effective cure for COVID-19. 32% of the respondents felt anxious about the possibility of transmitting the infection to their family members.

It was found that negative reactions related to anxiety on all COVID-19-related issues were intensified if the subject was female and had a chronic disease. Anxiety coping strategies were also analyzed for their association with low subjective well-being of students. In a single-factor analysis, students who were diagnosed with less severe anxiety related to COVID-19 were more likely to exercise, spent more free time with their family; ate healthy food and slept well; actively participated in social life and had hobbies; they were in search of spiritual support, in comparison with the more anxious subjects.

In the course of a multifactorial analysis, it was found that students who play sports; spend time with their family; do not have sleep problems and participate in social life have more pronounced indicators of subjective well-being. The results of our study showed that about 79% of the surveyed students depended on their source of income during the period of isolation. About 70% of the respondents demonstrated that they experienced pronounced difficulties related to financial difficulties. The vast majority of the tested students chose "Spending time with family at home" (90%), "Leading a healthy lifestyle" (58%), "Finally I'll get enough sleep" (85%) as a strategy to overcome the crisis.

About two thirds of the participants reported seeking spiritual support as a survival strategy, and 42% of respondents contributed to social welfare activities. Since uncertainty about the period of this pandemic is high, survival strategies in these depressive times are of paramount importance. Our population as a whole uses this time of isolation for useful activities. However, we believe that as the closure of jobs and other activities will continue, vulnerable segments of the population will especially need psychological support.

In our study, two thirds of respondents hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic would be successfully controlled globally, and three quarters believed that Pakistan

would also be able to control this pandemic through mitigation and prevention efforts. People should rely only on official resources from the official account of the Ministry of Regulation and Coordination of National Health Services of Pakistan, which will help reduce the fear and panic associated with the pandemic. About 40% of respondents believed that social distancing would become the new norm and in the future it would be difficult to meet people as before. This is due to the fear and anxiety associated with isolation and curfew conditions, as the pandemic is constantly growing in all parts of the world.

The prevalence of high anxiety identified in our study was 38.5%. This result was comparable to the results of a Chinese survey which reported that 35% of respondents had experienced psychological difficulties during this pandemic [3]. In contrast, a recent online survey in Malaysia found that 72.1% of people experienced moderate to severe anxiety [5]. Differences observed across countries in psychological well-being may be explained by health care practices, variations in health system responses, and pandemic prevention and control measures. The use of different tools to assess psychological well-being during this pandemic also makes it difficult to compare findings. Another systematic review also reported that female gender was significantly associated with mental disorders (30). Wang et al also reported that male gender was significantly associated with lower Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R) scores on the compared to women's. Similarly, a history of chronic illness was significantly associated with higher levels of IES-R [2], which was also significantly associated with poor health in our study. A possible explanation for these results could be that women who performed the main care work in households were overloaded with routine housework.

In addition, they also carried out duties related to children and male family members who are forced to stay at home due to the quarantine. This made them more vulnerable to poor health. Unemployment is also seen as an important factor associated with low levels of well-being, and the presence of chronic diseases makes a person vulnerable to psychological problems. We also found that coping strategies;

exercise during quarantine; spending time with family; eating healthy foods; good dream; participation in social security work; and spending time on your hobbies are significantly associated with improved mental well-being. Several studies have been conducted on a sample of university students in Poland [4], reporting that certain coping strategies had a positive impact on mental well-being during COVID-19. To assess the well-being of the population, we used the standardized and validated version of the WHO Well-Being Scale in Urdu. Since our questionnaire was written in both languages (English and Urdu), we were able to include those people who were not comfortable answering in English. We also conducted a factor analysis to isolate the domains that represented the items, allowing for the use of a standardized instrument.

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