

# Mental Distress among Students of a Private University of Delhi, NCR

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## Abstract

**Background:** One of the emerging significant public health problems is mental distress which includes somatic symptoms such as anxiety and depression. In comparison to the general population, earlier studies reported higher mental distress among university students. Students having mental distress suffer from poor academic performance and other learning disabilities. Due to the dearth of literature on the burden of this problem in India, the present study was done to assess the prevalence of mental distress and its association with sociodemographic, personal and academic related variables among students of a private university of Delhi, NCR.

**Methods & Materials:** A cross-sectional observational study was done on 300 private university students of Delhi, NCR. We applied the Self Reporting Questionnaire (SRQ-20) for the assessment of mental distress. Descriptive and Chi-square statistics were done.  $p$  value  $<0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

**Result:** The study participants were predominantly females 58.7%. It was also observed that 13% participants were unsatisfied with admission in the college, 17.3% were unsatisfied with their academic course and 16.3% were unsatisfied regarding coping up with course.

On bivariate analysis it was observed that level of course ( $p<0.001$ ), history of parental conflict ( $<0.001$ ), satisfaction with life ( $<0.001$ ) showed higher statistically significant association with mental distress. Similarly, academic variables such as satisfaction with admission to college ( $p<0.001$ ), satisfaction with academic course ( $<0.001$ ), satisfaction with coping up with course (0.003) were also highly statistically significant.

**Conclusion:** It is noted that mental distress is common among university students and there is a need for attention, support and personalized counseling.

**Keywords:** *Mental distress, SRQ-20, university students.*

## Introduction

Mental distress is defined as disturbance and unpleasant mental-emotional state such as fear, anxiety, depression, confusion and mood swings often impairing the ability to cope with day to day ability<sup>(1)</sup>. Mental distress is becoming a common problem among university students accounting for nearly 12% of the global burden of disease<sup>(2)</sup>. By 2020, mental distress is

expected to become the second most important cause of disability in the world<sup>(2)</sup>. In recent years, due to strong competition and aspiration, this makes the students more vulnerable to developing mental distress. Hence the study was undertaken to find the prevalence of mental distress and its association with socio-demographic, personal and academic-related variables among students of a private university of Delhi, NCR.

## Materials and Method

A cross-sectional study was conducted among 300 students of a private university of Delhi NCR. The study was conducted during mid-semester to ensure that no university examination or event might add extra pressure on students.

A self-constructed, pre-tested questionnaire was used to collect information on socio-demographic, personal and academic-related variables. Mental Distress was assessed using SRQ-20. It is an instrument having 20 questions for the respondents regarding the symptoms and difficulties faced which are significantly seen in the condition of neurotic disorder<sup>(3)</sup> The questions are oriented concerning certain symptoms and problems that might cause difficulties to the participants in the last 30 days. Answers are based on yes & no which are scored as 1 & 0, 1 for yes that indicate symptoms were present during the past month and 0 for no indicates the symptoms were absent.

The maximum score is 20 and anyone with cutoff score  $\geq 10$  suffers from mental distress. It has been used in different countries and is available in many international languages as well<sup>(3)</sup>. Informed consent was taken from the study participants. Institutional ethical approval has been taken.

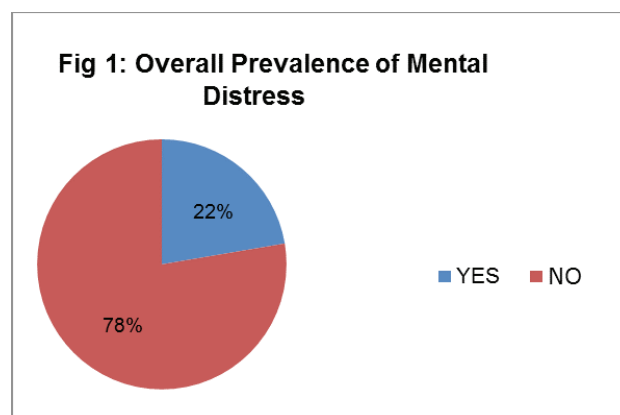
**Inclusion criteria:** Students who gave their informed consent to participate in the study.

**Exclusion criteria:** Those students diagnosed with any form of mental illness and currently on medication.

Data was analyzed using SPSS Version 23.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

## Result

Majority(48%) of study participants were between 16-20 years of age. 58.7% study participants were females. 90.7% of the participants belonged to general category. Out of 300 study participants, alcohol and smoking was reported in 27.3% and 27% of students respectively. With respect to academic related variables, 70.3% of the participants were satisfied with admission in college.



**Figure 1 shows that out of a total of 300 students of a private university the overall prevalence of mental distress was 22%. Age, level of course, history of parental conflict, current mental status, satisfaction with life, satisfaction with academic course and fear regarding future life were the contributing factors regarding mental distress among student.**

Bivariate analysis was applied to study the association between sociodemographic, personal and academic related variables with mental distress.

Table 3 shows that on applying bivariate analysis students, study participants between age 16-20years showed higher proportion of mental distress (n=47,32.6%) compared to students >20years (n=14, 10.3%) and this association was highly statistically significant. (p<0.001)

On studying the association between academic variables and mental distress, students who were unsatisfied with admission to college had higher mental distress (n=21,42%) than those who were satisfied with admission to college (n=41,18.8%) and this association was highly statistically significant. (p<0.001). (Table 3)

## Discussion

Our study was conducted in the mid-semester, to ensure that the students were not under the influence of any college event or examination on joining the university, Our observations suggested that 22.3% of the university students sampled in this study were under distress.

A study carried out in different regions of India reflect diverse situations depending on the use of study instruments. Similar findings were observed in the Kolkata study, where the prevalence of mental distress

was found to be 14.5% among medical students<sup>(2)</sup>. A study done among medical under-graduate students in Bhubaneswar (Odisha) reported the prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress using DASS (Depression Anxiety Stress Scale) scale as 51.3%, 66.9%, and 53% respectively<sup>(11)</sup>. A study in Jodhpur found that 57.98% of Medical students were depressed whilst 47.41% of the students suffered from anxiety<sup>(12)</sup>. A Delhi based study carried out using the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) reported the prevalence of depressive and major depressive disorder to be 21.5% and 7.6% respectively<sup>(13)</sup>.

Similar findings have been reported from else where in the world as well. A study from Ethiopia reported the prevalence of mental distress using SRQ-20 (Self-Reporting Questionnaire) among university students to be 21.6%, (South-West Region) Studies from different North West Region from Ethiopia showed prevalence of mental distress as 40.09% and 11.7% (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia)<sup>(4)(6)(7)</sup>. A study from Ireland using GHQ (General Health Questionnaire) and LBQ (Lifestyle Behaviour Questionnaire) reported 41.9% of university student respondents being mentally distressed<sup>(8)</sup>. Another study from the University of Iceland using Symptoms Checklist – 90 Depression and Anxiety Subscale among female students showed 22.5% and 22.2% of depression and anxiety respectively<sup>(9)</sup>. A study from five faculties at Jazan University, Saudi Arabia found that 31% of undergraduate students were psychologically distressed based on the BSI-18 scale (Brief Symptom Inventory-18)<sup>10)</sup>.

The predictors such as history of parental conflict, level of study, satisfaction with life, satisfaction with course, and alcohol consumption were significantly ( $p > 0.05$ ) associated with mental distress. Satisfaction with life was found to be strongly associated with mental distress in our study as well, Similar findings have also been reported by Canadian National Survey<sup>(15)</sup>, Ankara University<sup>(16)</sup> and Mid-Atlantic university<sup>(18)</sup>.

Students start their professional journey based on their selected courses with high expectation and enthusiasm with a keen interest of gaining new information. As they progress with their courses this enthusiasm often gets dampened along with lack of satisfaction with course. This is significantly common in students with mental distress, a fact well supported

by a study in Turkish university, which showed that mental stress is strongly associated with the student course satisfaction<sup>(17)</sup>. A similar study done in Wollo university stated significant correlation of alcohol intake with mental distress<sup>(19)</sup>. In our study, although females showed higher proportion of mental distress (25.6%) when compared with males (17.7%), this association was not statistically significant. However a study done in University of Hargeisa, Somaliland showed statistically significant association between gender and mental distress.<sup>(20)</sup>

Our observations revealed that inability to cope up with the course content was found to be significantly associated with mental distress, Similar findings have also been reported in studies conducted from Kolkata and New Delhi<sup>(2)(14)</sup>. Family history of mental illness, level of education and global satisfaction with life were other dominant risk factors associated with mental distress as observed in a study conducted among university students from New Delhi<sup>(14)</sup>. Risk factor identification observed in this study could be prospected as a potential risk factor for further studies<sup>(14)</sup>.

### Limitation

The cross-sectional nature of the study and the use of the self-reporting method is a limitation of the study. Further, the study has been conducted in a single university and it limits the external validity of the findings. However, the research is not defeated its purpose.

### Conclusion

Mental distress is common among university students they are either unaware of their situation or reluctant to seek help. But there is a need for care, assistance and counseling support which will provide further impetus for conducting multi-centric longitudinal studies for examining the causal hypothesis.

**Conflict of Interest:** None declared

**Source of Funding:** Self

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