

Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown School Reopening and the Need for Mental Health Support for Undergraduates in Nigeria: A Mini Review

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ABSTRACT

Authors' Contributions

1Conception & study design, Data collection & processing, Data analysis and/or interpretation, Drafting of manuscript.
2Data collection & processing, Data analysis and/or interpretation, Critical review.

Article info.

Received: August 07, 2021

Accepted: March 12, 2022

Funding Source: Nil

Conflict of Interest: Nil

Cite this article: Okoro RN, Aguiyi-Ikeanyi CN. Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown School Reopening and the Need for Mental Health Support for Undergraduates in Nigeria: A Mini Review. RADS J Pharm Pharm Sci. 2021; 9(4):255-260.

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Background: Higher education institutions are an important source of health services and supports, which act as a safeguard for students' social, emotional, and physical well-being. When schools are closed for an extended period of time, students may lose a sense of stability in their lives. The COVID19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of schools in meeting students' mental health needs. This revelation opens the door to updating and implementing school mental health policies in order to better assist students in need of mental health services and supports.

Objectives: To demonstrate the mental health impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closure on Nigerian undergraduates and highlight the need for mental health support services for the affected student, as well as the consequences of untreated mental health problems.

Methods: Articles on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closure on mental health of undergraduates in Nigeria published between April 01, 2020 and December 31, 2021 were searched in Google, Google scholar, medRxiv, and PubMed.

Results: Majority of the studies indicated that COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown and school closure impacted negatively the mental health of Nigerian undergraduates, especially females.

Conclusion: Evidence has demonstrated that COVID-19 pandemic school closures negatively impacted the mental health of undergraduates in Nigeria. This underscores the need for appropriate mental health interventions by professionally trained social workers and counselors to assist affected students in achieving psychological wellness and academic success.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, mental health, Nigeria, undergraduates

INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which started in China, quickly spread across the globe, including to Nigeria, causing massive disruptions in people's lives. Because of the delay in

developing an effective vaccination against the virus, lockdowns became an unavoidable alternative for containing the disease's spread over the world. Following the confirmation of an index case on February 27, 2020, Nigerian government imposed a lockdown on March 30, 2020. On March 27, 2020, the

Nigerian higher education apex regulating authority (National Universities Commission) announced the absolute closure of all higher education institutions across the country in preparation for an effective lockdown. Despite the success of the lockdown, the Nigerian government was forced to begin a phased and gradual lifting of the lockdown due to the unacceptably high economic impact on the populace.

The first phase of the nationwide lockdown easing began on May 4, 2020, and ended at midnight on June 1, 2020. The second phase began on June 2, 2020, and ended on September 3, 2020, at midnight. Phase three of Nigeria's lifting of lockdown began on June 30, 2020, with a few changes from phase two, such as the resumption of school for students in secondary schools in the mid- and final-year exam classes [1]. The fourth phase began on September 4, 2020, with all schools reopening on October 12, 2020, six months after they had been closed to contain the spread of COVID-19.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this review are to demonstrate the mental health impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closure on Nigerian undergraduates and highlight the need for mental health support services for the affected student, as well as the consequences of untreated mental health problems

METHODS

Articles on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closure on mental health of undergraduates in Nigeria published between April 01, 2020 and December 31, 2021 were searched in Google, Google scholar, medRxiv, and PubMed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mental health impact of COVID-19 pandemic school closures on students

The primary goal of school closures was to keep students safe throughout the epidemic, but many students were susceptible to anxiety, sadness, and other major mental health issues as a result. COVID-19's quick expansion and social distancing measures imposed in most countries exacerbated the mental health of residents, notably undergraduates [2]. This is due to the fact that schools are an important health resource and support system for young adult's physical, social, and mental well-being [3].

Adolescents with mental health concerns, on the other hand, have been demonstrated to find school routines to be a helpful coping tool. According to a study, some students have a variety of mental health issues that are handled directly by school-based services [2].

Furthermore, research has demonstrated a rise in anxiety and depression diagnoses among adolescents [4]. For these adolescents with mental health concerns, school closure meant being cut-off from the mainstream resources (mental health support, peer support networks, and face-to-face services) that they ordinarily have access to through their schools. As a result, when schools are closed, this group of students may lose a sense of purpose in life, and their symptoms may resurface. Nonetheless, throughout the period of school closures, a majority of people without pre-existing mental health concerns may have endured prolonged stress as a result of a variety of societal shifts and family events. The illness and grief of family members; social isolation from friends, extended family, teachers, and colleagues; exposure to distressing news; parental unemployment stress and loss of household money are all stressors they must have faced. These pressures are predicted to have a significant impact on their mental health [2].

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic school closures on mental health of undergraduates in Nigeria

A review of published studies indicated that of the 183 undergraduates surveyed in a study, 24% experienced severe anxiety, 22% moderate anxiety, and 30% mild anxiety due COVID-19 pandemic in north central Nigeria [5]. In this study, females had a statistically significant greater anxiety score against COVID 19 disease than males (10.1 ± 5.6 versus 8.2 ± 5.9 , $p = 0.027$). This result emphasizes the importance of focusing mental health interventions on female students.

In north western region, a study that examined the influence of the COVID-19 lockdown on students' mental health found that the lockdown protocols had a substantial impact on students' psychology, as well as their behaviour and normal routines [6]. Some of the indicative elements identified by this study that related to the shift in the psychology difference were a lack of desire in studying as normal, a worry of being affected by the COVID-19 disease, and a fear that some siblings might be or have been infected. The primary contributing variables to the students'

changing behaviour during the pandemic lockdown were recognized as getting upset easily and experiencing exhaustion more than usual, which could be linked to the type of living pattern cycled throughout time. Missing out on the opportunity to hang out with friends, lack virtual school programmes, and grappling with a unique manner of learning, among other things, were discovered to be some of the significant indicators that the students' routines were primarily affected. It is worth noting that according to this study, female students were more affected mentally in routine activity modifications than males [6]. This result shows that the government's lockdown and stay-at-home order increased most female household responsibilities, which could be distressing, resulting in a larger sense of psychological discomfort among female students than male peers. An evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown policy on the anxiety of 139 engineering students at a university indicated that the students' anxiety level increased, with female students also having a higher level of worry than male students [7]. Fears about a delay in life plans as a result of school suspension (92.0%), worries about academic delays/extension of the academic calendar (91.0%), and worries about running out of supplies (76.0%) were the most common contributing reasons to anxiety in this study. The main ways that anxiety impacted students' lives were a decrease in book reading/studies/academics (76.0%), difficulty focusing (75.0%), being unable to hang out with friends (68.0%), difficulties falling asleep (67.0%), and having more chores and homely responsibilities to do than usual (67.0%) [7].

Within south western region, according to a study that assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological well-being of students at a Nigerian university, 55.0% of 433 students surveyed experienced decreased psychological well-being as a result of the lockdown [8]. This study also found that students who expressed a need for substance use as a coping mechanism (Odds Ratio [OR] =1.50, 95% CI=0.55-4.05) and those who were dissatisfied with the online teaching technique (OR=5.34, 95% CI=4.13-9.18) had a considerably increased risk of poor mental health [8]. Online chatting with friends/watching movies (OR=0.22, 95% CI=1.37-3.59) and participating in online vocational training (OR=0.25, 95% CI=0.25-0.61) were found to be protective variables against decreasing mental health in this study [8]. Another study discovered that 65

(63.7%) of students reported mild to severe depression as a result of the pandemic lockdown [9]. Anxiety and depression were found to be prevalent in 41.5% and 31.9 of 386 undergraduate students at a university, respectively, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown[10]. These high figures show that the COVID-19 pandemic school closure caused significant psychological stress among Nigerian undergraduates. It was noted that the majority of these students dealt with their problems by using social media, watching television/movies, and participating in other online skill development activities [10]. According to one study, 18.6% (60/322) of undergraduates felt stressed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 24.5% (79/322) screened positive for depression symptoms, 16.1% (34/322) for anxiety symptoms, and 39.8% (128/322) for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms [11]. In this study, significant characteristics related with elevated levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD included an increase in time spent on social media, television and movies, sleep duration, and a decrease in physical activity. A study of 261 students from 22 private and federal universities in Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, and Lagos states discovered that a large proportion of students (52.8%, n = 138/261) lacked interest in activities, hobbies, or happenings around them, were afraid because it seemed to be no end in sight to this pandemic (64.3%, n = 168/261), and felt down, depressed, or hopeless (78.2%) [12].

In south eastern region, a qualitative investigation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on final-year social work students at a Nigerian university revealed that the pandemic had detrimental repercussions on the students' life, including anger, fear, anxiety, frustration, and suicide thoughts [13]. The students' unpleasant emotions were exacerbated by the possibility that they or their family members would get the virus. They were frustrated since the lockdown had kept them at home for several months, and they didn't know when academic activity at the institution would resume. Many of the students were excited about graduating from university and going on to the next stage of their lives, though the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown, hampered their academic progress.

Within south southern region, a study that evaluated the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of 259 university students discovered that 77 (29.7%) individuals screened positive for mild anxiety

symptoms, 34 (13.1%) for moderate anxiety symptoms, and 24 (9.3%) for severe anxiety. On the other hand, 71 (27.4%) students screened positive for mild depression, 37 (14.3%) for moderate depression, 20 (7.7%) for moderately severe depression, and 16 for severe depression [14]. These findings show that total or near-total seclusion at home had a negative impact on these students' mental health because humans are social beings who rely on social contacts for healthy mental health [15]. Fear, worry, sadness, and poor sleeping patterns have all been linked to social isolation [16]. Depression and suicidal ideation may result from feelings of social isolation/loneliness. Furthermore, the students' emotional anguish, despair, and anxiety may have been exacerbated by the stay-at-home order, which disrupted their continuity of studies and delayed their graduation.

Nationwide, an online survey of 1533 students, representing 84.9% of undergraduates, revealed psychosocial issues such as hopelessness and a high level of distrust for existing educational systems as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown [17]. A study that investigated the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the psychological well-being of tertiary institution students in Nigeria discovered a high prevalence of perceived anxiety (79.6%, n=109/137) and depression (88.4%, n=121/137) [18]. Boredom, having few or no friends nearby, loneliness, poor access to medical care, delayed laboratory work or research findings that already had a timeline, few opportunities to relieve stress through sporting activities, and inability to move around or attend functions were identified as significant contributing factors [18].

Needs and recommendations for post-COVID-19 pandemic lockdown school reopening mental health support for undergraduates in Nigeria

Because of the prolonged stress caused by school closures, more students are likely to return to school with social, emotional, and behavioral needs that will require the attention of school-based mental health and social service providers. As the need for mental health services grows, immediate action and valuable resources will be required to meet these demands. As a result, a clarion call is issued for schools to update their mental health policies and to put these updated policies into effect as soon as possible.

Where none existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic school closure, there is an urgent need for such school management to develop one and be willing to implement it in anticipation of a large number of students returning with mental health issues. As a result, it is expected that when these students return to school, school social workers, psychologists, and counselors will provide critical mental health support. Furthermore, their mental health status should be monitored on a regular basis in the long run to ensure their psychological well-being and academic success.

Consequences of unattended COVID-19 pandemic school closure mental health issues among undergraduates

Unattended or poorly managed students' mental health problems could result in both a mental health crisis and an emergency. Where there is no or ineffective mental health functional system in place to provide psychological support to students with mental health issues, these students are simply left to deal with their problems, which have consequences for them, others, the school, and the larger community. Untreated mental health problems in students, for example, can have a negative impact on their quality of life, academic achievement, physical health, and satisfaction with their school experience.

Secondly, it can have a negative impact on relationships with friends and family. The bigger picture is that these issues can have long-term effects on students' job opportunities after graduation, earning potential and overall health [19]. To summarize, the authors are concerned about the rising number of suicides among Nigerian undergraduate students [20,21]. Because of these troubling events, untreated mental health problems among Nigerian undergraduates may lead to suicidal ideation.

Concern for this group of students with mental health issues may have personal consequences for colleagues, family members, and staff. This concern may result in anxiety and depression, which can have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships and work productivity. Suicidal ideation and suicide by students may cause great distress among roommates, colleagues, and staff.

Furthermore, the consequences for schools include students' poor academic performance and burden as a result of withdrawal from school, as well as revenue losses for the schools as a result of poor student retention. Finally, the larger community will suffer if

these students are unable to graduate and contribute meaningfully to society's development.

CONCLUSION

Available evidence has demonstrated, the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and school closure on the mental health of undergraduates in Nigeria. The prolonged psychosocial and economic stresses endured by students and families as a result of the pandemic will undoubtedly result in many students returning to school with greater mental health needs than before. Therefore, appropriate mental health interventions by professionally trained social workers and counselors are needed to assist affected students in achieving psychological wellness and academic success. As a result, school administrators must develop or update their mental health policies, as well as provide necessary tools and resources for policy implementation, while psychological health service providers must provide services to alleviate students' mental health burdens as a result of prolonged COVID-19 pandemic school closures.

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