

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**Improving Students' Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being amid COVID-19  
Pandemic in Nigeria****Uthman Shehu LAWAL (Ph.D)**

Department of Social Development

School of General and Applied Sciences

Shehu Idris College of Health Sciences and Technology

Makarfi, Kaduna State

**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of stress to students in the country resulting in fear and anxiety about the new disease. Similarly, the public health measures such as physical distance, quarantine, wearing of masks, make students feel isolated, lonely and separated from the realm of life, academically, socially, psychologically and a lot more. With all of these issues amid COVID-19, it becomes imperative to improve the mental health and psychological well-being of the students to prevent the occurrence of severe mental illness/ disorder. This unit, therefore, explains the concept of mental health, psychological well-being and COVID-19. The various dimensions, issues and strategies for improving mental health and psychological well-being of students were also examined.

**Key words:** COVID-19, Mental Health, Psychology, Well-Being, Pandemic

**Introduction**

The world is experiencing a deadly pandemic of SARSCoV2 or the disease COVID-19. After starting in Wuhan city of China in Dec'19 it has spread over 183 countries so far, with varying degree of severity and fatalities (Farah & Mansuri, 2020). The World Health Organization [WHO] COVID-19 situation report for June 23, 2020, reports 8.99 million cases (133,326 new) and 469,587 deaths (3,847 new). The global daily incidence continues to exhibit an overall increasing trend. The global cumulative incidence surpassed 8 million cases on June 17, so it has only taken 6 days to reach 9 million cases (The Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security, 2020). Consequently, Nigeria at June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the country has a total 22614 cases (594 new confirmed cases) have been confirmed, 7822 cases have been discharged and 549 deaths (7 new) have been recorded in 35 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC], 2020). The spread of the pandemic varies from country to country and the worst affected ones are Italy, Spain and France regarding the fatality ratio. It is learnt that 40% of total global cases and 79.5% of total global deaths due to COVID19 are reported in the European region (The Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security, 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

Regional statistics of World health organization depicts that Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) stands fourth in the rank of the prevalence of confirmed cases of COVID-19 after Europe, Americas and Western Pacific, with a total number of 66 thousand cases and 3592 deaths. Among

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EMRO countries, Iran contributes the highest proportion of 88% of cases as compared to that of 3.7% cases recognized in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Correspondingly, 98% of deaths due to COVID-19 in the EMRO region were documented in Iran (Farah & Mansuri, 2020). Thus, the outbreak of this virus has resulted in mental health and psychological problems amongst students and the general public. For instance, almost half the citizens in the United States are mentally affected as a result of coronavirus. From a survey of 1,226 Americans between March 25-30, 45% of the respondents say the crisis of COVID-19 has hurt their mental health and psychological well-being (Kaiser Family Foundation Poll, 2020). Similarly, the Mental Health America (MHA), said: "Tens of thousands of people are already experiencing serious mental health problems because of the pandemic, many of the students." The number of people screened from January to April by MHA for anxiety increased by 70%, depression 64%, and thought of suicide or self-harms 42% (MHA, 2020). It is worthy of note that Nigeria and the rest of world are not exempted from these mental and psychological problems for the fact that, COVID-19 pandemic has retarded the education, economy and social sphere of human co-existence. At this point, it is important to clarify the major terms in this chapter.

**Clarification of Terms****COVID-19**

Corona-viruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several corona-viruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered corona-virus causes corona-virus disease COVID-19. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. COVID-19 is now a pandemic affecting many countries globally (WHO, 2020).

**Mental Health**

Mental health is an integral and most essential component of an individual's health. In 1948, the WHO defines health with a phrase that modern authorities still apply as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities (WHO, 2020).

Accordingly, the WHO explains mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and contribute to his or her community (WHO, 2018). Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life. On this basis, the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be regarded as a vital concern of individuals, communities and societies throughout the world.

**Psychological Well-being**

According to Burns (2016) psychological well-being refers to inter- and intraindividual levels of positive functioning that can include one's relatedness with others and self-referent attitudes that include one's sense of mastery and personal growth. Subjective well-being reflects dimensions of

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affected judgments of life satisfaction. Huppert (2009) describes it as “the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively”. To Roslan, Ahmad, Nabilla, and Ghiami (2017), psychological well-being is associated with fulfilment of life potential and happiness; personal experience of individuals, accomplishing goals as well as the feeling of pleasure from participating in fascinating activities. Thus, psychological well-being refers to a state of functional mental health, positive social connectedness and high sense of reasoning that enhances personal growth and development. At this point, it is important to look at mental health and psychological well-being issues amongst students as a result of COVID-19 pandemic.

### Dimensions of Mental Health/Psychological Well-being of Student amidst COVID-19

The concept of well-being could be explained to include subjective, social and psychological dimension as well as health-related behaviour of an individual. The model developed by Carol Ryff in 1989 and revisited in 1995 unfolds six dimensions of mental health/ psychological well-being. This includes:

- i. **Self-acceptance:** Self-acceptance is the most recurring aspect of students’ mental health and psychological well-being. It is a fundamental feature of mental health and an element of optimal functioning. Self-acceptance is a key component of self-actualization, enhanced mental health, psychological functioning and development of students amid COVID-19 pandemic (Ryff, 2014). Thus, self-acceptance helps students to maintain direction amidst of any calamity such as COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. **Positive relations with others:** Students developing positive relations with others is an essential component in advancing of trusting and lasting relationships as well as belonging to a network of communication and support amidst COVID-19 pandemic (Ryff, 2014). A calm and relaxed approach reflects maturity, leads to improved interactions and better consideration of others. While good relations of students result in an understanding of others, poor relations can cause frustration, anxiety and fear (Ryff, 2014). The ability to have good human relations is one key feature of mental health and psychological well-being of students amidst COVID-19 pandemic (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).
- iii. **Autonomy:** Saricaoğlu and Arslan (2013) noted that autonomy as equal to making one’s own decisions, freedom, internal locus of control, individualization and self-regulation of behaviour amidst of pandemic such as COVID-19. Thus, students with positive mental health and psychological well-being have a high level of internal evaluation, assessing the self on personal standards and achievements while not relying on the standards of others. They do not strive for endorsement from other individuals, are focused on their own beliefs and are less swayed by other people's ideas (Ryff, 2014).
- iv. **Personal growth:** Personal growth is "an optimal psychological functioning that requires not only to actualize oneself and realize one's potentialities but also to continue to develop and expand oneself as a person, underlining the importance of new challenges or tasks at different periods of life" (Ryff & Singer cited in Sagone & De Caroli, 2014). To achieve peak mental health and psychological functioning amongst students amidst COVID-19 one must continue to develop the self through growth in various facets of life (Ryff, 2014).
- v. **Environmental mastery:** Environmental mastery refers to choosing and controlling the surrounding and imagined environment through physical and/or mental actions. It is

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considered as the students' ability to create environments suitable to his or her psychic conditions amid COVID-19 (Ryff, 2014; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014). Environmental mastery means being able to control complex environmental and life situations such as COVID-19 and to seize opportunities which present themselves. It often requires the ability to step out of one's 'comfort zone' when striving for optimal performance.

- vi. **Purpose in life:** Purpose in life refers to the perceived significance of one's existence and involves the setting and reaching of goals, which contribute to the appreciation of life even in critical situations such as COVID-19 Pandemic (Ryff, 2014). Purpose in life offers students a testable, causal system that synthesizes outcomes including life expectancy, satisfaction, and mental and physical health (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Purpose in life creates direction, thereby eradicating despondency (Miller cited in Edwards, 2007). Goals are an important part of striving for success as students at any point in life. Let us look at mental health and psychological well-being issues as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. This will help in developing strategies for improving students' well-being.

### **Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being Issues as a Result Of COVID-19 Pandemic**

It is understandable, that with the increase in COVID-19 cases, mental health and psychological issues such as anxiety and depression are been experienced among students as a result of academic clampdown as well as total/partial lockdown. Thus, some of these issues include:

- i. **Stigmatization:** As highlighted by WHO, stigmatization and scapegoating of affected persons, students, health care professionals and authority figures are common occurrences during epidemics (Rubin & Wessely 2020, Shigemura et al. 2020) and unfortunately this trend still prevails during the current outbreak of COVID-19, as several people are victimized by social stigmatization, with immense levels of threats online and during public interactions (World Health Organization 2020). Also, where most of the population is illiterate this stigmatization specifically towards the affected individuals and their families is on the rise (Shuja Aqeel, Jaffar, & Ahmed, 2020). Hence, improving the mental health and psychological well-being are paramount in time like this.
- ii. **Medical Mistrust and Conspiracy Theories:** With still no success in creating a working vaccine for COVID-19, there is a medical mistrust amongst citizens which is resulting in less use of health care facilities and health condition management (Ho, Chee & Ho, 2020). Added to this, an important aspect that often appears along-side medical mistrust during a pandemic is of conspiracy theories (Quinn, Kelly, DiFranceisco, Tarima, Petroll, Sanders & Amirhanian, 2018). Studies have pointed out several instances where participants held a false belief relating to medical health. For example, as seen in many previous cases such as that of polio and the conspiracy theories, this had led many Nigerian families to rejection of polio vaccinations
- iii. **Anxiety:** Any uncertain situation can lead to panic-induced behaviour and with the influence of COVID-19, self-confinement and an absence of proper treatment for the infectious disease have lead Nigerians in panic and anxiety inciting situation (Lunn, Belton, Lavin, McGowan, Timmons & Robertson, 2020). Though these anxiety symptoms may not accelerate to the diagnostic threshold of DSM-5, still reassurance from mental health professionals can help students to cope with their current anxieties.

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- iv. **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:** Likewise, persistent contamination obsession, unwanted discomfort regarding one's cleanliness and in constant need of washing or sterilizing is usually classified under obsessive-compulsive disorder (Williams, Mugno, Franklin & Faber, 2013). Similarly, in the case of pandemic brought on by an infectious virus can trigger panic resulting in mental disruption and impairment of students. Medical and Psychiatric Social Workers, Mental health professionals, and clinical psychologists should be attentive towards such impending issues and try to resolve it with utmost care.
- v. **Aggression, Frustration and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:** Initially public emotional response to any pandemic is of extreme fear and uncertainty which usually drives towards negative societal behaviours and can involve public mental health concerns like anxiety, insomnia, depression aggression, frustration and hysteria (Shigemura et al. 2020). If compared to previous studies relating to the outbreak of SARS, students with definite or alleged COVID-19, and are in quarantine will most likely suffer from loneliness, anger and frustration (Xiang, Yang, Li, Zhang, Zhang, Cheung & Ng, 2020). In a country like Nigeria where uncertainty for students is not only that of COVID-19 but also about their next meal and disrupted education due to lockdown emotional disturbances such as aggression and frustration will be common.

In summary, the IASC's Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychological Support (2020) outline some common issues of mental health/ psychological well-being amongst students and public amid COVID-19 pandemic to include:

- i. Fear of getting ill and passing away;
- ii. Avoiding going to hospital or health care facilities due to fear of becoming infected when there;
- iii. Fear of not being able to work during isolation, being dismissed from work, and losing their income;
- iv. Fear of being placed in quarantine due to association with the disease and then being socially excluded/isolated (e.g. racism or xenophobia against persons/ population groups who are from, or perceived to be from, areas affected by COVID-19);
- v. Feeling powerless to protect the family and the fear of loved ones dying because of the virus;
- vi. Fear that quarantine will separate them from loved ones and caregivers;
- vii. Parents or caregivers are in isolation/quarantine due to fear of infection and cannot take care of the elderly, unaccompanied or separated minors, or people with disabilities;
- viii. Feelings of depression, helplessness, boredom, and loneliness due to isolation; and
- ix. Fear of reliving the experience of a previous epidemic.

### **Improving Students' Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being amidst of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

COVID-19 has thrown students into uncertainty about their educational pursuit and this has a serious impact on their mental health and psychological well-being since no pharmaceutical remedy has been developed to address the COVID-19 pandemic. So how can students improve their mental

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health and psychological well-being during this tumultuous period? The answer to this question is as follows:

- i. Accurate Dissemination of Health and Related Information to the Public:** To minimize the detrimental impact of "fake news" that is so rampant in the social media, the government and health authorities must relay to the students and public timely and accurate evidence-based information on the pandemic through traditional and new media. Practical tips on how the students should react during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as, the practice of good hygiene and donning of a surgical mask and manage fear and uncertainty of the virus through positive reframing, stress management and relaxation techniques can be disseminated to the students through video clips and cartoons that can be easily understood by them. Higher levels of satisfaction with existing health information have been found to correlate with lower mental and psychological distress in individuals. Accurate and updated information on the number of recovered cases, treatment (such as medicine or vaccine) and mode of transmission as well as regular updates on the number of infected cases and localities (such as a real-time or virtual map) is associated with lower stress and anxiety, respectively (Ho, Chee, & Ho, 2020; Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan, Xu, Ho & Ho, 2020). When students have access to adequate information and have sufficient trust in the government and health authorities to manage COVID-19, this could potentially reduce their anxiety and perceived vulnerability to the virus.
- ii. Identification of High-Risk Students:** Medical Social Workers, mental health professional and other allied health professionals should identify vulnerable students in the community who are at high risk of mental and psychological problems and target them for early psychological interventions. Additionally, students who have been quarantined or isolated in hospitals are at increased risk of psychiatric episodes since they have been deprived of social support. Consequently, they will benefit from practical and emotional support (Ho, Chee & Ho, 2020).
- iii. Positive Thinking:** Thinking positively also improves students' mental health and psychological well-being. In turn, as students' mental health and psychological well-being improve, it becomes easier to think positively and feel good overall. Fortunately, students can begin creating that positive cycle with a few simple strategies. According to Morin (2020), some of the way's students can increase their positivity in life include:

  - a. *Write about a better future:* Students should take a few minutes and write down all the good things that could happen to them in the future. Students should imagine how they would be spending their time and who they would be spending it with if they are living the best life.
  - b. *Recall Positive Life Events:* Students should spend time thinking about some of the best memories of life. Recognizing the good things that have happened over time and the people that have built their memories is an important part of improving student mental health and psychological well-being amid COVID-19 pandemic. They serve as a reminder of the fullness life has to offer, especially when circumstances may be pulling the students down.
  - c. *Perform Acts of Kindness:* Doing nice things for other people reminds us that we have the power to make a difference in the world. Giving to others also helps one to think more positively and feel happier. Studies indicate that individual acts of kindness release both endorphins and oxytocin, that is, the feel-good hormones and as well as creates new neural connections (Mathers, 2015). Consequently, kindness can become a self-reinforcing habit that

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takes less and less effort to perform. There's also some evidence linking kindness and healing. So, students should look for ways to be kind to others and their body and mind will thank them.

- d. *Practice Mindfulness*: Mindfulness which means staying in the moment; has been linked to a multitude of benefits, ranging from increased happiness to better resilience (Huppert, 2009). Although mindfulness is a skill that takes practice and dedication, over time you can get better at learning how to be present and in the moment. Doing so has several mental and psychological benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, studies suggest that mindfulness helps students manage stress, cope with serious illnesses, and reduce anxiety and depression. Students who practise mindfulness are better able to relax, have improved self-esteem, and possess more enthusiasm over life (National Institute of Health, 2012).
- e. *Express Gratitude*: Finding things to be thankful for every day is a simple but effective way to boost one's psychological well-being amid COVID-19 pandemic.
- f. *Identify Your Strengths*: Feeling capable and confident is important. Students should try to reflect on their past achievements and the qualities that helped them succeed. Working on improving oneself is a great way to impact on overall mental health and psychological well-being amid COVID-19 pandemic.
- g. *Practice Forgiveness*: Letting go of past hurt and anger is key to positive mental health and psychological well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. Forgiveness is about releasing oneself of the anger that's holding them back and keeping bound to that person.
- iv. **Fostering Relationships**: Studies show that loneliness takes a serious toll on students' mental health and psychological well-being. One study found that being lonely was as lethal as smoking 15 cigarettes per day (Tiwari, 2013). The quality of relationships matters more than the quantity when it comes to improving individuals' mental and psychological well-being in the COVID-19 pandemic. While contact over social media can be a good way to keep in touch when visiting a friend in person becomes impossible, there is no real substitute for the benefits of face-to-face contact. Strong social support also is important for students to stay mental and psychologically healthy (Morin, 2020). If students lack a support system, they should take steps to meet more people such as neighbours, old friends among others.
- v. **Improved Screening of Psychiatric Morbidities**: Mental health professionals should proactively screen students for psychological issues. The study by Wang et al had found that patients who are presented with physical symptoms such as chills, coryza, cough, dizziness, myalgia and sore throat, those who rated their health as poor and had a history of chronic illnesses were correlated with higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress that were attributed to the psychological impact of the outbreak (Wang, Pan, Wan, Tan, Xu, Ho & Ho, 2020). It is therefore, necessary for the mental health professional to make use of the opportunity to provide students with resources on psychological support and, when need be, refer them to psychiatrists for further evaluation and management.
- vi. **Mental Health Professional should develop activity Toolkits for parents, teachers/lecturers**: Improving the mental health and psychological well-being of students during this COVID-19 pandemic requires the development of activity toolkits that parents, caregivers and teachers/lecturers can use with their children/students in isolation, including messages on preventing the spread of the disease such as handwashing games and rhymes.

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Affected students should not be separated from their families unless for treatment and the prevention of infection (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2018).

### Conclusion

Nigeria and other countries of the world have implemented strong restrictive measure as a response to COVID-19 pandemic. These measures have an impact on the country and global economy, including increasing unemployment, retrenchment of workers and folding-up of small and medium scale enterprises. Thus, these have an impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of students, for the fact that their parents and caregivers are affected.

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