MENTAL HEALTH AND WAYS OF COPING DURING THE TIME OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK

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Abstract

Objectives: The study was conducted to find out the relationship between mental health and ways of coping of university students during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Methodology: The study design was cross-sectional and the data was analyzed using correlation method. Data for the study was collected via online Google Forms. The online questionnaire was based on two scales, the Mental Health Inventory in which the mental health characteristics were anxiety, depression, behavior control, positive affect, and the ways of coping (revised) scale.

Findings: The sample size of this study consisted of 400 university students of which 206 were male and 194 were female. The outcomes of this study showed that during the outbreak of COVID-19, a significant relationship was found between mental health and ways of coping in university students. The relationship of overall mental health scores with Painful problem-solving, seeking social support, and Positive reappraisal was significant but no significant relationship was found with other subscales of ways of coping.

Applications of the study: From the student viewpoint, universities should be aware of the students’ changing emotional responses from positive to negative during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the impact of COVID-19 would probably induce more negative emotional states, universities should offer more support for emotional management and coping. This should encourage students to talk about their concerns, worries, and anxiety toward COVID-19 and to help them de-stigmatize the fear of COVID-19 on their studies and future. This support should not be a one-time-event, but ongoing. With positive emotions and coping, students are more capable to counterbalance the perceived negative impact of COVID-19 on their degree completion and job prospects by effectively using different resources to reduce resource loss.

Novelty/Originality of the study: It is necessary for university institutions to focus their efforts on quality attention to students, in order to establish fluid communication with them and to adapt to their better well-being with good way of coping and fulfill their academic and personal needs.

Keywords: Coping Styles, Covid-19, Mental Health, Cross-Sectional, Correlation.

INTRODUCTION

An individual feels stress when he/she perceives any event as outrageous, traumatic, uncontrollable, discomforting, or critical. To manage our emotions, we use coping mechanisms or defense mechanisms. In many studies, it was shown that people who are overwhelmed by fear usually have clouded perception which affects their judgment and decision-making. This effect is not only mental but also physical in nature, and sometimes the physical disease becomes the cause of mental deterioration (Martin, 2005).

The definition of the pandemic is that it is an epidemic of an infectious disease, which is widespread over a large topographical area and it is affecting an extremely high percentage of people (Martin, 2005). These sorts of diseases or infections not only affect people’s physical health but have a prodigious influence on their psychological health. It is the perception or more appropriately the fear that plays a role in creating psychological issues while dealing with such pandemic issues. At first, a wave of anxiety, terror, and distress spread among people, which caused irrational responses within the communities and societies, like in history people’s reactions to diseases like AIDS/HIV, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and Ebola (Khan et al., 2020).

The psychological distress is not only because of the infectious disease but also because of the precautionary measures that one has to take. Like in the recent pandemic situation of COVID-19, in which the precautionary measures were to have social distancing and an overall lockdown situation. In such a situation all the places public places either restaurants educational institutes or workplaces were closed. All over the world people’s life has been pretentious by the epidemic of COVID-19, also because of the lockdown as a precautionary measure. The declaration of a global pandemic by WHO in the second week of March 2020 has also influenced the world. These irrational responses are because people stigmatize the person who is being infected (World Health Organization WHO, 2020).
The very first case of coronavirus patient was diagnosed on 26th February 2020, after that the situation worsened. On 23rd March 2020, the government took precautionary measures to stop spreading the virus and announced a complete lockdown situation in most of the countries. Later the situation of the lock-down changed into smart lock-down on 9th May 2020. However, all the educational institutions and all local places were recommended to be closed (Mahmood et al., 2021). This situation had an undue impact on students either primary level or university students. As they were asked to take classes online this was a new method of teaching for them to absorb. Not only in Pakistan this lockdown situation was faced by all over the world, as the spread of the virus was all over the media including the myths and misconceptions of the virus. This situation was creating frustration in people, especially among students as their life was restricted socially which caused boredom too. That entire lockdown situation was becoming the core risk factor for psychological issues and suggestively persuading the psychological health of students of universities. In many studies on COVID-related issues, it was reported that the situation of the epidemic had mental health impact on the overall public, laborers, and students (Wang et al., 2020).

Mental Health

Health is the most important aspect of our life, A person is considered to be healthy when his/her mental and physical state is in good shape, as their social well-being and not having any disease. As defined by WHO, an individual’s mental health is good, when they realize their capabilities to cope with life situations and work effectively which has productive effects not only on themselves but also on the community, they live in (Yao et al., 2020). Mental health is equally important as physical health. Mostly people are concerned with physical and opt for any treatment that helps them maintain their physical health. On the other hand, mental is being ignored not because people are not aware of it but also because people don’t give importance to their mental health, especially in developed countries.

Coping Mechanisms

Coping strategies that are emotion-focused help people handle distressful feelings that are the result of a problem, while problem-focused mechanisms are associated with methods that deal with the problem itself to reduce stress (Good Therapy | Coping Mechanisms, 2018).

Mental health has a vital impact on coping mechanisms, also our coping styles affect our mental health. Coping styles are of two kinds, healthy coping styles and unhealthy coping styles. Unhealthy coping styles can also be referred to as avoidance. People who are willing to face their life stressors, usually adopt healthy coping styles and those who avoid dealing with their stressors usually end up with unhealthy coping styles.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people are using their coping skills to deal with the stress, whether it is the stress of work, a total change in their daily life, as it was a lockdown situation, or the stress related to their financial issues, or studies. Some of the coping skills specifically for students are

- Confrontational coping, in which a person not only expresses their concerns but also directly addresses the issue.
- Distancing, which the individual uses to separate themselves from the situation they feel uncomfortable with and tries to minimize its importance.
- Self-control works to simplify the factor that involves the down-regulation of an individual’s unwanted thoughts/emotions, and behaviors rather than the mobilization of their desirable counterparts.
- Seek social support, means that individuals seek help or support from their friends and family when they are in difficult situations.
- Accepting responsibility, In this coping style the individual accepts responsibility for their actions or reactions to different situations.
- Escape avoidance, involves a maladaptive coping mechanism considered to be a conscious or unconscious effort by the individual to avoid the stressful situation.
- Positive re-appraisal is the kind of meaning-based strategy of coping, meaning that in any stressful event, the process of adaptation is construed again just like being cariingand giving value.
- Painful problem solving, Pain helps the person to find ways to cope with it to relieve pain. Appraising pain is seen as a challenge or predictive of problem-focused coping. Problem-focused coping contains strategies that involve dealing with stressful situations by focusing on the problem and finding a solution (Good Therapy | Coping Mechanisms, 2020).

University students coping styles in COVID-19

In recent research, it was shown that people reacted to COVID-19 and its precautionary measures like social distancing or living in a situation of lockdown has serious psychological and emotional consequences. The news of the continuous spread of infection via media, not having any clear idea of how to deal with the infection, the changing symptoms, false information related to the disease, also dealing with the lockdown where one has to be at home all the time. These
situations cause high distress and frustration among people, especially when it affects the students. The students not only had to deal with the lockdown situation but also faced the issue related to their new ways of education which is to take classes online, separately at their places.

One of the studies conducted in September 2020 by Mohammad Nurunnabi and colleagues on coping strategies of students for anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, revealed that university students used different coping styles to deal with psychological concerns during the lockdown, either healthy or unhealthy. In their study, it was mentioned that the students of the university are being engaged in different coping approaches in COVID-19, and also recommends a requirement to support such approaches in this population. The eruption of COVID-19 was distressing and it affected individuals’ psychological health. Signs of mental health issues, as well as social stress due to COVID-19, affected the capacity of coping of students (Nurunnabi et al., 2020a).

Another study was conducted in October 2020 on psychological impairment and coping strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic among students in Pakistan, has been mentioned that students’ coping strategies have been also affected, the majority of the participants reported using coping strategies which include spiritual or religious ways of coping followed by accepting issues, different ways of distraction, and other coping styles. Further, they recommended that COVID-19 triggered significant impairment in the psychological health of students, and throughout epidemics, it should not be ignored (Salman et al., 2020).

As per the current pandemic situation of COVID-19, their medical symptoms and psychological effect on people all over the world has a great impact on almost everyone all over the globe. Because of this pandemic situation, it is important to explore people’s experiences regarding their dealing with the pandemic and their ways of coping, especially students of Pakistan. A recent study was conducted to seek out the relationship between mental health and ways of coping of university students during the outbreak of COVID-19. The study results will reveal the frequent use of coping ways by university students, and it will help us understand the association between mental health and coping styles. Such sort of study will not only help to measure the coping styles and their connection to unexpected situations of university students but also to explore appropriate strategies and interventions to lessen the mental health of people.

OBJECTIVES: This study aims to find the relationship between mental health and ways of coping during the time of COVID-19.

METHOD

RESEARCH DESIGN

For data collection, a purposive sampling technique was used. It is a method of non-probability sampling that helps the researchers to choose the participants from the population for their study. A cross-sectional study method was considered to determine the coping styles of university students during the pandemic.

SAMPLE

The sample collected for the current study is 400, university student participants. For sample size calculation of unknown population size, the following formula is used: \( n = \frac{z^2 \times p \times q}{d^2} \) which is used to calculate the sample size of a qualitative variable in prevalence or cross-sectional studies. The required sample size was around383 for the population with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. The participants’ responses were taken based on their demographic characteristics like socioeconomic status, age, sex, and family structure (n=400). The sample was selected from different universities in Islamabad via online Google forms; also the forms were filled out by university students in person, by using the purposive sampling technique.

Inclusion Criteria

The responses were taken from male and female both participants, who were enrolled university students. The age limit was 18 and above, and the responses were collected by those who gave consent and those who completed the research questionnaire.

Exclusion Criteria

The responses from participants did not include any incomplete form or a student under the age of 18 years. Additionally, students who were suffering from mental or physical health issues were also excluded.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The selected research scales were applied only to university students, 18 and above age, also after they had given their consent. Further, resistant students, have been counseled that this information is for the research purpose and they have been properly explained for the confidentiality of their identity. All the ethical procedures as determined by the Institutional Review Board were followed and applied during the data collection, scoring, and analysis by maintaining participant confidentiality.
PROCEDURE
During the process of conducting research which includes data collection, compiling, and data analysis all standard protocols were followed. The researcher took the informed consent verbally from the participants and involved only those participants who willingly and voluntarily responded to the research study. Further, the aim of the study was also explained to the contributors, whose responses were taken in person and if they felt uncomfortable at any step they were counseled about their confidentiality, later they were thanked for their cooperation.

Demographic Characteristics
The data was collected on the base of demographic characteristics like age, sex, socioeconomic status, and family structure. Further two quantitative scales were used to identify the coping styles of students at university throughout the COVID-19.

Mental Health Inventory
Veit and Ware(1983) invented a short version of the mental health inventory (MHI-18) to assess well-being and psychological distress in the general population. This scale included 36 items that assess depression, anxiety, positive affect, and behavior. Positive affect and emotional ties are the composition of psychological well-being. Depression, anxiety and behavioral or emotional control issues come under the category of psychological distress. A Likert scale of 6-point was present which ranged from 1 to 6 that is (from all the time) to (none of the time). The total range of the scores and subscale range from 0-100, and those having high scores revealed that they have good mental health.

The ways of coping (revised) scale
The Ways of Coping (revised) is a questionnaire containing 66 items, It includes a wide range of acts and thoughts that people use to work with the internal also external difficulties of specific stressful situations. The revised Ways of Coping on the scale includes subject responses on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = does not apply and/or not used; 3 = used a great deal)(Folkman et al., 1986).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
Ways of Coping, with depression, anxiety, positive affect, and behavior control were analyzed through the Pearson Product Movement coefficient of correlation. The reason for using the Pearson Product Movement coefficient of correlation was to find out the correlation between the present research variables. Data was analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V 25).

RESULT
Results revealed that Anxiety and depression had a significant positive relationship with Escape-Avoidance and a significant negative relationship with Positive reappraisal. In addition to this behavior control has a significant negative correlation with Escape-Avoidance and no significant relationship was found with other variables of ways of coping and overall coping. In addition to this overall mental health scores are significantly positively related to Painful seeking social support problem-solving and Positive reappraisal but no significant relationship was found with other variables of ways of coping. (see table 2).

| Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| S. No | Variables | Frequencies | Percentages % |
| 1. | Gender | | |
| | Male | 206 | 51.5 |
| | Female | 194 | 48.5 |
| 2. | Socioeconomic Status | | |
| | Upper | 142 | 35.5 |
| | Middle | 200 | 50.0 |
| | Lower | 58 | 14.5 |
| 3. | Family Structure | | |
| | Joint | 200 | 50.0 |
| | Nuclear | 200 | 50.0 |

Mean Age = 21.16 Std. Deviation = 2.813
It emerges when an individual appraises the situation in terms of harm or risk, that is, as a difficulty. Students differed emotionally and pressure related to the changes in their educational system. The study was conducted to seek out the main condition for appropriate functioning is to develop optimal strategies concerning mental health and ways of coping in the time of COVID-19 outbreak.

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** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

(An = Anxiety, Dep = depression, BC = behavior control, PA = positive effect, TMH = Total Mental Health, CC = Confronted coping, Dis = Distancing, SC = Self-controlling, SSS = seeking social support, AR = Accepting responsibility, EA = Escape-Avoidance, PPS = Painful problem-solving, PA = Positive reappraisal, TCS = Total coping score)

** DISCUSSION **

The study was conducted to seek out the relationship between mental health and ways of coping of university students during the outbreak of COVID-19. Among all groups of people in education, students exhibited higher levels of emotional problems and pressure related to the changes in the educational and social situation during the pandemic. Coping is a specific adaptive reaction chosen during the secondary appraisal. It emerges when an individual appraises the situation in terms of harm or risk, that is, as a difficulty. Students differed concerning their tendency to use specific coping strategies, which does not mean that a given individual’s coping strategies are the same in every situation. Emotion-oriented coping strategies seek to reduce tension and unpleasant emotions which arise in reaction to stressful situations. They are unavoidable particularly when the individual does not influence the external events. Problem-focused coping involves cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce stress by trying to solve the problem (Folkman et al., 1986). Thus, the main condition for appropriate functioning is to develop optimal strategies for coping with mental health problems.

An individual feels stress when he/or she perceives any event as traumatic, uncontrollable, discomforting, or critical. To ease up our emotions individuals use coping mechanisms or defense mechanisms. The pandemic situation of coronavirus was considered to be the most disturbing and thought-provoking crisis of public health as compared to the influenza pandemic in 1918. As per the reported cases of COVID-19 on 14th May 2020, it was shown that more than 4.2 million people were infected globally (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). It has been observed that people’s reactions to unforeseen events are worse than to the issues they know about. Secondly, our reactions also depend on our perceptions. This effect is not mental but also physical in nature, and sometimes the physical disease becomes the cause of our mental.
breakdown. Mental health has a vital impact on coping mechanisms, also our coping styles affect our mental health. One of the studies that were conducted to assess the psychological impact of the SARS and MERS coronavirus epidemics also revealed the significant impact on the psychological health of students (World Health Organization WHO, 2020; Al-Rabiaah et al., 2020). This is in line with the present research findings.

The results of the current study showed that during the stressful situation of the pandemic, which can cause feelings of uncertainty and crisis (Wang et al., 2020), Pakistani students mainly chose such coping strategies as acceptance, planning, and seeking emotional support. The three main strategies seem constructive as they direct people towards a future temporal perspective and might facilitate a reorganization of the values–goals–life plans triad driving the dynamic character of the personality (Cantor, 1994).

The further explanation of the study results projects that the lockdown situation affects the overall mental health also on the coping styles of university students. As in the pandemic situation, the precautionary measure which was applied to everyone includes restricted living at home, studying online, and dealing mostly via calls (Cao et al., 2020). The study was limited to finding this pandemic situation and its effects on the mental health of university students and their ways of coping. To elucidate this result, it shows that university student’s mental health has been affected by the use of different coping styles. Taking responsibility for their action and then making decisions according to the understanding of the situation in a positive way helps them deal with the issues or the stress (Folkman et al., 1986). It is said that coping styles are of two kinds, healthy coping styles, and unhealthy coping styles, which is why their effects and outcomes also differ in dealing with and understanding the situation. The current study results interpretation shows that the use of unhealthy coping ways affects the lifestyles of university students, in a way that avoiding the difficult situation can never help them to deal with the issue. Instead, accepting the stressful situation can help them to understand the situation and to find appropriate ways to deal with it.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic of COVID-19 has had a significant impact on people all over the world especially on students and their mental health. The coping ways that university students used to cope with this COVID-19 situation and its precautionary measures which include the lockdown situation, have a prominent effect on their daily life functioning and their outcomes. The results reveal that taking responsibility for their action and then deciding according to the understanding of the situation positively helps them deal with the issues or stressful situations. Research in this direction should carry on to investigate how students deal with the following stages of studying both during the time of the pandemic as well as after the end of it.

LIMITATIONS AND STUDY FORWARD

The online web survey was able to capture mostly the urban population of Pakistan, so we cannot generalize our findings to the rural population of Pakistan. As it was an online survey, we used all our possible contacts to invite the population through means of phone calls, messages, and one-to-one interactions. There was an oversampling of a particular characteristic (e.g., younger age group, postgraduate, and participants from Islamabad and Rawalpindi), leading to selection bias.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author states that there was no conflict of interest in any area during the whole paper writing and publication process. All ethical standards has been followed while conducting the current research.

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The author states that there are no acknowledgments.

AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTION

Dr. Syeda Razia Bukhari¹: Final Article Preparation.
Ms. Shafia Tabassum²: Initial Write up.
Mr. Muhammad Waqas³: Writing methodology.
Ms. Tayyaba Khatoon⁴: Data analysis.
Ms. Kiran⁵: Data collection and compiling.

REFERENCE


