

Protective and Risk Factors of Mental Health Problems: The University Students Perspective

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Abstract: Mental health problems are more noticeable in university students (Eisenberg et al., 2007); therefore, there is a dire need to study students' perspectives on protective and risk factors of mental health problems. To explore the university students' perspectives on protective and risk factors for mental health. The study was conducted in Lahore, a city in Punjab, and the duration of the study was from 14-6-2023 to 14-05-2024. A purposive sample of twenty university students (men: 10, women, 10) with an age range of (18–24) years were recruited in the study. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore the participants' understanding of the mental health problems faced in academic life. The study followed the thematic analysis guidelines given by Braun and Clarke (2006) to explore the key findings. The results of the thematic analysis emerged major themes of risk factors named mental health problems, academic stressors, and socio-emotional stressors in university students. Mental Health problems are i.e. depressive symptoms, stress-related symptoms and anxiety-related symptoms. Socio-emotional stressors are i.e. financial crisis, relationship problems, emotional dysregulation and poor decision-making. At the same time, protective factors are mental health awareness, a positive mindset, social support and academic success. The research findings showed that mental health problems in University students are negatively influenced by stressful life happenings.

Keywords: Risk Factors, Protective Factors, Mental Health Problems, University, Students

Introduction

Mental health is a basic human right and essential for an individual, society and socioeconomic improvement (Kantaş & Ünkür, 2023). It is expressed in our mood, thoughts, emotions, control, cognition and behaviours. Mental health is a continuous state of adjustment, influenced by a variety of environmental and psychological factors as well as social mental determinants (Thapa et al., 2021). University students in the age range 18 to 25 are vulnerable to mental health problems (Nogueira et al., 2022). Depression, anxiety, and performance anxiety are the most common mental health problems in university students (Cook, 2007). Research on mental health problems in Pakistan explored that anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and stress are common among Pakistani University students (Saleem et al., 2013). Mental health problems in Pakistan University students most frequently reported are 16% loss of confidence, 17% sense of being dysfunctional, 12% anxiety proneness and 14% lack of self-regulation. So, it is alarming that the complex education system in Pakistan is causing mental health problems in Pakistani university students (Shah et al., 2023). Research conducted in KPK, Quetta, Faisalabad, and Lahore, Pakistan, reported that 60% of university students met the criteria of at least one mental health problem (Shahzeb & Khan, 2016).

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Further research on mental health problems of Punjab University students highlighted the academic career health problems, adjustment problems, relationship problems, low frustration tolerance/anger, health problems, mood problems, self-esteem-related problems, anxiety problems and obsessive-compulsive thinking (Zada et al., 2021). Mental Health Problems, symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression have a significant negative impact on students' academic performance (Mofatteh, 2020). Risk factors for mental health problems are academic pressure, exam anxiety, academic performance, low income, social rejection, sadness and loneliness (Remes & Mendes, 2021). Protective factors, mental health awareness, emotional skills, social support, individual emotional skills, personal attributes, positive mindset, quality education, and community cohesion, among others (Lei et al., 2024) and genetics can help people deal with mental health problems. Protective socio-emotional factors for mental health are "linked to academic performance, progress and associated with constructive life consequences" (Arnett et al., 2014).

Social support, community belonging, and trust in others have been significantly associated with mental health outcomes (Liu et al., 2020) and perceived emotional support and family/friend network size were identified as protective factors against common mental health problems (Liu et al., 2021). Financial insecurity is also linked with poor mental health (Claes et al., 2021). Studies have observed that lower income was linked to self-harm, suicide attempts, distress and worry (Knipe et al., 2022). Students who experienced negative events were at greater risk of manifesting mental health problems. On the other hand, studies recognize that when people are not able to control the resources needed to cope with adversity, the degree of well-being declines (Mayordomo et al., 2021). Research has revealed that loss of archived identity has significantly positive correlations with mental health. Findings of research discovered that individuals with achieved identity have significantly inverse relationships with mental health (Tayebeh, 2015).

Rationale of the Study

Mental health for university students is important to meet academic deadlines and to sustain academic performance. Most of the existing research has employed a quantitative research approach to investigate the mental health problems of university students. The present research will fill up the gap by using a qualitative research approach to explore the student's perspective on their mental health problems, their prevalence, and their contributing psychosocial factors.

Research Question

The research question of the present study was: What is the perspective of university students on mental health problems?

Method

Participants

A purposive sample of twenty university students (men: 10, women, 10) with an age range of 18–24 years ($M= 20.95$, $SD= 1.95$) were recruited in the study. Participants were included in the study with no prior diagnosis of mental health conditions. All of the participants had been studying at the university for at least two years. Participants varied in socioeconomic status were recruited. Further, pseudo-initial names were used to quote the participants' experiences.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=20)

Sr. No.	Pseudonyms of Participants	Age in years	Gender
1.	P1	23	Male
2.	P2	23	Male
3.	P3	22	Female
4.	P4	21	Male
5.	P5	22	Female
6.	P6	20	Male

Sr. No.	Pseudonyms of Participants	Age in years	Gender
7.	P7	20	Female
8.	P8	20	Female
9.	P9	23	Male
10.	P10	24	Male
11.	P11	22	Female
12.	P12	19	Female
13.	P13	22	Male
14.	P14	18	Male
15.	P15	19	Male
16.	P16	24	Female
17.	P17	20	Male
18.	P18	19	Female
19.	P19	18	Female
20.	P20	20	Female

Semi Structure Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore the participants' understanding of the mental health problems faced in academic life.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed, and here are a few sample questions.

1. How do you describe mental health?
2. How do you deal with your study pressure?
3. What is your mental state when your exams are near?
4. How do you manage academic uncertainties?
5. What are the effects of stressful events on your studies?
6. What are major mental health issues in University Students?
7. What are the reasons for distress in University students?
8. What is the impact of family support on studies?

Procedure

Firstly, permission to start this study was taken from the departmental ethical committee, Government College University, and Lahore, Pakistan. Before beginning any interview, participants were requested to sign the consent form, and they were informed that their responses would be recorded. Before the interview, the participants were given the opportunity to ask any question they wanted to ask. The participants were interviewed face to face, and every interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The study followed the thematic analysis guidelines given by Braun and Clarke (2006) to find initial coding and defining themes.

Results and Discussion

The data was analyzed through thematic analysis in which codes, subthemes and central themes were identified.

Table 2

Central and Sub Themes of Protective and Risk Factors of Mental Health Problems in University Students (N=20)

Protective Factors	Risk Factors
Mental Health knowledge - Awareness of mental health - Mental health is a basic need	Mental Health Problems
Positive mindset	Depressive Symptoms
Optimistic approach	Sadness.
	Loneliness.
	Feeling guilty due to poor performance.
	Increased feeling of indecision.

Protective Factors	Risk Factors
Social Support Peer group Healthy Family Dynamics	Stress-related Symptoms Family pressures for good grades. Semester grading system. Work study conflict. Sense of Incompetence. Poor academic performance.
Academic Success Good Grades Teachers encouragement	Anxiety-related symptoms Fear of failure. Social pressure. Nervousness. Panic Attacks. Low energy in the body.
	Academic Stressors Exam Anxiety Mentally blank just before exams. Academic workload. Unhealthy class competition. Inability to perform different tasks. Burden of extensive studies. Time Management
	Performance Anxiety Poor Study habits. Fear to perform in front of others.
	Loss of achieved identity Loss of Meaning in Life. Low Self-esteem. Unrealistic family expectations.
	Socio-emotional stressors Financial crisis Lack of financial resources. Fee payment through scholarships. Additional finance for hostel life.
	Relationship Problems Student-teacher conflict. Breakup in relationships. Peer rejection. Impaired social relationships Mistrust in social relationships Conflict with roommates Body shaming Social anxiety Poor social and communication skills Bullying

Protective Factors	Risk Factors
	Emotional Dysregulation Poor emotional control Inappropriate emotional expression <i>Poor appraisal of self-emotion</i>
	Poor decision-making ability Poor understanding of the situation Make wrong decisions Pessimistic thinking

Mental Health Problems

The first central theme was mental health problems that were further divided into three sub-themes: Depressive symptoms, stress-related symptoms, and anxiety-related symptoms.

Depressive Symptoms are a common mental health problem in university students. It involves loss of pleasure and interest in day-to-day activities for long periods of time. Depressive symptoms-related sub-themes include loss of interest in studies, loneliness, feeling guilty due to poor performance and overthinking past mistakes.

Participant P2 reported, "I got depressed, anxious and had panic attacks. Gradually, I have realized that my life is more important than any stressful situation.

Participant P8 reported that "students experience low mood due to bullying behaviour. Hostel residents' students experience loneliness. In university, students have to face a lot of daily challenges. They cannot enjoy their personal life.

Stress-related symptoms are a basic human reaction that reassures us about managing threats in our lives. Sub-themes through a thematic analysis emerged as family pressures for good grades, semester grading system, work-study conflict, sense of Incompetence, poor academic performance and student-teacher conflict.

Participant P11 reported, "I could not study in stressful situations. I could not concentrate on my studies due to stress".

Anxiety-related symptoms are states of fear, distress, and restlessness. Its sub-themes include mental fear of failure, social pressure, nervousness and panic attacks.

Participant P10 reported, "I usually went blank in exams even though I have full preparation of the paper".

Mental health problems are the result of inhibition from their peer group and social relationships due to perceived unappealing behaviours. Students with severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress are referred for counselling services. University students are more inclined to academic stress and anxiety because they have to meet academic deadlines in the form of presentations, quizzes, and assignment submissions. Poor family and peer support leads towards loss of interest in studies and poor performance. Students who are living alone in the hostels are more susceptible to sadness and loneliness. So, by addressing these issues, we can reduce mental health problems in University students. It's evident from the previous literature that depression, anxiety, stress, etc., are some problems reported in students due to academic stress (Nogueira et al., 2022; Arnett et al., 2014). The current research is in line with the previous research findings.

Risk Factors of Mental Health Problems

Academic Stressors

Academic stressors disturb university students in the form of exam anxiety, performance anxiety and loss of achieved identity.

Exam Anxiety is the condition of nervousness when an individual is near to precede the exam. Exam anxiety codes include mental blank just before exams, academic workload, unhealthy class competition, inability to perform different tasks, burden of extensive studies and time management.

Participant P2 reported about exam anxiety: "I got panic about my studies. I have panic attacks and cry in board exams that I will not be able to perform well.

Performance Anxiety refers to fear and worry about doing something in front of other people. Its codes include poor study habits and fear of performing in front of others.

Participant 12 reported about performance anxiety: "I could not feel the energy in my body when I have to present my knowledge in front of the class. Fear of evaluation causes anxiety in me, and I could not perform well, which affects my grades".

Loss of achieved identity Personal psychosocial conflict, especially in university students, refers to conflict in exploring identity and developing a sense of loss of achievement or meaning in one's own life. Its codes include loss of Meaning in life, low self-esteem and unrealistic family expectations.

Participant P11 reported about loss of academic identity: "I want to become a doctor, and it was a big challenge for me, but I could not fulfil it, and it upsets me a lot". Participant P2 reported, "I was a high achiever in board exams, but in BS first semester, I failed in one subject that disturbed me a lot".

Parents pressure their children to get good grades and choose specific subjects without knowing their willingness; hence, it appears as a source of academic stressors. Moreover, students' inability to multi-task at a time, excessive burden of studies, unrealistic family expectations and poor study habits are sources of academic stress. Students can manage academic stress by prioritizing their academic tasks. It's evident from the previous literature that academic stressors are linked to mental health problems (Remes et al., 2021; Mayordomo et al., 2021). The present study results also recognized the previous research findings.

Socio-emotional Stressors

Social-emotional stressors are problems with making connections with others, difficulty in regulating their emotions and staying in unhealthy relationships that are linked to poor mental health. **Financial crisis** students are experiencing in the form of non-availability of study resources, difficulty in completing a degree, searching for scholarships and doing overnight jobs, and daily commute issues. Its codes include a lack of financial resources, fee payments through scholarships and additional finance for hostel life.

Participant P1 reported on living in the hostel: "I am living in the hostel, and that is why I am facing many other issues as well, i.e., diet and laundry.

Participant P6 reported on scholarship: "I have faced financial challenges throughout my academic life. In college and university, I mostly studied on scholarship. A financial crisis puts me under extra responsibility, and I have to maintain my CGPA to get financial assistance; otherwise, it can get cancelled. My challenges motivate me to achieve my goal".

Participant P12 reported on work: "Students have adversity in their lives. For example, if students work at their jobs at night and take classes in the morning, they may have sleep issues, and they usually remain absent-minded in class so, which ultimately affects their studies. So they get frustrated".

Relationship problems students are experiencing in the form of a lack of acceptance in relationships that cause mental health problems for students. Its code includes breakup in relationships, peer rejection, impaired social relationships, student-teacher conflict, mistrust in social relationships, conflict with roommates, body shaming, social anxiety, poor social and communication skills and bullying.

Participant P10 reported about relationships as "Body shaming and commenting on others' appearance is quite common. University students realize that they have no self-worth if they do not get acceptance from a particular group".

Participant P8 explained about relationship problems as “Relationship issues are also leading towards Mental Health Problems. They feel anxious due to insecure attachments.

Participant P3 reported, "Social media is affecting our mental health due to the constant comparison of real life and imagined life. You face stress in the form of body image if you cannot meet the ideal image of your friend.

Emotional dysregulation refers to trouble in managing one's feelings and emotions in everyday life to cope with stressors. Its codes include poor emotional control, inappropriate emotional expression and poor appraisal of self-emotion.

Participant P18 on emotional dysregulation reported, "I could not regulate my emotions in stressful situations that negatively side affect my life".

Poor decision-making is the process of making choices needed to make an informed, rational decision. It includes poor understanding of the situation, making wrong decisions, pessimistic thinking, conflict with parents when choosing a subject, and increased feelings of insecurity.

Similarly, another participant, P2, reported, "I could not stay on my decision. I have very poor decision-making power”.

Students with family and social relationship problems may blame society and themselves; it can result in feelings of being different and in future behavioral and social issues. Lack of acceptance from loved ones and peer groups isolates them and causes disturbing emotional regulation. Social stressors students experienced were due to a lack of social acceptance and recognition from their peers, parents, and teachers. Students were facing financial issues due to non-availability of financial support from their parents and institutions. Students were communicating relationship issues due to a lack of focus on their goal, that is, academic accomplishments. University students had limited exposure to the social environment; therefore, they glamorized the effect of social media, which resulted in breakups in friendships, and searching for more empathetic friends resulted in multiple friendships. Youth had a desire to gain independence in the form of decision-making and exploring career opportunities with studies that were causing mental health problems. It's evident from the previous literature that socio-emotional stressors are linked with mental health problems (Liu et al., [2020](#); Claes et al., [2021](#)). The present study also confirmed previous research findings.

Protective Factors for Mental Health

Mental Health Awareness

Mental health knowledge provides an understanding of mental health problems. Its sub-themes are awareness about mental health and mental health is a basic need.

Participant P4 reported, "Mental Health Awareness is necessary to help people recognize the ways mental health problems impact their lives”.

The current study also stressed the significance of mental health awareness in university students. It's evident from the previous literature that mental health awareness is linked with low mental health problems (Lei et al., [2024](#); Arnett et al., [2014](#)). The present research findings are also in line with previous research.

Positive mindset

A *positive mindset* is a powerful approach. It can help fight feelings of low self-esteem, improve physical health, and improve life. Its sub-themes include a positive approach. Participant P7 reported that a "positive mindset helps to cure mental health problems.

Positive students always find positivity in adverse circumstances, i.e., academic challenges. It's evident from the previous literature that a positive mindset is linked with low mental health problems (Lei et al., [2024](#)).

Social Support

Social support has various bases, such as family and friends, which are positively correlated with positive affect and inversely associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression. Social support has been associated with improved mental health. Its sub-themes include peer group and family dynamics. Participant P17, about social support, reported that "mental health problems can be reduced by discussing with supportive friends and family". It's evident from the previous literature that social support has an inverse relationship with mental health problems (Liu et al., [2020](#)).

Academic Success

Academic success refers to the accomplishment of academic objectives and the acquisition of abilities. There is a strong connection between mental health and success. Its sub-themes include good grades and teachers' encouragement. Participant P14 reported that "students who are high achievers have high self-esteem and self-confidence, which is why they have very little chance of mental health problems".

Mental health problems can be cured due to better community awareness, fostering a positive image in university students and realizing their loved ones that their support is valuable in reducing mental health problems. Institutions can encourage the promotion of academic excellence through scholarships and aids. It's evident from the previous literature that academic performance has a high link with mental health problems (Arnett et al., [2014](#)). The results support the previous research findings.

Limitations and Suggestions

The sample was selected from educated university students with varying disciplines from both rural and urban backgrounds of Punjab, and therefore, findings cannot be generalized. It is suggested that the factors which emerged qualitatively must also be explored quantitatively in future studies by potentially undertaking a more comprehensive and diverse sample. It is suggested that future mixed-method research can provide a better understanding of the risk and protective factors of mental health problems in university students.

Conclusions

It can be concluded from the findings of the present study that major risk factors for mental health problems are academic stressors, relationship problems, emotional dysregulation and poor decision-making ability, which play a significant role in the development of mental health problems. At the same time, protective factors are mental health awareness, positive mindset, social support and academic success.

Implication of the Study

This study will be helpful in providing insight into the risk and protective factors of mental health problems. It is the need of the hour for public health professionals to improve awareness of mental health problems so these problems can be detected on time. It is necessary to improve access to mental health community services. It is helpful to develop programs that report the factors that contribute to fostering good mental health.

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