

LETTER TO EDITOR AND EXPERT COMMENTARY

Mental health of university students through a pandemic event: what lessons did we learn?

Pasquale Di Fronzo, SIMED¹; Daniele Solla, SIMED¹; Luca Gambolò, SIMED¹

¹Società Italiana di Medicina e Divulgazione Scientifica), 43125 Parma, Italy

Corresponding author: pasqualedifronzo89@libero.it

Financial support: No financial support used for the study.

Keywords: university, students, pandemic, psychological effects, social relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected our daily lives, bringing about significant changes that still permeate our society, encompassing the economic, social, and scholastic spheres. These effects had significantly affected the mental health of university students, as they had to navigate the challenges and uncertainties of daily life in the midst of a global crisis [1-3]. The implementation of strict measures such as lockdowns and social distancing guidelines resulted in major changes to their daily routines, causing a deep sense of loneliness and isolation [1-4]. The absence of face-to-face classes and limited social interactions, the lack of physical contact, restricted social gatherings, and limited opportunities for in-person connections left many students feeling disconnected from their peers and support networks, further exacerbating their mental distress [1,2]. Furthermore, with concerns about their financial stability and prospects students struggled to embrace their academic journeys while experiencing the difficulties of economic hardship [1,4].

To address these challenges, many institutions have implemented online psychological counseling services through their counseling centers [1,2]. By offering remote counseling sessions, students had access to professional help and guidance despite the physical limitations imposed by lockdowns [2]. These services played a vital role in providing support to students, as they were effective in alleviating distress, reducing feelings of isolation and providing a sense of continuity during these unprecedented times [1]. In addition to individual counseling, universities have also organized online

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Received: November 26, 2024

Revised: December 9, 2024

Accepted: December 11, 2024

Published: December 20, 2024



Article information are listed at the end of this article.

psychoeducational groups focusing on anxiety-management interventions, providing a safe context for students to interact with peers who share similar experiences and concerns [2], normalizing emotional struggles and fostering a collective understanding of the challenges faced during the pandemic. Recognizing the unique difficulties associated with remote learning, universities also organized online workshops on study methods aimed to address the specific challenges encountered with online learning, such as maintaining motivation, managing time effectively, and overcoming the absence of in-person interaction and immediate feedback from teachers [2]. All these adopted measures could be interpreted as a signal that scholastic environments are becoming more receptive to the mental wellbeing of their students. As we approach the post-pandemic phase, academic institutions are resuming their activities, welcoming

back university students. In the future it could be tempting to discard all the implemented measures, but we shouldn't discard all the positive initiatives that have been implemented since 2020. Furthermore, the profound changes experienced during the pandemic took a toll on the mental health of students that could possibly persist for a long period, making it necessary to provide further support in the next years. Indeed, online interventions have the potential to reduce the mental health burden experienced by students, increasing the interest to further explore their potential as a daily tool [5].

With the surge in interest in student's mental health during the pandemic brought to the development and implementation of innovative tools, the efforts toward a supportive academic environment should not be discontinued in the future, instead it could be beneficial to further potentiate them.

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