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## Unraveling the Untold Stories of University Students on Mental Health Struggles: An Exploratory Study

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### ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the virus during this pandemic gave so many struggles in the different countries around the world which also shook the world economy. Universities are also affected since the outbreak started which brought changes to the way students live while they are pursuing their degrees in college. This study explored the psychological problems encountered by college students amid the pandemic. The study used descriptive phenomenology as its research design. The researcher invited nine students to participate in the study using purposive sampling. As part of the ethical considerations, the researcher used code names to hide the identity of the participants. Colazzi's method of analysis was used by the researcher to identify the themes. This study revealed four themes related to students' psychological problems which are Intense Power of Stress and Pressure, Battling with the spirits of Anxiety and Depression, Living in the Shadow of Death, and Fear of Uncertainty in Life. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that the universities must actively guide their students by having mental health webinars, and most especially the guidance counselors must follow up with those students who are struggling mentally. The instructors must also give the utmost leniency to help the students cope with the adversities brought by this pandemic. Future researchers may also consider studying the challenges of students academically and their coping mechanisms.

### INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic used to have a massive global effect on human lives and even the educational sectors which more than 1.6 billion learners were greatly affected (UNESCO 2021). To combat the pandemic, the Philippines, like many other countries, has implemented a policy of school lockdowns beginning in mid-March 2020. As a result of the lockdown, universities embraced and pursued online instruction using video conferencing systems. Teachers, students, and their families have faced a variety of issues, including increased stress and worry, which has harmed their mental health. As the coronavirus pandemic spreads throughout the globe, it is generating significant dread, anxiety, and fear in the general public, as well as in specific groups including older folks, caregivers, and individuals with pre-existing health concerns. The main psychological effect on public emotional

stability has been increased symptoms of stress or worry. Additionally, as new restrictions and sanctions are implemented, particularly confinement and its implications on so many people's daily tasks, habits, or occupations, levels of psychological distress, sadness, destructive drug, and alcohol use, and self-harm or suicide behavior are estimated to rise.

China was the first to be affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. As a result, various studies examining the influence of the pandemic on students' mental health have been published. Hou et al. (2020) discussed and examined the issue of mental health difficulties and suicidal behavior among senior high school students in China during the Covid-19 outbreak. In their research, 859 high schoolers participated (61.4 percent male and 79.4 percent below 16 years of age). Despair, anxiousness, PTSD, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal

acts were found to be 71, 54.5, 85.5, 31.3, and 7.5 percent, correspondingly. Their investigation, however, did not directly concentrate on the following stressors, while they speculate that academic pressure, prolonged school shutdown, and stigmatization of Covid contamination may be stressors. Zhang et al. (2020) employed three sets of questions from previous studies in a cross-sectional investigation of 532 Chinese high schoolers and found that roughly 20% of the participants' psychological health was affected. According to their findings, perseverance and good coping are important mechanisms against despair, anxiousness, and tension symptoms. Another study by Liang et al. (2020) with 584 Chinese youth participants (aged 14–35) found that 40.4 percent were vulnerable to psychiatric issues and 14.4 percent had Post-traumatic stress disorder. Their investigation in the context of Covid-19 revealed that mental state was linked to educational level, job, and the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms.

Though the lockdown rules significantly prevented or halted the spread of the coronavirus illness, they harmed lifestyle and culture, with serious effects on emotional and psychological health and well-being, especially among the youth (Volkan & Volkan, 2020; Marroquín *et al.*, 2020). Continuous lockdown could worsen the symptoms or fatigue on people as a result of the enormous interruptions to their activities and routines, social exclusion, lack of support, obvious danger to health, and unpredictable nature about what is ahead, and it may emerge as a combination of physical, psychological, and/or emotional indications (Australian Psychological Society, 2020). Though fatigue is personal, it is often an unpleasant feeling whereby a person is overcome by an overwhelming sense of exhaustion that is not alleviated by rest or calorie consumption, a strong desire to sleep, a loss of physiological energy, and low productivity and sense of satisfaction (Trendall, 2001). University students, for example, are highly sensitive to the negative mental and emotional health ramifications of stay-at-home restrictions or confinement measures, since they may jeopardize their physiological, social, and mental wellbeing, and also their academic and behavioral progress (Singh et al., 2020).

Strong coping mechanisms and personal resiliency are important qualities that can shield

individuals from lockdown-induced exhaustion as well as other psychological and emotional health impacts of the pandemic and the disease-control protocols. Personal resilience is essential for effective restoration from adversity or hardship (Hart, Brannan, & De Chesnay, 2014). In the setting of a pandemic, sufficient psychosocial adjustment and coping mechanisms are critical to assisting a person in dealing with the negative consequences of the pandemic and supporting their psychological health (Labrague & De Los Santos, 2020). Building resilience and reinforcing better coping mechanisms may thus aid individuals in combating tiredness caused by lockdown or home detention measures, as well as other stressors linked with the unavoidable changes caused by the Covid-19 virus.

Most of the studies conducted by the researchers about the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects of it are more quantitative in nature but lack of studies conducted in a qualitative approach. There is also a lack of studies exploring the experiences of Filipino College Students on the mental health struggles brought by the pandemic. This was the reason why the researcher conducted a study that explored and described the struggles of Filipino college students during the global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to find out various psychological problems faced by students during a pandemic.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The study used descriptive phenomenology as its research design. Descriptive phenomenology is a common methodology in social science research for investigating and describing people's lived experiences (Lopez and Willis, 2004). Living with the Covid-19 pandemic is a new experience for people, and the current literature on the pandemic does not reveal the underlying ambiguity and complexity of student mothers' experiences with this unanticipated situation. According to Dowling (2007) The idea of bracketing, which requires suspending past beliefs and judgments about the phenomenon under investigation, is fundamental in descriptive phenomenology.

### **Settings and Participants**

The research was carried out at one of the universities in the Philippines. The researcher interviewed ten college students who are currently

studying during this pandemic time. A purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the participants. The common sample size for phenomenological research is 3 to 10 people. This is because a person may have hundreds of thoughts and thousands of words. With this approach, there is no need to recruit more participants to collect a large amount of data (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A semi-structured in-depth interview was the primary method utilized to gather data and obtain reliable and factual information. Each interview was conducted face-to-face and lasted 20-30 minutes. The interview started with general questions but was followed by a relaxed and adaptable approach. The level of engagement of the participants was the most important factor in the interview process. The data were thematically analyzed by the researcher utilizing Colaizzi's methods in descriptive phenomenology. Rereading all transcripts three to five times to acquire a better understanding of the meaning provided; reading each description and extracting significant statements; developing meanings for these important sentences; grouping defined meanings into theme clusters; merging the results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon; returning the exhaustive description to participants for validation of feelings; and adding any relevant additional data into the final description of the core of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978).

#### **Ethical Considerations**

The participants were informed that the study was totally voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time with no consequences to their studies or academics. All participants signed written consent forms before the interview began. Confidentiality was ensured by using code names to replace participant names on transcripts. The audio data was saved on a computer laptop with a password that was kept in a secure folder and only available to the researcher.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the themes that were identified in the psychological problems encountered by college students.

#### **Theme 1: Intense Power of Stress and Pressure**

Stress and pressure are both natural phenomena in which pressures from within or

outside the environment affect an individual's mental or physical well-being or even both. Human reacts to stress in ways that influence both the person and their surroundings. People assume that stress is a negative experience because of the excess pressure in our modern life most especially this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Stress is generally associated with both contextual factors. The external structure, including responsibilities, interactions with others, home, and all circumstances, problems, difficulties, and demands encountered daily, are examples of external factors. Internal variables influence the body's ability to react to and cope with external stressors. Internal factors that influence stress tolerance include nutritional quality, general health and fitness capabilities, psychological health, and sleep duration. In connection, Filipino college students are suffering from the intense power of stress and pressure brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. It has ruined the healthy lifestyle of Filipino students.

Most of the participants described that they are powerless to overcome the stress and pressure due to multiple responsibilities amidst the pandemic. College students expressed how they are struggling with the intense power of stress due to the unending demands of the University where they are enrolled. This is the same as the findings of Yang et al. (2021) found that academic load and distance from school had consequences on the health of university students via perceived stress. It has also been demonstrated that the pandemic caused a great deal of stress and pressure on students, particularly when it came to completing their school tasks or lesson activities. The prevalent assumption seems to be that college students are under more stress and have much more severe physical and mental health problems specifically stress and pressure in life during pandemics compare to other student groups, like secondary school learners (Gao, 2020).

The participants of this study also shared their difficulties in completing their lesson activities which is another factor of their pressure and stress amidst the pandemic. It is also reported by the participants that performing their duties inside of their house while attending to school matters gave them dilemmas on how to balance their responsibilities. Jake shared how stress and pressure rule his life during a pandemic. While having an

interview with him, he showed with his eyes the pain under the power of stress. He stated that:

I'm under pressure sir, I can't stop sometimes being pressured and stressed in life right now most especially during this pandemic... the many responsibilities that have to be done and that made me pressured sir

Justin also shared that he cannot even resist the power of stress and pressure brought by this pandemic. In an interview with him, I (researcher) felt his struggles in balancing his responsibilities as a student and also as a breadwinner of his family. He said:

...I'm confused sir, I don't know how will I explain this but I feel like I'm a slave of stress and pressure in life... I don't know how to balance my studies and how to help my family during this pandemic...

Another participant also expressed his difficulty in handling stress and pressure in life. His gestures while talking with him is like he is trembling due to uncontrollable feelings. I (researcher) observed that he took the opportunity to express his mental health struggles brought by this pandemic. His actions showed that he needs people to help him to regain his confidence and power to overcome stress and pressure. Kyle stated that:

My life is already challenging before the pandemic but it became more difficult when the pandemic came into my life...I feel the stress amidst the pandemic...I am also pressured because of overloaded lesson activities given to us..."

He added:

"...how to overcome this stress in life sir? Please, I have been suffering because of it..."

Shane also had to share:

"I feel so stressed because of so many things demanded by our professors...unending responsibilities in our house also added stress...a reason why I think a lot of things in life and that made me stressed..."

## **Theme 2: Battling with the Spirits of Anxiety and Depression**

It's understandable to feel down or blue now and again. Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time it's a natural reaction to traumatic situations. However, severe or recurrent despair and anxiety might be symptoms of a deeper mental health issue.

Anxiety can be a sign of clinical (severe) depression. Depression that is precipitated by an anxiety illness, such as social anxiety disorder, chronic anxiety, or social phobia, is also frequent. Many people experience anxiety disorders as well as clinical depression. This covid-19 pandemic added a level of amount of anxiety and depression, most especially to the college students who were shocked by the abrupt transition of lifestyle into a new normal. A study conducted on anxiety and depression among college students in Nepal amidst the Covid-19 pandemic found that a majority of college students experienced severe anxiety and depression. Anxiety and depression affect around 11.8 and 5.5 percent of college students, correspondingly (Risal et al. 2020). In addition, several factors, such as trouble concentrating, interruptions in sleeping habits, fewer social connections owing to physical distancing, and greater concerns about academic achievement, were found as contributing to increased levels of anxiety, and depressive moods (Son, 2020).

The participants of this study also shared that they are battling the spirits of anxiety and depression and this kind of battle with their inner self gave them a dramatic experience during the pandemic. They are overpowered by anxiety and depression as described by the participants. They expressed and described that they feel and experience feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness, suicidal ideation or self-inflicted harm, oversleeping or waking up too early, feeling unhappy or nervous frequently or all of the moment, reluctance to engage in previously enjoyable activities and feeling irritated, incredibly frustrated, or agitated. One of the participants described his challenges amidst the pandemic, he shared that he is suffering mentally due to some thoughts that make him suffer. Justin shared that he feels guilty due to some problems he encountered in his life as a student and the son of his parents. He stated that:

I am confused sir...I am blaming myself because of what happened to my friend...I am also blaming myself because I am about to fail my subjects...I am really afraid of what is happening to me now that it is also my fault sir..."

He added:

"I am trying to fight these some thoughts on my mind but that is not easy... I am so weak..."

The same concern is shared by Pharsa who she is also facing a battle that controls her emotions to the point that even her physical body became weak. While having an interview with her, she opened up everything by sharing her experiences on how she battles the different thoughts on her mind. She said:

“There are things I can't stop thinking, I feel so weak sometimes because of this depression I have been facing. I don't want to share everything but I am struggling and I don't know who I can talk to about it. How do fight this battle? I think I cannot, I just want to be alone sometimes”

### **Theme 3: Living in the Shadow of Death**

Countless individuals are devastated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Grief is a natural reaction to loss that occurs during or after a disaster or other stressful event. Grief can occur as a result of the death of a close one, as well as severe changes in normal habits and ways of life that normally provide peace and a sense of security. During a pandemic large-scale emergency situation, some people may suffer multiple losses. Due to the obvious Covid-19 pandemic, people may be unable to be with a loved one when they die or to grieve in touch with friends and relatives. The participants are also suffering from the threat of death during the pandemic, they described that they are living in the shadow of death because some of their relatives are infected by the Covid-19 virus. College students are struggling with this problem as described by the participants since the virus are unseen and anytime they can be infected too. This made them struggle mentally considering to limit their actions for their safety. Despite it, they expressed that they are living in a dark world with the shadow of death that might take their lives in just a blink of eyes.

Aphrodite a participant who shared her struggles battling different thoughts that leads her to suicide. This is indeed a battle that almost gets her life to an end. In an interview with her, she is crying while telling her experiences. She shared:

There are days I want to end everything. I am so confused with so many thoughts...I don't know what to do...There are times I want to suicide...You guys cannot understand me because you are not in my situation

Alice also shared her pain with the people around her. She felt like nobody cares for her and

no one wants to understand her. These feelings give her a thought to end her existence in this world.

It is painful on my part that no one cares for me, or maybe it is totally I am nothing to them. If that is the case, it is better to end this life. It is too hard to live during this pandemic that there are so many problems

### **Theme 4: Fear of Uncertainty in Life**

Fear is rising across communities in tandem with the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. Fear is a reasonable emotion to threat: it guides our decisions and actions, allowing us to refrain from taking unnecessary chances with our health and life. Furthermore, we know not that all individuals are equally sensitive to danger: some misjudge it and proceed regardless of the risk, and others are considerably more restrained – some would even be paralyzed by fear. In this regard, uncertainty makes it more difficult to forecast which options to take as well as how to behave. As a result, it is normal for people to find uncertainty distressing, puzzling, and infuriating.

Athena shared that she is suffering from fear during this pandemic. She even doesn't how to battle this fear since the pandemic is still active giving threats to humanity. She is afraid on how she handles things in life which might give her failure.

I am afraid that I might not finish what I have to accomplish... I might not achieve the expectations of my family. That's what makes me afraid of...because of this pandemic it seems like everything is impossible

Alexis also expressed her struggles during this pandemic.

It seems like impossible, I am confused, I don't know if I will continue my studies during this pandemic because I am afraid to give false hope to my parents and I cannot give what they want because of this pandemic. I have this fear that I might fail those people who are expecting on me...that's why I am rattled.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is indeed that the pandemic brought massive changes to the way college students live while continuing their studies. This brought challenges most especially to their mental health as they live in this new normal. The use of Colaizzi's method analysis for descriptive phenomenology helped the researcher to extract the themes from the shared

experiences of the participants. It is found out that college students are facing great struggles on their mental health amidst the pandemic. They are experiencing so much stress and pressure, anxiety, and depression. Some of them are also experiencing uncontrollable thoughts that lead them to suicide and they are also facing fear as a result of this pandemic. Based on the findings, the researcher recommends that the universities must actively guide their students by having mental health webinars, and most especially the guidance counselors must follow up with those students who are struggling mentally. The instructors must also give the utmost leniency to help the students cope with the adversities brought by this pandemic. Future researchers may also consider studying the challenges of students academically and their coping mechanisms.

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