

Mental Health Matters! A Look into the Perception of Mental
Disorders Among College Students.

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The purpose of this study was to research the stigma of depression amongst college students, as media typically only shows major depression and displays critical symptoms. College students perceive anxiety symptoms as symptoms of depression. College students are exposed to many stressors and environmental factors that can contribute to or trigger depression; therefore, having students who are well informed about the different forms that depression takes would be extremely beneficial to them. It would not only help break the stigma against mental illness, but would help students on a personal level if they notice themselves or someone around them, displaying early/minor symptoms of depression.

The results of the study could provide Angelo State University with valuable statistics about its student population. Having a student population knowledgeable about mental health could be beneficial for both the students and the university. Students can take preventative action, when they have the ability to recognize if their mental health is declining. Over time, this could lead to overall improved campus life among students, better grades, better social lives, and generally just allow students to perform at a higher capacity, all which benefit the university.

Researchers Lynch, McDonagh, and Hennessy (2021) wanted to study the stigma of social anxiety and depression amongst adolescents to help people understand the mental illnesses. Their study was created to better understand the stigmas associated with social anxiety and depression by examining demographics and personal variables. The researchers decided to use a group of three hundred and fifteen adolescents, from 2nd and 4th years of secondary school. These students were asked to complete the peer mental health stigmatization to measure personal and perceived stigma and they also completed the social anxiety scale for adolescents.

According to the study, “gender predicted both personal and perceived stigma towards depression and personal stigma towards social anxiety. Males scored higher on measures of personal stigma whereas females had higher scores on perceived stigma. Ability to accurately identify symptoms described in a vignette, predicted lower personal stigma towards social anxiety and higher perceived stigma towards depression. Depression was more stigmatized than social anxiety.”(p.744)

Researcher Townsend et al. (2019) wanted to study gender differences in depression literacy and stigma after a randomized controlled evaluation of a universal depression education program. She claimed that depression affects women more than men and men are more likely to commit suicide and least likely to seek help. The study consisted of a random group of 6,679 students from 54 schools in several states. The investigation involved teachers delivering the adolescent depression awareness program (ADAP) as part of the health curriculum. “Depression literacy and stigma outcomes were measured before intervention, 6 weeks later, and at 4 months. Multilevel models evaluated whether gender moderated the effect of ADAP on depression literacy and stigma.”(p.472) At four months, students achieved higher rates than the control group with the ADAP on depression literacy. According to the gender results, women showed greater rates of depression literacy than men. There appeared to be no effect on stigma alone but women seemed to demonstrate less stigma than men. There was no significant effect on intervention plus gender interaction or interaction between the intervention and gender on stigma. The adolescent awareness program proved to be effective in increasing depression literacy among high school students and gender did not play a part in ADAP’s effectiveness.

Another researchers Phelan and Basow wanted to study college students’ attitudes toward mental illness. The purpose of the study is to “examine how labeling and negative stereotyping

impact a desire for social distance toward those with symptoms of mental illness in order to understand better how these three components are interrelated, as well as to identify factors that may influence their likelihood.”(p.2828) The study consisted of 96 females and 73 males of undergraduate students. The students read three scenarios of characters with symptoms of depression, alcohol abuse, and common stress. Afterwards the students completed assessments of their attitudes towards the characters in the scenarios, including their level of social dominance orientation, empathy, adherence to traditional gender roles, and familiarity with mental illness. According to the results, students who labeled the character as mentally ill were likely to view the character as dangerous. This led to an increased want for social distance and empathy was associated with a decrease for social distancing.

The purpose of this study was to research the stigma of depression amongst college students. College students tend to perceive anxiety symptoms as symptoms of depression. In this research Angelo State University students will be asked to select symptoms they believe are associated with depression. We want to determine if students have the knowledge to know the difference between anxiety and depression.

I predict that Angelo State University’s student body will not know the difference between anxiety and depression. As a consequence people are unaware of what symptoms are associated with depression and become unaware of any early signs of depression. This can delay the process of getting help and having a hard time battling depression or anxiety. With a busy life, it can be difficult to put our mental health first and even harder to realize if we have a mental illness.

I also believe that women are more aware of the symptoms associated with depression than men. Both genders have a social role that can play a part of their mental health and being

unaware of the symptoms associated with mental illnesses. “From an early age, men are conditioned to believe that expressing their feelings is out of character with the male identity. Doing so can ruin their image of being strong and stoic (Dekin, 2020).” Men are viewed as weak if they show their emotions.

Method

Participants

The participants were 122 undergraduate students from Angelo State University. The participants consisted of 86 % women, 13% men, and 1% nonbinary. The race percentage included 1% Native American, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6% Black or African American not of Hispanic origin, 48% White or Caucasian/ not of Hispanic origin, 68% Hispanic or Latinx, 7% Biracial, and 1% other/not listed. Age ranged from 18 to 42 ($M = 19.58$, $SD = 2.72$).

Design

The design is a descriptive study because the study collected information without manipulating anything.

Measures

The study used a survey that we created and it was designed to measure college students' knowledge of depression symptoms. The students were asked to select symptoms they believed were related to depression. The survey consisted of twenty symptoms. Ten of those symptoms were considered anxiety symptoms and the other ten were depression symptoms. The students' gender, race, and age was asked for the demographics part of the study. The data was collected to describe the sample and to learn which gender might know more than the other.

Procedure

Participants were recruited by the online recruiting tool called Sona. The data was collected using the online software program Qualtrics. The participants were first presented with a consent form and then the students were faced with the survey. They were asked to select symptoms they believed were associated with depression. Finally, they were presented with the debriefing page that gave more information about the study. The debriefing page also included references for related articles and contact information for our faculty adviser in case the participant had any questions.

Results

The purpose of this study was to research the stigma of depression amongst college students, as media typically only shows major depression and displays critical symptoms. I predict that college students tend to perceive anxiety symptoms as symptoms of depression and that women are more aware of the symptoms associated with depression than men. To test my hypothesis I used an independent t-test to determine which gender is aware of depression symptoms. There was no significant difference between responses of women ($M = 8.27$, $SD = 1.41$) and men ($M = 8.53$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(117) = .77$, $p = .442$. I also conducted a survey where students selected symptoms they believed were associated with depression.

Most participants correctly identified the actual symptom as reflecting depression. Participants correctly identified the actual symptoms as depression for five of the symptoms that ranged from 90% to 98%, including Fatigue, Suicidal Thoughts, Withdrawing from Personal Relationships, Change in Eating Habits, and Shame/Guilt. In addition, three other symptoms (Anger, Insomnia, and Fluctuations in Body Weight) were correctly identified between 85% to 89%. However, there were some that many of the participants did not correctly identify, which

includes Muscle pains (only 30% correctly identified) and Digestive Issues (only 54% correctly identified).

Discussion

This study was designed to research the stigma of depression among college students. Students tend to perceive anxiety symptoms as depression symptoms. Women are also more aware of the symptoms associated with depression than men. The study recruited 120 participants. An independent t test was conducted to determine which gender is more aware of depression symptoms. According to the results, there was no significant difference between the responses of women and men. The majority of students got five symptoms correct. Not as many students got three symptoms correctly. Only some of the students got two symptoms correct. The results didn't support my hypothesis because the majority of participants correctly identified 8 out of 10 symptoms.

If I were to do this study again, I would keep the same hypothesis but change symptoms. I would put lesser known symptoms of depression such as substance abuse, brain fog, daydreaming, trouble remembering, and constipation. I believe these changes can properly determine the stigma of depression among college students. Uncommon symptoms are rarely talked about. The symptoms I did put on this study were common symptoms of depression. I also believe that these changes are important for people that choose to participate in the study because the study would give them insight on uncommon symptoms. Future researchers should explore what other mental illnesses stigmas are among students or a general population. Understanding what the population knows is important to help people learn if they might be struggling with a mental illness.

The point of this study is to determine the stigma of depression amongst college students. A survey was conducted for participants to select symptoms they believed are associated with depression. The symptoms on the survey consisted of well known symptoms of depression. According to the results, college students are aware of well known symptoms of depression. This study is a simple survey that is relevant. It allows the researchers to know what further to research. It is also important to learn what college students know and for the general population to not be afraid of talking about depression.

Even though mental illness is becoming a little more talked about and accepted, it is still important to have a refresher on the symptoms associated with any mental illness. I would definitely do another survey of lesser known symptoms to cover that side of depression. It is important to know every aspect of a mental illness for someone to learn if they might know if they have that illness. People could also help someone they know that might be struggling with something.

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