

Prevalence of Mental Health Issues in Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Psychological outbreak brought by the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged the mental health of adolescents. The study determined the prevalence of adolescents' mental health issues as to anxiety and depression and the factors associated with them. Descriptive-correlational design through survey technique was used as the method. Respondents were Bicol University college students (588) from different colleges. Results revealed that the prevalence of adolescents' mental health issues as to anxiety and depression increased to more than 20%, which were highly affected by academic demands and personal conditions. A significant association was found between age and year level to the level of anxiety. At the same time, a significant association was also found between depression and age, year level, and the source of adolescents' social support implying that younger adolescents experience higher levels of anxiety and depression. Relationship of anxiety and depression to factors like academic demands, family/home life, economic difficulties, personal condition, and social relation were all significantly associated with depression, while no significant association was found between adolescents' level of anxiety in all the five factors. Given the increase in the prevalence rate of anxiety and depression of younger and lower year level students, the findings may serve as a basis for developing an intervention program for the promotion of the mental health of adolescents amid this health crisis.

Keywords: *prevalence, mental health, issues, adolescents, Positive Psychology*

Introduction

Psychological outbreak such as panic (anxiety) and distress was another epidemic brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, which is the most devastating, according to many epidemiologists. The closure of schools, churches, workplaces, and amusement centers due to social distancing protocols has caused an increase in the emotional and mental health-related distresses in the general population, specifically the adolescents, due to a drastic shift from traditional face to face to online classes as the new form of learning modalities (WHO, 2020).

Promotion of mental health and well-being among young people and children is imperative as being one of the most vulnerable populations faced with different life adversities needing adequate attention and intervention. Mental Health statistics worldwide showed that 20% of adolescents are affected by mental health problems and 50% of the psychological and behavioral problems occur at the onset of adolescence (World Health Organization, 2015).

Awareness campaigns and advocacy projects on mental health issues have increased in the Philippines before the Covid-19 pandemic due to the enactment of RA11036 or the Philippine Mental Health Act, an act addressing the mental health-related concerns of adolescents that focused much on anxiety and depression, as two most prevalent mental health disorders, according to Coronel of CNN Philippines Life (2018).

The schools as primary providers of mental health services for children and adolescents, educators, and mental health professionals shared the same goal of integrating mental health services through psychosocial intervention programs into education (Farmer et al., 2005).

A national survey on school-based mental health programs found that most programs provided were screening and counseling interventions to referred students, which often compete with instructional time and are considered resource-intensive (Foster et al. 2005) while the study of Baker et al. (2006) on the clinic model within schools has given opportunities

between educators and mental health professionals for interdisciplinary collaboration.

However, the minimal initiative is known about the emotional well-being and mental health issues, plight, struggles, and stresses of young people in the academe, particularly, during this pandemic, and how the academe tries to address the issues confronting this group of students. More so, the effects of online learning on students' mental health and well-being due to academic demands and the retention policy in every course offered to survive the online classes among SUCs were rarely given much attention.

The relevance, timeliness, and urgency of researching children and adolescents' mental health problems as a vulnerable group in this pandemic is imperative being faced with many issues and difficulties in the transition period including academic, peer, and parental pressures aside from economic, financial, family, and relationship problems.

This research undertaking focused on the prevalence of adolescents' mental health issues in the school setting and the integration of positive psychology in the classroom, to promote adolescents' mental health and well-being, particularly the college students of Bicol University.

Objective: The study is primarily aimed to determine the prevailing mental health issues among adolescents. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Determine the prevalence of mental health issues among the students;
2. Identify the contributing factors and the level of anxiety and depression;
3. Test the relationship of the factors to the level of anxiety and depression.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the theory of Seligman (2009) on Positive Psychology, known as PERMA- the theory on "happiness" with its five factors essential to happiness and well-being; positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and purpose, and achievement. The approaches and techniques in Positive Psychology integrated in the university mental health program and the application of faculty

in its classroom-based instruction will help prevent anxiety and depression among the students which were considered significant in promoting well-being and mental health among adolescents who experience emotional and mental health problems.

Materials and Methods

This descriptive-correlational research utilized an online survey. The online survey involved 588 students as respondents from the eight colleges of Bicol University using a stratified sampling technique. The assessment instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire adopted from previous research and combined with the GAD7 (General Anxiety Disorder) for anxiety and HPQ9 (Hospital Patient Questionnaire) for depression by Spitzer, R., Williams, J., Kroenke, K., et al. (1999) as instruments assessing the mental health issues of adolescents in terms of the level of anxiety and depression as well as the factors influencing and associated with anxiety and depression.

Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, and weighted mean were used for describing the level of anxiety and depression of students and the factors while chi-square was employed to test the association of factors causing a high level of anxiety and depression.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Respondents

Of the 588 student respondents, there were more respondents 229 (38.9%) were from the first-year level, mostly females (72.6%), and the majority were from the age group of 19-20 years old (74%), full-time students (91.8%), get both social (61.4%) and financial (83.8%) support from their parents who are all single. More than half (55%) of the adolescents' parents were college graduates, while 48% with minimum income (P10,000.00 and below), where the majority (83%) had low connectivity, and 53.2% without laptops shared by either 2 or 3 siblings. The result implied that adolescents' online class difficulties were due to lack of resources, internet connectivity issues, and unavailability of laptops or gadgets that contributed to the adolescents' emotional problems, level of anxiety, and depression. And if these difficulties are not given adequate and appropriate attention, they could lead to serious mental health problems, such as anxiety disorder and depression.

The prevalence of mental health issues in adolescents.

The data in Table 1 revealed the prevailing mental health issues in adolescents as to the status of distress-related anxiety and depression of students based on the survey using GAD7 and HPQ9 instruments for anxiety and depression, respectively.

Table 1 showed that the status of adolescents' anxiety revealed 57.3% (337) experience moderately severe (26.0%) to severe anxiety (31.3%) levels, while the majority, 62.6%, experience somewhat difficulty in doing work, taking self-care, and getting along with others, but 21.6% have a very difficult experience. The result means that respondents can still cope and perform the basic life functions of doing work, taking care of themselves, and getting along with others, despite the experience of anxiety-related distresses which ranges from moderately severe and severe anxiety. Result also implies that the prevalence rate of anxiety among adolescents has increased from 20%-31.3% rate (6% to 8.3%), which supports the findings of WHO (2020) that the pandemic has elevated anxiety and distress in the general population.

The result likewise revealed that the status of adolescents' depression showed that 47.5% (279) experience moderately severe (24.5%) to severe (23%) levels of depression. However, 66.7% experience somewhat difficulty doing work, taking care of themselves, and getting along with others. While 18.9% have very difficult experiences, respondents are still functioning and able to cope and perform the basic life functions of doing work, caring for themselves, and getting along well with others despite the experience of stress-related depression.

These results implied that the prevalence rate of anxiety and depression among adolescents has increased to more than 20%-24.5% rate (3%-4.5%), which affirmed the findings of WHO (2020) that the impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of the general population were increased stress, anxiety and depression wherein 20% affect the teenagers which when not given attention could lead to severe mental health problems and the higher incidence of the suicide rate among this age group of teenagers.

These findings confirmed the study of Omari, M., et al. (2020), which concluded that COVID-19 as an epidemic crisis is casting a shadow on adolescents' mental health issues with the total prevalence of stress (38.1%), anxiety (40.5%), and depression (57%). Likewise, it supports the study of Ramon-Arbue-s, E. et al., (2020) which found a moderate increase in the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms among adolescents with factors like gender, age, self-esteem, the quality of sleep, and living arrangements as well as specific behaviors relating to alcohol, tobacco and internet use that seem to be strongly associated with psychological distress, particularly in the college students. Moreso, this result supports the findings of Puyat, et. al (2021) in the Philippines where in 8.9% or 1 in 10 young adults experience moderate to severe depressive symptoms who are more likely to think of taking their lives and the prevalence is up to 40 times higher among females than males suggesting an urgent need for policies and mental health resources to support young adults who are experiencing depressive symptoms. Furthermore, this result affirmed the study of Garcia (2019) in relation to mental health concerns of Filipino adolescents on depression which stated that although the incidence of suicide ideation decreased, the

Table 1 Status of the Anxiety and Depression of the Adolescents

| Status | Anxiety | | Depression | |
|--|-----------|------|------------|------|
| | f (n=588) | % | f (n=588) | % |
| Mild | 91 | 15.5 | 142 | 24.1 |
| Moderate | 160 | 27.2 | 167 | 28.4 |
| Moderately Severe | 153 | 26.0 | 144 | 24.5 |
| Severe | 184 | 31.3 | 135 | 23.0 |
| <i>A difficulty that these problems made in doing work, taking care of things at home, or getting along with other people.</i> | | | | |
| Not difficult at all | 53 | 9.0 | 47 | 8.0 |
| Somewhat difficult | 368 | 62.6 | 392 | 66.7 |
| Very difficult | 127 | 21.6 | 111 | 18.9 |
| Extremely difficult | 40 | 6.8 | 38 | 6.5 |

incidence of suicide attempts increased. Therefore, the prevalence of emotional and mental health problems in terms of anxiety and depression has increased, and the pandemic has impacted this group of individuals.

Factors influencing the mental health issues of adolescents as to the level of anxiety and depression

As presented in Table 2, the mean scores of factors influencing the adolescents’ mental health issues were associated with the level of anxiety and depression. Data revealed that factors like personal condition (3.53) and academic responsibilities (3.50), ranked 1st and 2nd respectively, highly affected the levels of anxiety and depression of adolescents, while also affected by economic difficulties (2.92) ranked 3rd; social relation (2.75) ranked as 4th, and family/home life relationship (2.68) ranked as the 5th.

The result implied that the increased levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents were highly affected and influenced by personal conditions resulting from the stresses related to the threats of covid-19, with feelings of uncertainty, confusion, loneliness, lack of self-confidence, and difficulty in accomplishing tasks which are distress reactions and the impact of this pandemic to the mental health of the general population as stated by WHO, (2020). Similarly, the increased levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents were also highly affected by the demands of academic responsibilities causing a high level of stress to cope with the new learning modalities, shifting from remote face-to-face learning mode to online learning as prescribed, and to comply with the social distancing protocol required by the present condition of the pandemic.

The drastic change in adolescents’ learning environment caused much academic stress in coping, their ability to focus or concentrate, and inadequate learning resources due to limited accessibility. Moreover, economic difficulties also affected the respondents to contribute to the high level of anxiety and depression due to insufficient budget to cope with the expenses of online classes in terms of affording stable connectivity, laptop, gadgets, and other learning resources.

The finding has been related to the study by Kilingel, S., Kilingel, O., Muratdagi, G., Aydin, A., Usta, MB., (2020), which concluded that home quarantine and closure of schools during pandemics were the factors associated with increased anxiety levels of adolescents and the identification of risky groups and intervention programs helped to properly support these individuals by various social connections with healthcare professionals, families, and schools. As such, results also supported Omani M. et al. (2020), which identified factors such as conditions of being female, having contact with a friend or a family member with mental illness, being quarantined, and the internet usage as significant to stress, anxiety, and depression. Hence, recommending the promotion of the adolescents’ mental health by collaborating with various Health Care Organization sectors, providing psychological first aid, and designing appropriate psycho-educational programs.

Moreover, Ramon-Arbues, E. et al., (2020) found a moderate increase in the prevalence of distress related anxiety and depression symptoms among college students, which seem to be strongly associated with factors like gender, self-esteem, age, quality of sleep, and living arrangements, as well as behaviors related to use of the internet, alcohol, and tobacco.

Table 2 Factors influencing the mental health issues of adolescents as to the level of anxiety and depression

| Factors | Mean | Rank | Interpretation |
|------------------------------------|------|------|-----------------|
| Personal condition 3.53 | 3.53 | 1 | Highly Affected |
| Academic responsibilities 3.50 | 3.50 | 2 | Highly Affected |
| Economic difficulties 2.92 | 2.92 | 3 | Affected |
| Social relation 2.75 | 2.75 | 4 | Affected |
| Family/home life relationship 2.68 | 2.68 | 5 | Affected |
| Overall Weighted Mean | 3.08 | | Affected |

Legend: 4.21 - 5.0 Severely affected
3.41 - 4.20 Highly affected
2.61 - 3.40 Affected
1.81 - 2.60 Somewhat/Moderately affected
1.00 - 1.80 Not affected at all

Table 3 Relationship between factors influencing adolescents’ mental health issues as to the level of anxiety

| Factors | Computed X ² value | Df | p-value | Significance |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|---------|-----------------|
| Academic responsibilities | 14.517 | 12 | 0.269 | Not significant |
| Family/home life relationship | 16.522 | 12 | 0.168 | Not significant |
| Economic difficulties | 8.672 | 12 | 0.731 | Not significant |
| Personal condition | 5.590 | 12 | 0.935 | Not significant |
| Social relation | 7.010 | 12 | 0.857 | Not significant |

Furthermore, the results also confirmed the findings of Keles, B., McCrae, N. and Grealish, A. (2020) that the predictor of depression, anxiety, and stress among the adolescents was the increased use of the internet which was aggravated by the suspension of classes due to pandemic and moving to online learning, from an average of 5.46 hours a day before the pandemic up to 9.74 hours a day. Therefore, these findings likewise support the recommendations of the previous research that health care providers and concerned agencies should collaborate and give attention specifically to the identified factors affecting the mental health of adolescents that must be considered in designing an intervention program specific to adolescents to prevent mental illness that leads to disability and suicide.

Relationship of factors to the Level of Anxiety and Level of Depression

Data in Table 3 showing the test of the relationship between all factors and level of anxiety showed that the computed p-values indicated no significant association. The finding inferred that the factors do not directly affect adolescents’ level of anxiety.

The result implied that there could be other factors that contribute to influencing the adolescents’ level of anxiety, such as the distress resulting from home quarantine, loneliness, and the impact of the threats of the pandemic causing a lot of feeling anxiety and

distress due to uncertainty and a prolonged period of stressful situations to the general population.

According to many epidemiologists, this anxiety and distress are also called psychological outbreaks as the second component of the pandemic. The study by Kilingel, S., Kilingel, O, Muratdagi, G, Aydin, A, Usta, MB. (2020), stated that home quarantine and closure of schools during pandemic were the factors associated with increased anxiety levels of adolescents and identifying at-risk groups and intervention programs help support these individuals by various social connections with healthcare professionals, families, and schools. In this sense, the high anxiety level of the respondents may be associated with other factors not mentioned.

The data (Table 4) showing a test of the relationship between all factors and levels of depression revealed that the computed p-values indicated a significant association. The finding inferred that factors directly affect the level of depression of students. This result means that the adolescents’ level of depression is significantly influenced or associated with factors such as academic responsibilities, family/home life relationships, economic difficulties, personal condition, and social relations.

This also implied that adolescents’ inability to control the threatening situations in the immediate environment with its uncertainty as to when the pandemic would end caused them to feel sad, lonely,

Table 4 Relationship between factors influencing students’ mental health issues as to the level of depression

| Factors | Computed X ² value | Df | p-value | Significance |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|---------|--------------|
| Academic responsibilities | 200.745 | 12 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Family/home life relationship | 194.334 | 12 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Economic difficulties | 58.369 | 12 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Personal condition | 358.452 | 12 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Social relation | 229.518 | 12 | 0.000 | Significant |

and depressed, as well as the feeling exhaustion and the decreased motivation in their studies due to distress in coping with the new normal lifestyle, academic demands, and pressures of online learning.

The finding concurred with the study of Kilingel, S., Kilingel, O, Muratdagi, G, Aydin, A, Usta, MB. (2020), which concluded that home quarantine and closure of schools during the pandemic caused the loneliness and anxiety that leads to cause depression among adolescents. Also, the findings support the research conducted by Beiter, R., Nash, R., McCrady, M., Rhoades, D., Linscomb, M., Clarahan, M., Sammut, S, (2015), which found three concerns of adolescents such as pressure to succeed, high academic performance, and post-graduation plans, that contribute to a high level of anxiety, depression, and distress which mostly affected student transfers, upper-level students and those living off-campus. Moreover, the finding was related to the study of Lee, RB., Maria, MS., Estanislao, S., Rodriguez, C. (2013), which pointed out that depressive symptoms among Filipino university students urgently need intervention to prevent the rising rates of depression and suicide.

From the data (Table 5), showing a test of the relationship between the profile of respondents to the level of anxiety resulted in the computed p-values that there is a significant association between the profile of adolescents and the level of anxiety in terms of age and year level, but no significant association with the respondents' sex, the source of social support, the source of financial support, marital status of parents, educational attainment of parents and parents' average monthly family income to the level of anxiety. The result inferred that age and year level of students directly influence the level of anxiety.

This finding implied that the age of adolescence as a transition period is a contributory factor in the prevalence of anxiety and depression among this age group due to the developmental changes occurring in all aspects of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development as being described as the period of storm and stress making it difficult for a lot of teenagers to cope and adjust successfully. Likewise, the adolescent's year level also directly influenced the anxiety since college life is also a transition period from high school to college as the most serious stage of student life, requiring many adjustments.

The result affirmed the study of Ramon-Arbues, E., et al. (2020) which found an association between the moderately increased prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms among young people with factors like gender, self-esteem, age, the quality of sleep, and living arrangements. Likewise, the finding relates to the study of Kilingel, S., Kilingel, O., Muratdagi, G., Aydin, A, Usta, MB., (2020), which stated that home quarantine and closure of schools during the pandemic caused loneliness and anxiety among young people. Identifying this at-risk group helps properly provide support for these individuals by various social support agencies, including healthcare professionals, families, and schools.

Further, data in Table 5A showing a test of the relationship between the level of depression and profile of adolescents also revealed that there is a significant association between the level of depression and profile of respondents as to age, year level, and the source of social support but no significant association with respondents' sex, the source of financial support, marital status of parents, educational attainment of parents and parents' average monthly family income.

Table 5 Relationship between the profile of adolescents and their level of anxiety

| Factors | Computed X2 value | Df | p-value | Significance |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|----|---------|-----------------|
| Year level | 12.851 | 6 | 0.045 | Significant |
| Sex | 5.257 | 3 | 0.154 | Not significant |
| Age | 18.955 | 6 | 0.004 | Significant |
| Sources of social support | 7.664 | 9 | 0.568 | Not significant |
| Sources of financial support | 6.517 | 9 | 0.687 | Not significant |
| Status of parents | 6.707 | 9 | 0.668 | Not significant |
| Educational attainment of parents | 5.791 | 6 | 0.447 | Not significant |
| Parent's absence | 11.488 | 9 | 0.244 | Not significant |
| Average monthly income | 10.876 | 12 | 0.540 | Not significant |

Table 5A Relationship between the profile of adolescents and their level of depression

| Factors | Computed X2 value | Df | p-value | Significance |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|----|---------|-----------------|
| Year level | 13.680 | 6 | 0.033 | Significant |
| Sex | 5.267 | 3 | 0.153 | Not significant |
| Age | 14.052 | 6 | 0.029 | Significant |
| Sources of social support | 24.468 | 9 | 0.004 | Significant |
| Sources of financial support | 7.404 | 9 | 0.595 | Not significant |
| Status of parents | 13.394 | 9 | 0.146 | Not significant |
| Educational attainment of parents | 9.556 | 6 | 0.145 | Not significant |
| Parent's absence | 9.624 | 9 | 0.382 | Not significant |
| Average monthly income | 13.049 | 12 | 0.366 | Not significant |

Results inferred that the adolescents' age, year level, and source of social support directly influenced their level of depression. This result implied that the age of adolescence as a transition period is a contributory factor in the increased prevalence rate of depression among this age group due to the developmental changes occurring in all aspects of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development as development described as the period of storm and stress making it difficult for a lot of teenagers to successfully cope and adjust. Likewise, the student's year level also affects the level of anxiety since college life is also a period of transition and requires a lot of academic demands and adjustments, which was more intensified by moving to online classes due to the pandemic. Moreover, the presence of social support from friends and family was also a great contributory factor as a source of emotional security.

The findings also affirmed the study of Ramon-Arbues, E., et al, (2020), which found a strong association between stress, anxiety, and depression with factors like gender, self-esteem, age, the quality of sleep, and living arrangements of college students, including behaviors related to the use of internet, alcohol, and tobacco thereby recommending implementation of psychological intervention aimed at promoting mental health among college students. Further, the result relates to research conducted by Lee, RB., Maria, MS., Estanislao, S., Rodriguez, C., (2013) on factors associated with symptoms of high risk of depression among Filipino university students such as frequency of smoking, frequency of drinking, not living with biological parents, dissatisfaction with one's financial condition, level of closeness with parents, and level of closeness with peers which suggested an urgent intervention to prevent the rising rates of depression and suicide among this age group.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study pointed to the following: (1) There is an increased prevalence of anxiety and depression among Bicol University students thereby needing attention; (2) Anxiety was associated with younger and lower year level students while depression was also associated with younger, lower year level and sources of social support of students. Students' mental health and well-being affect academic achievement. Hence, addressing mental health issues of students through development of preventive intervention programs helps students achieve emotional and academic success.

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