



## EXPLORING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH OF TERTIARY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Prior studies have explored the mental health challenges experienced by college students in Nigeria, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, which have been linked to poor academic performance. However, the economic downturn and political instability experienced in Nigeria have given rise to a range of issues such as income inequality and insecurity that pose a significant threat to the mental health of its citizens, particularly tertiary students. In low and middle-income countries like Nigeria, mental health services are often stigmatized, making it challenging to access appropriate care. Drawing upon a conceptual framework, this study analyzes previous research on mental health, and its causes including societal factors, consequences, and management strategies of mental health problems among tertiary students in Nigeria. Since little is known about how mental health challenges can be addressed among students in Nigeria, this study explores the strategies for addressing mental health problems using the social-ecological model to enhance the academic performance of tertiary students in Nigeria. The mental health of tertiary students in Nigeria should be a priority for individuals, families, communities, the school system, and the government. Therefore, we recommend that educators, social workers, counsellors, and policymakers work together to provide support for students and create a positive atmosphere that fosters their well-being.

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**Keywords:** economic downturn, management strategies, mental health, political instability, stigma

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### Introduction

Good mental health is important for everyone whether young or old. World Health Organization (WHO, 2003) defines mental health as “a state of well-being whereby individuals recognize their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities.” Hence, good mental health refers to the condition of one’s mind and its capacity to function appropriately. Whenever there is any hitch in its functions, it causes disorders that can lead to mental health challenges in human existence. Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. People with mental health conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being, but this is not always or necessarily the case.

Mental health challenges are experienced in different parts of the world including Nigeria. Yusuf Hassan Wada et al. (2021) in a panel discussion describe Nigeria as one of the countries with public health problems such as suicidal episodes, communal violence, and insecurity leading to mental health issues. Studies show that mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are prevalent among college students (Aluh, et al., 2018; Amawulu & Prosper, 2018; Oladele & Oladele, 2016.;

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Nwachukwu et al., 2021). For example, Oladele and Oladele (2016) stated that students with learning disabilities experience more depression and suicidal ideation compared with those without learning disabilities. Auerbach et. al. (2017) ranked the prevalence of mental health disorders in college students as follows, anxiety, mood disorders, substance disorders, behavioral disorders, individual disorders like a phobia, and major depressive disorder (MDD). Scholars agree that depression and anxiety are high among medical students in Nigeria (Esan et al., 2019; Isara et al., 2022; Nwachukwu et al., 2021).

Based on gender differences, Nwachukwu et al. (2021) found that depression and anxiety are more prevalent among females than males for medical students and tertiary students in Bayelsa state in Nigeria (Amawulu & Prosper, 2018). Similarly, as the age of the students increases, their mental health symptoms decrease (Amawulu & Prosper, 2018). This may be due to maturation and the ability to endure stress. Consequently, Nwachukwu and colleagues reported that perceived risk for mental health challenges among students may include overwhelming academic expectations, failure to meet academic expectations, and polygamous families among others. Isara et al. (2022) added that the risk factors for mental health problems include emotional problems, financial challenges, and substance use such as smoking. Additionally, the economic and political instability in Nigeria has compounded the problems of mental health issues for students because of the strike actions, multiple closures of schools, insecurity, and poverty experienced in the country (Esan et al., 2019). Despite the challenges, there is limited literacy about the causes and implications of mental health challenges on human existence, poor mental health-seeking, and stigma toward individuals with mental health challenges (Pederson et al., 2020). In most cases, mental health challenges in Nigeria are often associated with weakness and spiritual affliction which requires spiritual cleansing rather than seeking health from therapists and medical experts (Gurejeet al., 2005; Dograet al., 2012; Abiodun, 1995).

Scholars agree that once mental health issue is discovered early enough and proper treatment is given, it leads to a reduction in morbidity and mortality in suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Neary-Fernandes, Quarantini, Guimaraes, et al., 2011; Treatment for Adolescents with Depression Study [TADS], 2009). Although mental health has been studied among secondary school (Aluh, et al., 2018; Auerbach, et al., 2016; Nwachukwu et al., 2021) and college medical students, (Esan, et al., 2019) most of the studies have failed to provide sufficient information about political effects on mental health of students and the methods or strategies for addressing mental health challenges among college students. To close this gap, this study will draw a conceptual framework with a focus on previous research on mental health challenges, including its causes, consequences, management /treatment Strategies, and suggestions on interventions to reduce the effect of mental health challenges on college students.

The following research questions serve as a guide in the literature search for this study:

1. How are mental health problems conceptualized in Nigeria?
2. What are the factors responsible for the mental health challenges of tertiary students in Nigeria?
3. What are the consequences of mental health challenges on the academic performance of tertiary students?
4. How can the mental health/well-being of tertiary students be managed?

### Mental Health Conceptualization

Knowing that the state of one’s mental health affects the thoughts, feelings, and actions. Fusar-Poli et al. (2020) in a scoping review on “What is good mental health”, identified 13 empirical domains of good mental health: mental health literacy, attitudes toward disorders, self-perceptions, and values, cognitive skills, academic/occupational performance, emotions, behaviours, self-management strategies, social skills, family and significant relationship, physical health, sexual health, the meaning of life and quality of life. Fusar-Polis and colleagues conclude that to have good health, an individual should be able to cope with the normal stresses of life, function productively, and be resilient. Negative experiences such as trauma, and stress prevent proper functioning of the mind which leads to mental health challenges also known as problems or disorders. Thus, exposure to risk factors (biological, individual, socioeconomic, and political) leads to mental health challenges (depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation), which may result in negative consequences (psychological, emotional, educational, and social relations) as represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Based on the African cultural context, mental health problems are associated with supernatural forces, which require help from spiritual healers (Aluh, et al., 2018; Mubbashar & Farooq, 2001). Hence, medical advice is a secondary intervention. African Polling Institute (API) and EpiAFRIC in a survey on mental health in Nigeria in 2019 reported that the awareness of mental health is low in the country. Their findings show that although most participants are aware of mental health disorders, it was mostly associated with drug abuse and sickness of the brain caused by an evil spirit and that patients with mental health disorders seek spiritual intervention from prayer houses and priests (Yusuff Hassan Wada, et al., 2021).

### Factors Contributing to Mental Health Challenges

Good Mental health is important for the successful academic performance of students. When mental health is compromised due to mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation, the student experiences poor academic performance. Poonam (2023) identified biological, psychological, and environmental as factors contributing to mental health challenges. The biological factors refer to the abnormal functioning of the nerve cell circuits due to heredity, prenatal damage, substance abuse, and alcohol intake by parents prenatally. The psychological factors include situations such as loss of loved ones, neglect/lack of care, inability to relate with people, and suicidal ideation. The environmental factors



include an un conducive educational setting and situation in Nigeria especially those fostered by insecurity, strike actions that keep students out of school for a long time, political instability, a dysfunctional family, lack of support, and inconsistent jobs for parents or guardians.

Joo (1998) identified financial distress as a source of distress for students in higher-level education. The author added that financial distress is a cause of mental illness due to the lack of financial independence and low socio-economic status of parents/guardians. Mojs et al (2012) associated poor financial status with depression in students and young adults. Scholars agree that long-term financial problems hurt the cognitive and emotional well-being of students. In tandem, Richardson (2017) found that financial difficulties lead to greater depression for students. Findings from Andrews and Wilding (2004) show that financial stress among college students relates to anxiety and depression.

Health condition was identified by Delamater et al. (2017) as causing mental health challenges because a long-term health condition can lead to mental instability. Pedrelli et al. (2015) stated that social relations such as the transitioning process from one semester to another impact students' adjustment to school. Students can develop mental health challenges such as isolation, lack of sleep, worries, and biological symptoms (Mushtaq et al., 2014) in the next semester at the university.

### **Consequences of Mental Health Challenges**

While mental health challenges/disorders disrupt the thinking process, emotional states, and routines, Lessard (1998), opined that mental illness is experienced by people irrespective of gender or age group, particularly students who need to adjust to different roles such as being a student and engaging in tasks outside of school. According to WHO (2003), mental health conditions/disorders are the cause of 15 per cent of diseases worldwide and over 45 million people live with mental health disorders. WHO (2003) further added that poor mental health is associated with unwanted lifestyle, violence, and physical ill-health. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) stated that health problems are common among students, and they often lead to mental health problems that impact their learning. For instance, Khan et al. (2010) reported that students who have experienced depression become knowledgeable about the symptoms and treatment, hence, it is not appropriate to let students experience depression or other mental health disorders before action is taken to educate our students about mental health and its effect on their well-being.

Moreover, the consequences of mental health challenges/disorders include emotional, such as isolation, fear, anxiety, and worry among others (NHSinform); psychological, distorted thinking; and social relations (Pedrelli et al., 2015) such as attitudes that make an individual become depreciative of social esteem in a wide range of roles, lack of effect on family relationships and communication challenges. Auerbach et al. (2017) reported that pre-matriculation onset of mental health disorders is associated with reduced college matriculation and an increased rate of attrition post-matriculation. A student who experiences mental health disorders is likely to drop out of college. As a result of financial strain, students drop out of school and engage in illicit behaviours such as ganging, scamming, betting, and kidnapping, to mention a few. According to Richardson et al. (2017), students who experience financial difficulties fall into worse depression, which in most cases makes the student drop off from their studies.

## Strategies for Addressing Mental Health Challenges

While exploring previous studies on mental health challenges among tertiary students in Nigeria, studies reveal that mental health challenges of students need to be addressed to enhance the positive mental health and well-being of the students (Khan et al., 2010). We used the social-ecological model, a framework for prevention (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006) to describe the strategies for addressing the mental health challenges of tertiary students. The social-ecological model has four individual levels relationship (family and friends), community, and societal. The model helps in understanding the mental health problems tertiary students may be experiencing and the effects of the potential prevention strategies on mental health outcomes. We further categorized the model into two informal and formal strategies. The informal strategies include individual, family and friends, community, and religious/spiritual. The formal strategies are those help that can be received from the school system including the psychological support/counselling centre at schools and the help from the government, particularly those that can bring about a restructuring of Nigeria's socioeconomic and political systems.

### Informal Strategies

- **Individual Self-help**

Individual support involves the students' awareness of mental health, its causes, and its consequences. Those experiencing stressful challenges can develop information-seeking behaviour, but self-stigma for an individual feeling anxious and depressed can be associated with barriers to help-seeking behaviours (Pederson et al., 2020). In tandem, Baro et al. (2010) stated that information seeking could be challenging and a difficult task for tertiary students in Nigeria, but students are encouraged to seek mental health help as they continue to seek resources for their academic pursuits, and they should also be concerned about their mental well-being. Aluh et al. (2018) stated that it is important to raise awareness about mental health among adolescents to encourage appropriate help-seeking behaviour.

- **Relationship: Family/Friend Support**

Family members have been a great support for family members, hence the support a college student receives from the family can serve as an intervention for mental health problems. Nwachukwu, et al. (2021) stated that family relationships and socioeconomic status can help reduce the burden of mental health problems among adolescent and college students. Aluh et al. (2018) found that the family is a source of recommendations for help particularly in African settings because parents and elders are the first points of call on mental health concerns. Adolescents and young people are easily influenced by friends; hence it is important to consider friends/peers as a support system to help in identifying mental health challenges among peers. Therefore, awareness about mental health problems should be emphasized among tertiary and secondary school students. The authors suggest that mental health awareness should target families.

- **Religious/Spirituality Support**

Religion and spirituality are commonly known as a way of coping with life challenges. In developing countries such as Nigeria, mental health problems are associated with spiritual attacks, while ignoring other possible causes. Esan et al. (2019) in their study described religion and spirituality as strategies for coping with mental health problems. Particularly, the scholars found that religion is associated with psychological distress and helpful in reducing the use of psychoactive substance use among medical



students examined in their study. They also found that religion and spirituality provide connectedness with self and others and the sovereign. Additionally, positive reframing, as a way an individual views one's motivation and behaviors helps students deal with mental health challenges. Resilience was also described as helping address mental health challenges. Resilience is the ability to overcome stressful situations. Students who are experiencing adverse conditions such as financial distress, and psychological problems, can become resilient. Esan and colleagues opined that resilience can be promoted with psychological support, social activities, mentorship, and intellectual stimulation. Aluh et al. (2018) added that God was recognized as a source of intervention for depression.

- **Community Support**

Community involvement in the effort to support students in Nigeria would be an important way of reducing mental health challenges because as identified above, lack of resources such as income, school materials, and school fees, and insecurity can lead to mental health challenges, particularly depression which can negatively impact students' academic performance. Receiving support from individuals and philanthropists in the community is a way of encouraging the positive mental well-being of the students. The community stakeholders can initiate food pantries on campus and in the community for students to have free access to food and other needs. Further, our community can help reduce stigmatization associated with mental health problems through education that encourages the use of biological and medical resources to combat mental health disorders (Pederson et al., 2020).

### **Formal Strategies**

- **School Support**

Although schools and colleges are for learning and socialization. During teacher-learner engagement, teachers have multiple roles to play in the school setting. Among the roles are competence, active listening, observance, and serving as a broker who connects students with counsellors and social workers. Grants received by faculty members can be directed to supporting students learning to reduce mental stress. Hence, academic staff members are encouraged to seek grants at home and abroad to support the growth and well-being of their students and research. Additionally, teachers should develop positive attitudes toward the learner. School environments need to be conducive to learning. Workshops can be organized for students to boost their resilience in the tertiary institutions (Esan et al., 2019)

- **Psychological Support/Counseling Center**

Guidance and counselling centres should be made available and functional on Nigerian campuses. The role of guidance and counsellors should be emphasized among the students, parents, religious centres, and through the mass media. A lack of awareness about the importance of guidance counsellors in schools would limit students' ability to seek psychological support for mental health challenges. Few participants in Aluh et al. (2018) study recognized school guidance and counsellors as a support for mental health intervention, however, the authors conclude that Nigerian students may have restricted access to school counsellors. This indicates that students should be aware of the roles of the school counselor and there should be open access to receiving services from the school counselors. Also, school counsellors should be trained in identifying symptoms of mental illness. To maximize the expertise of guidance counsellors and psychologists in Nigerian schools, their workload should be limited to counselling students instead of the dual role of teaching and counselling. The service of guidance counsellors should be separated from administrative work. Counsellors can be considered independent offices under student affairs. Aluh et al.





(2018) suggest that psychoeducation should be incorporated into the school curriculum to improve mental health literacy. The social worker's role should be considered in Nigerian schools to help connect the students to resources in the community and engage them in therapy and psychoeducation about mental health, signs and symptoms, and treatment to encourage help-seeking behaviour.

▪ **Societal Support: Socioeconomic and Political Restructuring by the Government**

As discussed earlier, socioeconomic, and political instability have been described as conditions that contribute to the mental health challenges of students. Hence, to enhance good mental health, the socioeconomic and political arena must be restructured. For instance, education should be prioritized with emphasis on reviewing educational policy and improving the socio-economic status of Nigerian citizens. The starting point could be the creation of jobs, and financial help for students from low-income families through the local government in each state. Parallel to this O'Brien and Shedd (2001), emphasized that financial aid should be provided to students from low-income status. The government should work on ensuring political stability to prevent incessant strikes that put students out of school for a long period and make them feel insecure in the community. The government should consider equipping our schools with resources, humans, and equipment, that would promote the mental well-being of students. The human resources include hiring guidance and counsellors, social workers, nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists in schools including tertiary institutions. The equipment includes the needed materials for the experts hired to help students with mental health issues. This will make all the professionals more focused on their specialized fields and help them support the students better.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This is the first known study to explore the strategies for addressing the mental health challenges of college students in Nigeria from multiple perspectives. As in other studies, this study also has some limitations. The study is literature-based and due to the time limit, we were not able to explore all the articles found on the topic. Also, the majority of the articles explored on this topic are quantitative with secondary school and medical students' samples.

### **Future Research**

Our plan for future study is to conduct a systematic review of literature, and quantitative and qualitative studies about the mental health of tertiary students in Nigeria. The majority of the studies we explored used quantitative research methods. Hence, our next study will focus on qualitative research to enable us to hear the voices of tertiary students on their experiences with mental health challenges as they influence their academic performance or achievements. Secondly, a quantitative study needs to be conducted to understand the extent to which students are impacted by mental health problems and their prevalence among college students in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, taking mental health issues and their treatment as air to life is highly important. Every student must be guided against anything that can affect his total well-being. As commonly known, health is wealth! Hence, the Nigerian government at all levels must have strong policies that address mental health issues among students at different levels.



## Recommendations

Based on our findings on the mental health challenges of college students in Nigeria, the following recommendations are made:

- Mental health literacy should be provided to students, families, religious leaders, and the entire masses with an emphasis on help-seeking when they experience mental health problems or challenges.
- Intervention programs should be made available in schools and the community.
- An increased number of mental health workers such as guidance and counsellors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and psychiatrists in Nigerian schools and colleges.
- Teachers and school counsellors should be trained on how to recognize signs and symptoms of mental health and the importance of referrals to psychological/counselling centres.
- The government needs to take action on restructuring Nigeria's socioeconomic and political situation to benefit Nigerian citizens. Policymakers should support advocacy for building family relationships by fostering a positive change in policies that impact families and the education of children.

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