MENTAL HEALTH STRESSORS AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG STUDENTS OF NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA

Chrysantus Chinyere Onwurah PhD, Nwachukwu Naomi Onyinyechi, Alexander Uzochokwu Ogbunugwor, Chijioke Anthony Ude, Polycarp Chibueze Nworie & Anthony Chinedu Ezeugo PhD

[123]Department of Health Promotion and Public Health Education
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
cc.onwurah@unizik.edu.ng
[4]Department of Philosophy and Religion
Godfrey Okoye University Enugu, Nigeria
[5]Department of Philosophy, Religion and Peace Studies
Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Nigeria
[6]Theology Department, Christendom College, Rome
Fr.ezeugo@christendom.edu

Abstract
University life is a critical developmental period for students, characterized by significant academic, social, and personal challenges, students navigate various stressors that can significantly influence their mental health. Understanding the stressors specific to this population is essential for promoting the mental well-being. This study investigated the knowledge of stressors on mental health of university students, the coping strategies for mitigating the impacts of stressors. A descriptive survey research design was employed and 200 university students were randomly selected from the institution, data were collected and analysed. The study revealed that students experienced academic pressure, financial issues, family expectations, students' academic and personal lives, stressors resulting in heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, and symptoms of depression and their utilization of counselling services is low among students. The findings indicated that academic pressure, financial concerns, and family expectations contribute to a substantial level of stress, which in turn affects students' psychological well-being. The results shows that many students are aware of coping strategies such as time management and exercise, the under utilization of counselling services highlights a critical gap in mental health support that needs to be addressed. Effective interventions include promoting positive peer relationships, providing mental health support, and encouraging open communication between students and university.

Introduction

Mental health refers to a state of well-being in which individuals realize their potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2020). Mental health is a vital aspect of overall health, and its importance cannot be overstated, especially among the university students. Improving mental health of a person is very crucial to their life. There is the need for concerted effort to achieve

adequate mental health. When these efforts are not put in place, it may lead to certain mental health hazards which are usually seen as mental health stressors that may affect the state of the mind and psychological reasoning of a person (Onwurah *et al* (2024).

Mental health stressors are factors or events that pose a challenge or threat to an individual's mental well-being. These stressors can arise from various aspects of life, including personal, academic, social, and environmental domains. They contribute to psychological stress, which can significantly impact one's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2018, Onwurah C. C *et al*. 2024). Understanding these stressors is crucial for identifying and implementing effective strategies to maintain mental health and prevent the onset of mental health disorders.

Mental health stressors come in multiple forms, including acute, chronic, and traumatic stressors. Acute stressors are short-term events such as exams or deadlines that cause temporary stress but can be managed with appropriate coping mechanisms (American Psychological Association, 2019). Chronic stressors, such as ongoing academic pressure or financial difficulties, persist over a longer period and can have more detrimental effects on mental health. Traumatic stressors, including experiences of violence or significant loss, can lead to severe psychological distress and long-lasting impact or death of a family member and sponsor (Bonanno, cited in Reavley &Jorm (2020).

Mental health stressors can have severe and far-reaching excruciating effects on individuals, impacting their emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being. Some of the excruciating effects of mental health stressors include: Chronic stress can lead to anxiety and depression, making it difficult to manage daily life (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas & Walters, 2022); sleep disturbances can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insomnia, fatigue, and decreased cognitive function (Harvard Health Publishing, 2019); prolonged stress can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure,

heart disease, and stroke (American Heart Association, 2020); chronic stress can weaken the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to illnesses (Segerstrom & Miller, 2024, Onwurah *et al*, 2023); stress can impair cognitive function, including memory, attention, and decision-making abilities, individuals may turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for stress, leading to addiction and other related issues (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020); stress can lead to social isolation and withdrawal, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and disconnection (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2018); chronic stress can manifest as physical pain, including headaches, back pain, and fibromyalgia (American Psychological Association, 2020); stress can cause gastrointestinal problems, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), acid reflux, and stomach ulcers); in extreme cases, chronic stress can lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviors (World Health Organization, 2020).

The symptoms of mental health stressors are varied and can affect individuals differently. Common symptoms include anxiety, depression, irritability, sleep disturbances, and difficulty concentrating (Kessler *et al*., 2018). Physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, and gastrointestinal issues are also prevalent. Behavioral changes, such as withdrawal from social activities, substance abuse, and changes in eating habits, often accompany these psychological symptoms. These symptoms of mental health stressors can affect the university students in a great extent if not managed. Therefore, recognizing these symptoms early is essential for timely intervention and support.

University students are particularly vulnerable to mental health stressors due to the unique challenges they face. Academic pressures, financial constraints, social adjustments, and future career uncertainties contribute significantly to their stress levels (Bayram & Bilgel, 2018 & Onwurah *et al* 2024). At some universities like Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, students encounter similar stressors that can affect their mental health. Studies have shown that a significant proportion of university students experience mental health issues such as anxiety

and depression, which can impact their academic performance and overall well-being (Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2020 & Onwurah 2022). Addressing these stressors through awareness, support services, and coping strategies is vital for promoting mental health among students. However, the rate at which these university students encounter mental health stressors is alarming with an elevated prevalence rate

Additionally, financial constraints, social challenges, and uncertainty about future careers exacerbate stress levels (Hurst *et al*., 2020 & Onwurah *et al* 2023). The reason for the negative outcome of the university students on mental health stressors may be due to their level of knowledge about mental health stressors. Assessing the level of knowledge of university students towards mental health stressors is essential for designing targeted educational interventions. In this view, understanding mental health stressors is essential for university students to navigate the challenges of academic life and maintain their well-being. Therefore, this study will examine the knowledge of mental health stressors among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Statement of the Problem

University students lack adequate knowledge about mental health stressors. This deficiency hampers their ability to identify and address mental health issues effectively. The pressure from academic demands such as school fees increment, peculiar dues, transport fare to school, bullying from course mates, as well as family background, current economic situation, social adjustments, and personal challenges often leads to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students. Despite the availability of some mental health resources, their utilization remains low due to insufficient awareness and stigma associated with seeking mental health support. This situation negatively impacts students' academic performance, social relationships, and overall quality of life (Ibrahim *et al*., 2020; Bayram & Bilgel, 2018).

While some studies have explored mental health literacy in broader contexts, there is limited empirical evidence on the specific knowledge gaps and challenges faced by students in this university. Moreover, existing research often overlooks the effectiveness of current mental health education initiatives and the role of cultural and institutional factors in shaping students' mental health knowledge and behaviors. The motivation for this study is to address the gaps in previous research and explore the knowledge of mental health stressors among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the knowledge level of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?
2. What is the knowledge level of the forms of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?
3. What is the knowledge level of the coping strategies of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?

Methodology

This survey research design was used to assess the knowledge of mental health stressors among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. This study was carried out in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in Anambra state. According to the Director Academic Planning (2023), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka has a population of forty-eight thousand nine hundred and sixty (48,960) students which comprises of the regular undergraduate and part time undergraduates. However, the target population are the regular undergraduates because they are readily available than the part time students. According to the office of the Director Academic Planning (2023), the population of the regular undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka is twenty-eight thousand, seven hundred and twenty-eight (28,728).

A multi-stage sampling techniques to select 200 students from 10 selected departments in the various faculties in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher titled "Knowledge of Mental Health Stressors questionnaire (KMHSQ). The validation of the instrument was done by three experts. The reliability of the instrument, the Kuder Richardson method was used on 30 students in Paul's University, Awka who were administered the instrument to ascertain its reliability before it was administered to the actual respondents. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.67. The researcher administered the structured questionnaire to the students at their various departments on a face-to-face basis with the help of a research assistant. Data collated will be analyzed using percentages, frequency and tables. Based on this, any percentage above 50% is taken to the majority response and will be termed as low % while any percentage below 50% is taken to the minority response and will be termed high %

Research Question 1: **What is the knowledge of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?**

S/N	Items	Frequency Yes		Frequency	No
1	I am aware that heavy academic workloads and the pressure to perform well can cause significant stress.	160	100%	0	0%
2	I understand that financial difficulties, such as paying tuition fees and managing living expenses, are major stressors for university students.	160	100%	0	0%
3	I recognize that navigating social relationships, including friendships and romantic relationships, can contribute to mental health issues.	136	85%	24	15%
4	I am knowledgeable about the stress associated with transitioning from living at home to living independently.	140	86.5%	20	12.5%
5	I understand that physical health problems and lack of access to healthcare can exacerbate mental health issues among students.	140	86.5%	20	12.5%
6	I recognize that concerns about future career prospects and job market uncertainties can cause anxiety and stress	152	95%	8	5%

Table 1 show the percentage scores on the knowledge of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. It is observed that respondents said YES which states that they are aware that heavy academic workloads and the pressure to perform well can cause significant stress with percentage score of 100%; they understand that financial difficulties, such as paying tuition fees and managing living expenses, are major stressors for university students with percentage score of 100%; they recognize that navigating social relationships, including friendships and romantic relationships, can contribute to mental health issues with percentage score of 85%; they are knowledgeable about the stress associated with transitioning from living at home to living independently with percentage score of 86.5%; they are aware that balancing academic responsibilities with part-time work and personal life can lead to burnout and stress with percentage score of 86.5%; they understand that physical health problems and lack of access to healthcare can exacerbate mental health issues among students with percentage score of 88%; and lastly, that they recognize that concerns about future career prospects and job market uncertainties can cause anxiety and stress with percentage score of 95%. Therefore, the overall result implies that university students are aware and have adequate knowledge of mental health stressors in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Research Question 2: **What is the knowledge of the forms of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?**

S/N	Items	Frequency Yes		Frequency No	
1	Can academic demands be considered a significant mental health stressor for students?	152	95%	8	5%
2	Is financial pressure a significant mental health stressor for students?	148	92%	12	8%
3	Are social relationships a source of mental health stress for students?	124	77.5%	36	22.5%
4	Do you consider work-life balance as a serious mental health stressor to students?	120	75%	40	25%
5	Do you consider work-life balance as a serious mental health stressor to students?	128	80%	32	20%

6	Do you agree that future uncertainty is a significant mental health stressor for students?	140	87.5%	20	12.5%
7	Is the transition to independence a major mental health stressor for students, in your opinion?	108	67.5%	52	32.5%

Table 2 shows the percentage scores on the knowledge of the forms of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. From the data presented, it was observed that all the respondents said YES with percentages above 50 percent that the forms of mental health stressors among university students were academic demands **(**95%**),** financial pressures **(**92%**),** social relationships **(**77.5%**),** work-life balance **(**75%**),** health concerns **(**80%**),** future uncertainty **(**87.5%**),** and transition to independence **(**67.5%**).** Therefore, the overall result implies that the university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka are aware and have the knowledge of the forms of mental health stressors which includes academic demands, financial pressures, social relationships, and work-life balance among others

Research Question 3: **What is the knowledge level of the coping strategies of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka?**

S/N	Items	Frequency	Yes	Frequency	No
1	I regularly use stress management techniques such as deep breathing exercises or meditation to cope with academic pressures.	128	80%	32	20%
2	I seek support from friends, family, or counseling services when I feel overwhelmed by my university workload.	112	70%	48	30%
3	I employ time management strategies, like creating a study schedule, to help reduce stress related to deadlines and exams.	132	82.5%	28	175 %
4	I engage in physical activities, such as exercise or sports, to manage stress and improve my mental well-being.	124	77.5%	36	22.5 %
5	I use academic support resources, such as tutoring or study groups, to help manage academic-related stress.	104	65%	56	33%
6	I maintain a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet and adequate sleep, to better cope with stress.	128	80%	32	20%
7	I use relaxation techniques, such as listening to music or engaging in hobbies, to help manage stress and maintain mental health.	152	95%	2	5%

Table 3 shows the percentage scores on knowledge level of the coping strategies of mental health stressors among university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. From the results, it was noticed that respondents attested YES to all of the options on the table with over 50% that they regularly use stress management techniques such as deep breathing exercises or meditation to cope with academic pressures with percentage score of 80%; they seek support from friends, family, or counseling services when they feel overwhelmed by their university workload with percentage score of 70%; they employ time management strategies, like creating a study schedule, to help reduce stress related to deadlines and exams with percentage score of 82.5%; they engage in physical activities, such as exercise or sports, to manage stress and improve their mental well-being with percentage score of 77.5%; they use academic support resources, such as tutoring or study groups, to help manage academic-related stress with percentage score of 65%; they maintain a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet and adequate sleep, to better cope with stress with percentage score of 80.5%; and that they use relaxation techniques, such as listening to music or engaging in hobbies, to help manage stress and maintain mental health with percentage score of 95%. Therefore, the overall result implies that the university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka have high knowledge level of the coping strategies of mental health stressors.

Discussion

Knowledge undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University about mental health stressors

The study found that the majority of the students are aware and have adequate knowledge of mental health stressors in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The study found that university students are adequately aware and knowledgeable about mental health stressors. This is consistent with findings by Adeoye and Aluko (2019), who observed that Nigerian university students generally possess a high level of awareness regarding mental health issues.

Their research, conducted at the University of Lagos, indicated that over 70% of students were aware of mental health stressors such as anxiety and depression, largely due to the availability of mental health advocacy programs. Similarly, Nkwocha *et al*. (2021)**,** in a study of mental health literacy among university students in Eastern Nigeria, concluded that students demonstrated a considerable understanding of common mental health stressors, particularly those relating to academic and social pressures. Olumide and Akinyemi (2020) further reinforced these findings, showing that university students who participated in peer education programs were more likely to be knowledgeable about mental health stressors and the need for professional help.

Knowledge of undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University about the forms of mental health stressors

The study found that the university students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka are aware and have the knowledge of the forms of mental health stressors which includes academic demands, financial pressures, social relationships, and work-life balance among others**.** This was in accordance with the findings of Obi and Eze (2020) conducted a study among students of three Nigerian universities and found that academic demands were the most frequently cited mental health stressor, followed by financial difficulties and social relationships Onwurah C. C. *et al* (2024). Similarly, Okoro and Uzochukwu (2021) reported that Nigerian university students experience significant stress from trying to balance academic responsibilities with financial and social commitments, which negatively affects their mental health. These findings are further corroborated by Adebayo and Johnson (2018)**,** who found that financial pressures, coupled with academic demands, were significant sources of stress for students in Nigerian higher education institutions, often leading to increased anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Knowledge level of undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University towards the coping strategies of mental health stressors

The study found that the majority of the students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka have high knowledge level of the coping strategies of mental health stressors**.** This result is supported by Chukwu and Nwachukwu (2017)**,** who conducted a study on coping mechanisms among students in Nigerian universities. In addition**,** Uche and Adeyemi (2022) found that students who regularly attended stress management workshops had a higher level of knowledge about stress-relief practices, particularly when it came to managing academic and social pressures effectively (Onwurah *et al*, 2024).

Conclusions

The study on reveals a significant level of awareness and understanding of mental health stressors among the student population. Students demonstrated adequate knowledge of common stressors, including academic pressures, financial difficulties, social relationships, and challenges with balancing work and life. Therefore, it is essential for the university to strengthen its mental health support services, create a conducive academic environment, and foster a culture of well-being to help students navigate these challenges and maintain their academic performance and overall well-being

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The university management should organize regular workshops and seminars focusing on stress management, mindfulness practices, and resilience-building strategies. These proactive sessions can empower students to better manage stress before it escalates into more serious mental health issues.

2. The university management should establish a support system that addresses specific stressors, such as academic advising, financial counseling, and social mentoring programs. This will allow students to receive guidance in managing the various aspects of their academic and personal lives.
3. The university management should promote self-care among students and foster a supportive academic environment that can help students manage their academic and personal responsibilities more effectively.
4. The university management should increase access to mental health resources, including self-help tools, mobile apps for stress management, and campus-based wellness centers that provide practical coping strategies.
5. The university management should train the students in peer counseling and mental health first aid. Peer support networks can provide a sense of community, reducing the stigma associated with mental health and encouraging more students to adopt coping strategies in their everyday lives.

References

Adebayo, T. O., & Johnson, E. S. (2018). Academic demands and financial stressors among Nigerian students. *Journal of African Mental Health*, 5(1), 45-57.

Adeoye, J. O., & Aluko, O. (2019). Mental health awareness among university students in Lagos, Nigeria. *African Journal of Mental Health*, 6(2), 102-110.

American Heart Association. (2020). Stress and Heart Health. Retrieved from (link unavailable)

American Psychological Association. (2019). *Stress effects on the body*. Retrieved from https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body

American Psychological Association. (2020). *Stress in America: Coping with Change*. Chicago

Bayram, N., &Bilgel, N. (2018). The prevalence and socio-demographic correlations of depression, anxiety, and stress among a group of university students. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 43*(8), 667-672. doi:10.1007/s00127-008-0345-x

Bonanno, G. A. (2017). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist, 59*(1), 20-28. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20

Chukwu, P. C., & Nwachukwu, I. S. (2017). Coping strategies for mental health stressors among university students in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Psychology and Counseling*, 9(4), 23-34.

Harvard Health Publishing. (2019). The effects of stress on your body. Retrieved from (link unavailable)

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2018). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. PLoS Medicine, 12(7), e1001870.

Hurst, C. S., Baranik, L. E., & Daniel, F. (2020). College student stressors: A review of the qualitative research. *Stress and Health, 29*(4), 275-285. doi:10.1002/smi.2465

Ibrahim, A. K., Kelly, S. J., Adams, C. E., & Glazebrook, C. (2020). A systematic review of studies of depression prevalence in university students. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 47*(3), 391-400. doi: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2018.11.015

Kessler, R. C., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Wittchen, H. U. (2022). Twelve-month and lifetime prevalence and lifetime morphid risk of anxiety and mood disorders in the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey Initiative. Depression and Anxiety, 29(9), 653-664.

National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2020). Stress and Substance Abuse. Retrieved from (link unavailable)

Nkwocha, C. O., Okoro, I. A., & Onuorah, N. M. (2021). Mental health literacy among university students in Eastern Nigeria. *Journal of Nigerian Medical Practitioners*, 12(4), 84-95.

Obi, A. C., & Eze, O. A. (2020). Forms of mental health stressors among university students: Academic demands and financial pressures. *Journal of Nigerian Educational Psychology*, 11(3), 67-75.

Onwurah, C. C., Barnaby, J, Alozie, I. O. Ikegulu, J. U, & Ogbunugwor, A. U. (2024). Effects of Sleep Deprivation on Mental Health of Undergraduate Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Anambra State Nigeria. Journal of Guidance and Counselling Studies 8 (1), 49-64.

Onwurah, C.C., Ikegulu, J. U. Alozie, I. O. & Onwunali O. C (2024). Work Stress Among Secondary School Teachers In Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State. South Eastern Journal of Research and Sustainable Development (SEJRSD) 14 (2) 178 197

Onwurah, C.C., Alozie, I. O. Ikegulu, J. U. Ude, A. C & Alozie, C. P. (2024).Balancing Personalization and Standardization in Digital Mental Health Therapeutics: A Call for Regulatory Guidance. International Journal of Emerging Trends in Health Promotion 1 (1), 1-19

Onwurah, C. C., Okoye C. A. & Ikegulu U. J (2023). Perceived Mental Health Impact of Covid-19 on Adolescent in Secondary Schools in Awka South Local Government Area in Anambra State. *African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies, 8 (1) 1 -15.*

Onwurah C.C., Barnaby, J., Alozie, I. O., Ikegulu, U. J. & Onwunali C. C. (2024), Stress Levels and Stress Management Strategies among Undergraduate Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria", *South Eastern Journal of Research and Sustainable Development*. 14, (2), 198-213

Onwurah, C. C. (2022). Microsystem Interaction as Predictor of Suicidal Behaviour among In-School Adolescents in South East, Nigeria. *African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies, 7(1), 225-235*. https://ajemates.org

Trom, S. C., & Miller, G. E. (2024). Psychological stress and the human immune system: A meta-analytic study of 30 years of inquiry. Psychological Bulletin, 130(4), 601-630.

World Health Organization (2020). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. World Health Organization

World Health Organization. (2020). Mental Health. Retrieved from (link unavailable)