

Suicide and depression in university students: a possible epidemic

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The mental health of university students is considered among the most pressing public health areas in South Africa. For instance, the past 5 years has seen unprecedented incidents of suicide acts and attempts among university students across the country (van Zyl et al., 2017). The increasing tragic events on campuses, associated with mental health, have led many experts to suspect that we may be experiencing a mental illness epidemic among university students. While the prevalence of mental disorders (including depression and suicidality) among the general population is common course, there is a scarcity of reliable, robust, and comprehensive data on the prevalence rates of suicide and depression among university students in South Africa. This is perhaps partly because university students are mostly used as analogue samples to study mental health in the general population – with few studies focusing on university student-specific mental health.

This neglect is surprising given research that shows that most mental health problems develop early in life, with the onset of 75% of lifetime mental disorders occurring in adolescence and early adulthood (Kessler et al., 2007) – periods that cover university students. Available research (e.g., Bantjes et al., 2019; Mortier et al., 2019; Pillay et al., 2020) shows depression and suicide to be common and to disproportionately affect university students compared to the general population (Ibrahim et al., 2013). One can only expect these rates to worsen given the current public health crisis (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures [e.g., social distancing]) that is engulfing the world and its projected impact on mental health (Bu et al., 2020). Fatalities that accompany suicide and depression can be averted because the two conditions are preventable. There is an increasing awareness of the urgent need for the timely identification, effective prevention, and optimal care for students suffering from depression and related mental illness.

The rise in the number of university students experiencing mental health difficulties calls for special attention on the mental health of this cohort. The five articles in this special section aim to do exactly that, by addressing various aspects of university students' mental health through the curation of new research on the prevalence, aetiology, symptomatology, correlates, and prevention of suicide and depression. In the paper 'Trends in the prevalence and severity of depressive symptoms among undergraduate students at a South African University, 2016–2019', Rousseau et al. (2020) describe recent trends in depression and suicidal ideation among university students using archival

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($n=2593$) and original ($n=499$) data. Their results show increased prevalence over the studied period. Similar to previous research, this study further reports first-year undergraduate students to show more depression and suicidal ideation than students in subsequent years. In ‘Suicidal behaviour among university students: a systematic review’, Pillay (this issue) conducts a systematic literature review to examine worldwide student suicide prevalence, the risks, and protective factors related to student suicide, and university-based suicide interventions.

The paper ‘Influence of Poor Emotion Regulation on Disrupted Sleep and Subsequent Psychiatric Symptoms in University Students’ by Nicholson et al. (2021) investigated the influence of both maladaptive and adaptive emotion regulation strategies on sleep quality and, subsequently, on the degree of depressive and posttraumatic symptomatology in 336 students. Their findings indicate that emotion regulation indirectly affects the manifestation of depressive and posttraumatic symptoms through sleep. In ‘Reducing nonfatal suicidal behaviour among university students: actuarial analysis of potential effects of treating common mental disorders’, Bantjes et al. (2020) conduct a population attributable risk analysis to quantify the potential reduction in nonfatal suicidal behaviour achieved by effectively treating common mental disorders (CMDs) in a sample of students from two South African universities ($N=633$). The authors found that treating CMDs could yield absolute reductions in suicide ideation, plan, and attempt in university students.

Finally, in ‘Comorbid anxiety and depression psychopathology in university students: a network approach’, Makhubela (2020) introduces a novel research framework named ‘symptomatology/network analysis’ to the study of psychopathology in South Africa. The author does this by applying a special case of the network approach (i.e., Network Comparison Test) to explore the network structure, symptom centrality, and depression comorbidity in university students ($N=919$). Among other findings, the results showed *Anhedonia*, *hopelessness*, *worthlessness*, *self-blame*, and *loneliness* to be the most central symptoms of depression in university students.

Together, the papers in this special section illustrate the extent of the mental health crisis facing university students in South Africa; posit possible interventions and public mental health responses; and suggest state-of-the-art lines of research that promise to advance our knowledge and response to mental illness in university students. Future research needs to develop ways to reliably predict suicide and depression in university students before they occur. This is currently a notable gap in our work on suicide and depression.


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