PREVALENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SYMPTOMS IN STUDENTS OF THE FACULTY OF HEALTH STUDIES UNIVERSITY OF MOSTAR

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The student population is in a period of psychological maturation during which a person searches for their identity and gradually accepts the role and responsibilities of an adult. Studentship is considered a very sensitive period, because up to the age of 24 years has the highest prevalence of mental disorders appearing for the first time.

Objective: Investigate the prevalence of psychological symptoms in students of the Faculty of Health Studies of the University of Mostar.

Subjects and methods: The study group consisted of students of the Faculty of Health Studies of the University of Mostar (N=100), and the control group consisted of students of the Faculty of Kinesiology of the University of Mostar (N=100). The data were collected using a socio-demographic questionnaire designed specifically for this research and The Symptom Checklist-90-R (SCL-90-R).

Results: Students who used psychoactive substances were statistically significantly more likely to drink alcoholic beverages and smoke tobacco when compared to the group of students who do not use psychoactive substances. Students of the Faculty of Health Studies achieved statistically significantly higher scores on the scales for psychological symptoms (SCL-90-R): obsessive-compulsive symptoms, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, paranoia, psychotic features and non-specific psychological symptoms when compared to kinesiology students.

Conclusion: Students of the Faculty of Health Studies of the University of Mostar have a statistically significantly higher prevalence of psychological symptoms when compared to students of the Faculty of Kinesiology.

Key words: prevalence, psychological symptoms, students

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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) mental health is state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (1). It is an indisputable fact that there is no health without mental health, and that mental health is extremely important, both from an individual and social perspective (2). Mental symptoms present a risk factor for many physical diseases accompanied by the development of various mental disorders (3).

Studentship is considered a very sensitive period, because up to the age of 24 years there is the highest prevalence of mental disorders appearing for the first time. Students are exposed to added stress such as fulfillment of academic requirements, creating more stable partner relationships, increased financial difficulties, harmonizing family and work responsibilities, and the problem related to separation from a familiar social environment, which makes students more sensitive to the problem of adaptation (4). Epidemiological data show that, on average, one in four people will face mental disorders during their lifetime, and one in five will have difficulties that can be diagnosed as a mental disorder or illness (5). It should be emphasized that a mental disorder or mental illness is most often the result of the interaction of biological inheritance, social influences and unfavorable stressful situations (6). The term stress denotes different types of life experiences and physical reactions to life experiences that disrupt a person's homeostasis, that is, it is a state of threat to a person's physical, mental, social and spiritual balance caused by life experiences - stressors. Stress causes different body responses to stressors (7). Stress is not a situation in which an individual finds himself, but a reaction to a situation (8). A high level of stress can result in anxiety, which has a negative impact on the quality of life, work and social functioning, especially in adolescents (9). The depressive disorder is one of the mood disorders and one of the most common psychiatric disorders. It is characterized by a number of psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and physical symptoms, the most pronounced of which are low mood, lack of interest and ability to enjoy normal activities, and a decrease in energy (10). According to WHO data, the frequency of depression in the adult population is 4.6-8.8% (11). The student population is in the period of adolescence. It is a period of psychological maturation during which a person searches for their identity and gradually accepts the role and responsibilities of an adult (12-14).

The objective of this study is to investigate the prevalence of psychological symptoms in students of the Faculty of Health Studies.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The study was conducted on students of different study years of undergraduate and graduate university programmes at the Faculty of Health Studies (FHS) of the University of Mostar, and

the control group consisted of students of the Faculty of Kinesiology (FK) of the University of Mostar. A total of 200 respondents were included in the study, of which 100 students of FHS were the study group, and 100 FK students were the control group. The subjects were selected using a random sample method in the months of November and December 2023. The study was approved by the two faculties, and a cross - sectional study was conducted with data collected by a questionnaire, students were given clear and brief instructions on filling out the questionnaire at the very beginning. Estimated time period for answering the questionnaire is 20 minutes.

The subjects were selected using a random sampling method and agreed to voluntary participate in the study. Students with diagnosed health problems were excluded from the study.

The data was collected using an anonymous survey questionnaire, consisting of:

The general socio-demographic questionnaire was created specifically for the purpose of this study. The variables analyzed in the questionnaire are sex, place of residence, title and year of study, grade average, economic status, and frequency of psychoactive substance use.

The Symptom Checklist-90-R (SCL-90-R) assesses the current level of psychological symptoms and discomfort caused by stressful life situations. One of the main advantages of the SCL-90-R scale is that, although it requires a short time to complete, it provides a multidimensional profile of symptoms, which significantly increases the quality of measurement compared to unidimensional scales. The scale consists of 90 questions and the subjects answer by assessing the level of discomfort caused by the described symptom on a five-point scale (from 0 - not at all, to 4 - very much). The SCL-90-R scale was defined to measure nine primary symptom dimensions and three global indices of distress. The primary dimensions of psychological symptoms are: somatization, obsessive compulsiveness, sensitivity in interpersonal relationships, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobia, paranoid ideas, and psychoticism. The three global indices are: Global Severity Index, Positive Symptom Distress Index, and Positive Symptom. (15).

Statistical analysis

Statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for Windows (version 17.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) was used for statistical data processing. The obtained results were processed using descriptive, non-parametric and parametric methods of inferential statistics depending on data distribution. The distribution of the sample for each continuous variable and for each study group was tested with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Categorical variables were presented by descriptive statistics in the form of frequency and percentage, while continuous variables were presented as arithmetic mean and standard deviation. Differences in categorical variables were tested with the Chi-squared test and Fisher's exact test where necessary. Differences among continuous variables were tested with the Student’s t-test.

Values lower than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

There was a statistically significantly higher proportion of female subjects than male among FHS students when compared to kinesiology students (p<0.001). A significantly higher percentage of kinesiology students enrolled in the faculty of their own choice, and were more often above the average standard than FHS students, while FHS students were more often smokers (p<0.001). Psychoactive substances users (PAT) smoked and drank alcoholic beverages more often than the group that did not use PAT (p<0.001).

FHS students achieved statistically higher results on the scales for Obsessive-compulsive symptoms, Interpersonal sensibility, Depression, Anxiety, Paranoia, Psychotic features and Non-specific symptoms of the SCL 90-R questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1 - Differences in the intensity of psychological symptoms between groups.

SCL-90-R	University study				t	p
	FHS		KF			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
Somatization	0.71	0.56	0.61	0.51	1.304	0.194
Obsessive-compulsive symptoms	1.16	0.62	0.90	0.61	2.954	0.004
Interpersonal sensibility	0.74	0.47	0.55	0.52	2.644	0.009
Depression	0.79	0.54	0.62	0.54	2.243	0.026
Anxiety	0.87	0.62	0.64	0.50	2.862	0.005
Aggression	0.65	0.53	0.51	0.59	1.819	0.070
Phobia	0.38	0.44	0.28	0.38	1.726	0.086
Parania	0.91	0.63	0.61	0.54	3.590	<0.001
Psyhotic features	0.53	0.46	0.32	0.38	3.489	0.001
Non-specific symptoms	0.82	0.52	0.64	0.55	2.411	0.017

SCL-90-R – The Symptoms Checklist-90-R; FHS - Faculty of Health Studies;
FK - Faculty of Kinesiology; $\bar{X}$ - arithmetic mean; SD - standard deviation; t - Student's T-test

Female students achieved statistically significantly higher results on the Somatization scale of the SCL-90-R questionnaire when compared to male students. There were no statistically significant differences between the groups of respondents in relation to their gender on other variables of the SCL-90-R (Table 2).

Table 2 - Differences in the intensity of psychological symptoms between the sexes.

SCL-90-R	Sex				t	p
	M		F			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
Somatization	0.52	0.39	0.71	0.57	2.088	0.038
Obsessive-compulsive symptoms	0.93	0.64	1.07	0.62	1.331	0.185
Interpersonal sensibility	0.57	0.51	0.67	0.50	1.204	0.230
Depression	0.64	0.59	0.72	0.53	0.866	0.387
Anxiety	0.68	0.60	0.78	0.56	1.040	0.300
Aggression	0.51	0.56	0.60	0.56	0.946	0.346
Phobia	0.26	0.31	0.35	0.44	1.375	0.171
Parania	0.76	0.62	0.75	0.60	0.110	0.913
Psyhotic features	0.43	0.52	0.42	0.41	0.133	0.895
Non-specific symptoms	0.71	0.52	0.73	0.55	0.224	0.823

SCL-90-R – The Symptoms Checklist-90-R; M-male, F-female;$\bar{X}$ - arithmetic mean; SD - standard deviation; t - Student's T-test

No statistically significant difference was spotted among subjects in the intensity of psychological symptoms in relation to the use of marijuana (Table 3).

Table 3 - Differences in the intensity of psychological symptoms in relation to the use of marijuana.

SCL 90-R	PAT				t	p
	Marijuana		No			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
Somatization	0.65	0.44	0.67	0.54	0.110	0.912
Obsessive-compulsive symptoms	1.17	0.66	10.02	0.62	0.963	0.337
Interpersonal sensibility	0.79	0.54	0.63	0.49	1.346	0.180
Depression	0.84	0.55	0.69	0.55	1.186	0.237
Anxiety	0.77	0.60	0.76	0.57	0.118	0.906
Aggression	0.63	0.53	0.58	0.57	0.385	0.701
Phobia	0.44	0.66	0.31	0.37	0.829	0.416
Parania	0.75	0.67	0.76	0.60	0.030	0.976
Psyhotic features	0.54	0.41	0.41	0.44	1.261	0.209
Non-specific symptoms	0.88	0.61	0.71	0.53	1.243	0.226

SCL-90-R – The Symptoms Checklist-90-R; PAT – psychoactive substance;$\bar{X}$ - arithmetic mean; SD - standard deviation; t - Student's T-test

DISCUSSION

The study investigated the prevalence of psychological symptoms in the student population of the Faculty of Health Studies and the Faculty of Kinesiology of the University of Mostar. The study includes a comparison between groups of subjects according to their university study programme, sex structure and general characteristics. The study confirmed that female students achieved significantly higher results on the Somatization scale of the SCL-90-R questionnaire when compared to their male counterparts. Despite numerous theories, it is not yet clear why women are more susceptible to the mentioned psychological disorders. A significantly higher percentage of KF students enrolled in the study according to their personal choice, as many as 95% stated that KF was their first choice when selecting a study, while among FHS students, the same was stated by 61% of subjects. KF students had a significantly higher-grade average when compared to FHS students, and more often stated that they belonged to an above average socioeconomic group, 23% of them, while among FHS students, 85% declared that they belonged to an average socioeconomic group. Students who did not enroll in the study of their personal choice achieved significantly higher results on the Interpersonal sensibility, Depression, Anxiety, Psychotic features and Non-specific symptoms scales of the SCL-90-R questionnaire. Kumaraswamy states that at any given time, about 25% of students report reduced subjective and psychological well-being precisely because of the feeling of anxiety caused by the demands of the academic environment. Stress and anxiety lead to alcohol and drug abuse because students consider these substances as a way to relieve the pressure they feel (16).Although the largest number of students (approximately 75%) still have relatively mild and temporary disturbances in the form of anxiety and tension, it is worrisome information that a significant number of students face long-term and more serious psychological problems (17).Eisenberg and associates proved that depression in students has a negative effect on academic efficiency and significantly affects their studies (18).The current study confirms the use of tobacco among students. Namely, 40% of FHS students declared themselves as smokers, which is higher then in KF students, of whom 16% identified themselves as smokers. Numerous studies confirm the increased prevalence of anxiety in groups of people with unhealthy lifestyle habits (19, 20). Previous studies state that factors leading to drinking alcoholic beverages and "drugs" in students include: openness, lack of inhibitions, increased anxiety in interpersonal communication, emotional immaturity, lower level of frustration tolerance, lack of self-confidence, feeling of isolation, perfectionism, guilt, and compulsive behaviors. The data of the current study indicate that a large number of students drink alcoholic beverages, that is 68% of KF students and 63% of FHS students. The study confirms the results of other researches, and we can conclude that students generally drink large amounts of alcoholic beverages. In line with this,

the results of Dawson and associates show that students are more prone to drinking than young people who are not students (21). Chow and associates point out that there is a problem of frequent drinking among the student population in Hong Kong. Their study shows that drinking alcoholic beverages is significantly associated with the prevalence of depressive symptoms in students. Continuous education of students on the perception of the risk of drinking alcoholic beverages is an important factor in the preservation of their mental health (22).

Our study determined that a smaller number of respondents use PAT, of which marijuana is the most common one used. While filling out the questionnaire, a few respondents canceled their answers on the use of marijuana and speed, and circled a different answer to the statement, "I don't use", so we can conclude that the actual percentage of subjects is slightly higher than the percentage obtained in the study. It was confirmed that students who use PAT were more likely to use alcoholic beverages and tobacco when compared to the group without PAT use. Studies conducted in many countries of the world have established a significant prevalence of the use of addictive substances in the student population. The results of a study conducted in Portugal, on a sample of 182 nursing students, show that 79.2% of students use psychoactive substances without a doctor's prescription (23). A study conducted in Poland shows that most students who smoke cigarettes also use marijuana and other similar psychoactive substances (24). In accordance with our results, Adere and associates, in their study conducted in Ethiopia on a sample of 730 students, state that more than half of the students use PAT, mostly students who frequently drink alcoholic beverages (25).

Several studies were conducted on the mental health of students at the University of Mostar. In a 2016 study, Dilber and associates state that the subscales of the SCL-90-R questionnaire negatively correlate with religiosity and that students who believe in God and practice religion have fewer mental symptoms and better mental health when compared to students who are not religious (26). In a 2017 study, Brajković and associates state that students who live with their parents have a better quality of life, less pronounced psychological symptoms and lower self-esteem when compared to students who live as tenants (27). Babić and associates state that physical education students achieved significantly lower scores of psychological symptoms and thus showed better mental health when compared to medical students (28).

This study could be improved by additional investigation on whether students suffer from some diseases, given that a large number of autoimmune diseases contain physical as well as psychological symptoms that are organically conditioned, and in this way more realistic results on students' psychological conditions could be obtained. Furthermore, many studies indicate the importance of engaging in physical activities for the purpose of improving and reducing psychological symptoms (29-33). This study did not investigate students' physical activities, which we recommend for future studies. This way, we

would get a more complete picture of their free time and the way they deal with stress apart from the use of addictive substances. The results indicate that a large number of students are predisposed to further development of various psychological disorders, therefore it is necessary to additionally engage in this type of research in order to determine the best preventive measures to keep students mentally healthy.

CONCLUSION

Students of the Faculty of Health Studies of the University of Mostar have a significantly higher incidence of psychological symptoms when compared to students of the Faculty of Kinesiology. Female students achieved statistically significantly higher results on the Somatization scale when compared to male students. Users of psychoactive substances drink alcoholic beverages and smoke tobacco more often than the group without psychoactive substance use.

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POJAVNOST PSIHIČKIH SIMPTOMA U STUDENATA FAKULTETA ZDRAVSTVENIH STUDIJA SVEUČILIŠTA U MOSTARU

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SAŽETAK

Uvod: Studentska populacija nalazi se u razdoblju psihološkog sazrijevanja tijekom kojeg osoba traži svoj identitet i postupno prihvaća ulogu i odgovornosti odrasle osobe. Studentsko razdoblje smatra se vrlo osjetljivim razdobljem jer u dobi do 24. godine postoji najveća prevalencija psihičkih poremećaja koji se pojavljuju prvi put.

Cilj: Istražiti pojavnost psihičkih simptoma studenata Fakulteta zdravstvenih studija Sveučilišta u Mostaru.

Ispitanici i metode: Ispitnu skupinu činili su studenti Fakulteta zdravstvenih studija Sveučilišta u Mostaru (N=100), a kontrolnu skupinu činili su studenti Kineziološkog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Mostaru (N=100). Podaci su prikupljeni pomoću socio - demografskog upitnika osobne izrade namjenski sačinjenog za ovo istraživanje i standardiziranog upitnika skale psihičkih simptoma SCL 90-R.

Rezultati: Studenti koji su upotrebljavali psihoaktivne tvari su statistički značajno češće pili alkoholna pića i pušili duhan u odnosu na skupinu studenata koja ne koriste psihoaktivne tvari. Studenti Fakulteta zdravstvenih studija su na SCL 90-R upitniku postizali statistički značajno više rezultata na skalama psihičkih simptoma: opsesivno - kompulzivni simptomi, interpersonalna vulnerabilnost, depresivnost, anksioznost, paranoja, psihotična obilježja i nespecifični psihički simptomi u odnosu na studente kineziologije.

Zaključak: Studenti Fakulteta zdravstvenih studija Sveučilišta u Mostaru imaju statistički značajno veću pojavnost psihičkih simptoma u odnosu na studente Kineziološkog fakulteta.

Ključne riječi: pojavnost, psihički simptomi, studenti

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