

Self-reported anxiety levels in a cluster of Albanian University students: a comparative study

Suela Kellici*¹, Klea Prifti², Gentiana Qirjako³

¹Department of Pharmacy, Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine, Tirana, Dibra Street 376, 1005 Tirana, Albania

²Regional Health Authority, Fier, Albania

³Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Medicine, Tirana, Dibra Street 376, 1005 Tirana, Albania

Introduction

Depression and anxiety are considered among the major problems within the young age worldwide. They are the most common mental health conditions, having a high prevalence at the young age, beginning by age 14 (half of them) and developing by age 18 (75% of them).

There is evidence of an increasing prevalence of anxiety among undergraduate students.

Anxiety is one of the challenges students of higher institutions face the most along their studies. It is often related to work overload, financial burden, competition with friends, willingness to succeed and concerns about the future. It can influence on student's ability to study and can affect also their quality of life. There are many studies evidencing the level of anxiety among students and addressing the need to reflect on the contributing factors in anxiety symptoms in this category.

The aim of this study was to explore the level of anxiety among students in higher education institutions in Albania and identify eventual contributing factors.

Materials and methods

This is a Cross-sectional study (through an online self-reporting structured questionnaire).

The sample consisted in 695 students who participated to the study.

The administered Questionnaire included demographic, socio-economic and behavioral data linked to anxiety.

The presence of anxiety was evaluated through the Zung self-rating Anxiety Scale.

The Zung Self Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS)⁵, is a 20-item self-report assessment device which includes measures of state and trait anxiety. Answering the statements, a person should indicate how much each statement applies to him or her. Each question is scored on a Liker-type scale of 1-4, ranging from "never occurring" or "a little of the time" to "most of the time". Overall assessment is done by total score. The total scores range from 20-80. The total scores are again divided into score with 20-44 as "Normal Range", 45-59 as "Mild to Moderate Anxiety Levels", 60-74 as "Marked to Severe Anxiety Levels" and 75-80 as "Extreme Anxiety Levels".

Chi square test was applied and the statistical analyses was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 17.0.

Results and discussion

695 students responded to the online questionnaire: 599 females and 96 males. Age was categorized in three sections: ≤ 21 years, 21-25 years, ≥ 25 years. The majority of respondents was in the ≤ 21 years' category (557 students), 121 were aged 21-24 years and only 17 belonged to the age group ≥ 25 years. This result is in line with the Albanian students' tradition to make all efforts to conclude the university studies in due time (23-24 years).

The students were categorized according to the field of study. We made no distinction between different locations of the universities, therefore data came from students in faculties located in different Albanian cities. Based on this categorization we had 311 respondents from the faculties of natural sciences and agricultural sciences,

211 belonged to the social sciences and arts, 173 to the medical sciences and sports.

Among all participants a certain level of anxiety was perceived in 96.3% of cases. Only 3.7% resulted as “anxiety free” students according to the scores of the questionnaire. 482 students showed “Mild to Moderate Anxiety Levels”, 182 of them showed “Marked to Severe Anxiety Levels” and only 5 of them were categorized as students showing “Extreme Anxiety Levels”.

Trying to identify the contributing factors to the anxiety level, the Chi square test showed a statistically significant correlation between gender and anxiety level. Female students show higher level of stress as compared to male students ($p=0.01$). All 5 students falling in the category of “Extreme Anxiety levels” were female. This finding is in line with other reports showing higher prevalence of anxiety in young females.

In our analyses the age and the study program seems to have not any statistically significant correlation with the anxiety level. Despite this it seems that age can contribute somehow on the anxiety level, as almost all students defined as “Anxiety free” (25 out of 26) belonged to the age category ≤ 21 years.

The higher percentage of anxiety presence according to the study profile was evidenced for medical and sport sciences (97.1 % of them showed any level of anxiety).

Although the high prevalence of some level of anxiety, none of the students responding the questionnaire reported any treatment for anxiety or any other similar condition or mental health condition. This may be related to the underestimation of the anxiety symptoms in the young age.

The sooner the treatment beginning in mental health conditions, the better the condition prognosis is. The lack of awareness about the need to seek medical advice in case of any mental health condition can be of high relevance in the burden of these diseases. Health care professionals, but also regulators of the higher education institutions should be alerted on the size and severity of the mental health conditions among students in order to address their common efforts in the improvement of the university environment and in the preventive medical mental care. Psychological support could also influence and help in the condition improvement.

We are aware of some limitations of our study. It consists in an online questionnaire and therefore there are some bias on reporting data this way. Symptoms of anxiety are often underestimated as young people hardly admit them. There is still stigma about this kind of symptomatology and this can lead to under-reporting and as a consequence under treating it.

Further analyses should be done including examination of other influencing factors such as family problems, academic performance, biological and

sociological factors. A simultaneous study of all these factors could give a clearer picture of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

Anxiety is rather common in university students in Albania. It is closely related to the female gender. This is an initial evidence which should be further exploited in order to better understand the determinants related to the anxiety symptoms. Findings from this study can be of help in higher education institutions and in policy making on improving the health determinants among students in Albania.

References

- Bitsko, R.H., Holbrook, J.R., Ghandour, R.M., Blumberg, S.J., Visser, S.N., Perou, R., Walkup, J.T., 2018. Epidemiology and Impact of Health Care Provider-Diagnosed Anxiety and Depression Among US Children. *J. Dev. Behav. Pediatr.* 39(5), 395-403. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP>
- Castillo, L.G., Schwartz, S.J., 2013. Introduction to the special issue on college student mental health. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 69(4), 291-297. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.21972>
- Khesht-Masjedi, M.F., Shokrgozar, S., Abdollahi, E., Habibi, B., Asghari, T., Ofoghi, F.S., Pazhooman, S., 2019. The relationship between gender, age, anxiety, depression, and academic achievement among teenagers. *J. Family Med. Prim. Care* 8(3),799-804. https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmipc.jfmipc_103_18
- Narmandakh, A., Roest, A.M., de Jonge, P., Oldehinkel, A.J., 2021. Psychosocial and biological risk factors of anxiety disorders in adolescents: a TRAILS report. *Eur. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry* 30, 1969–1982. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01669-3>
- Saleh, D., Camart, N., Romo, L., 2017. Predictors of Stress in College Students. *Front Psychol.* 8, 19. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00019>
- Vander Lind R., 2017. Effects of mental health on student learning. *Learning Assistance Review.* 22(2), 39-58.
- William, W.K., Zung, A., 1971. Rating Instrument for Anxiety Disorders. *Psychosomatics* 12(6), 371-379.
- Yang, Q., Shi, Q., & Zhang, L., 2020. Mental health problems and counseling path for college students preparing for exams. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica* 29(1), 1364–1369.