

THE BEGINNING OF STUDIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research-based recommendations for universities and students

CENTER FOR PSYCHOTRAUMATOLOGY

Vilnius University
Institute of Psychology

2020 Vilnius



MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

To control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, in Lithuania, as well as in many other countries of the world, measures were taken that limited the possibilities of direct communication and encouraged various activities to be carried out remotely, if possible. The study process in many cases also moved into the virtual space. This became a particular challenge for students entering universities in 2020 - after a difficult graduation exam session, studies in a new academic environment began during the pandemic.

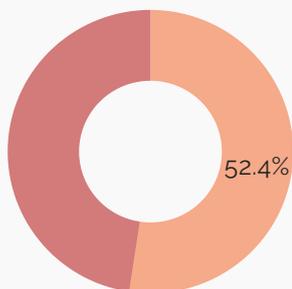
As early as the beginning of 2020, as soon as the pandemic began, the World Health Organization expressed concern that the level of stress associated with COVID-19 was increasing in society and that this could have a negative impact on mental health (WHO, 2020). Even outside the crisis, various life changes (such as starting studies, changing residence, meeting new people, and losing former social contacts) are very challenging and stressful for young people.

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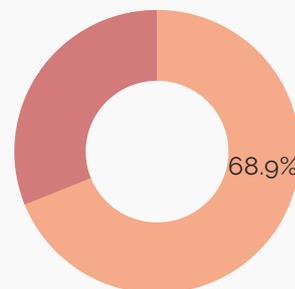
SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS SUCH AS EVENT RESTRICTIONS, QUARANTINE, DISTANCE LEARNING THAT LIMIT DIRECT CONTACT WITH OTHER STUDENTS AND FACULTY CAN BE EXTREMELY STRESSFUL AND INCREASE THE RISK OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS.

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During the study years specifically, young adults experience more mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, increased risk of suicide, adjustment disorder, etc. (Schönfeld, et al., 2018; Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene, Kazlauskas, et al., 2020). While for young adults SARS-CoV-2 virus is relatively less dangerous than for older people, it is young people who may be most affected by the restrictions introduced to control the spread of COVID-19. In the first year of studies, an active process of socializing takes place: students make new friends, meet future romantic partners, try various new activities. All these social processes are crucial in forming a professional and relational identity and understanding which direction to take in life.



52.4% of first-year students experience stress due to the changed study process during the lockdown



68.9% of students assist relatives, that are experiencing difficulties due to the COVID-19 crisis, daily.

VU Center for Psychotraumatology study findings

According to a study conducted in March-April 2020 by the researchers from the Center Psychotraumatology at Vilnius University, more than a half (52.4%) of first-year students who participated in the study experienced significant levels stress due to the changed study process during the lockdown. Also, more than a half (54.8%) of students reported being severely stressed by the introduction of lockdown and, as a result, restricted traveling. It is important to understand that not only the restrictions related to COVID-19 were challenging, but also the newly arisen responsibilities. More than two-thirds (68.9%) of first-year students surveyed said that their daily activities included assisting relatives that were experiencing difficulties due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Increased stress is the first sign that mental health may deteriorate in the future. According to the study, the good news is that students whose mental health was quite well before the pandemic did not experience any negative changes in mental health at the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic. However, those who, even before the pandemic, had high enough levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, experienced even more intensified symptoms of depression and significantly declined psychological well-being during the first wave of the pandemic. In addition to that, the results of the study revealed that during the first wave of the pandemic, the number of students who could be classified as being at a higher risk of suicide increased and was as high as about 20%. These research findings suggest that the deterioration in students' mental health is one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that needs to be taken into account in order to successfully overcome the crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES FOR HELPING STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

- 1. Recognize, clearly identify, and communicate that the semester begins during a time of a crisis** and that students may experience stress, tension, insecurity, and some even problems of mental health.
- 2. Encourage the lecturers and professors to identify and remind students** during lectures and seminars that **it is normal to experience troubling feelings** in a pandemic situation and to seek psychological help if necessary.
- 3. Spread the information to students about how to overcome the feelings tension and stress.** If possible, organize stress reduction skill seminars and workshops. Developing coping skills is one of the most imperative measures in the prevention of problems of mental health.
- 4. Communicate clearly what actions the university is taking** to overcome the crisis and **how members of the university community should react** to specific situations related to COVID-19. This is especially relevant for first-year students who are just getting acquainted with their study environment and the academic culture of the university. Knowing what to do reduces anxiety.
- 5. Ensure the availability of psychological support at the university.** More students will likely seek psychological help. Make sure the psychologists working at the university **have enough resources to consult remotely.** Look for ways to help more students at once. Support groups run by psychologists or online self-help programs can help. Identify resources inside or outside the university that could ensure the availability of psychological support for students.
- 6. The most vulnerable students will likely need the most support.** Identify vulnerable groups (students from socially disadvantaged families, students from abroad, minorities, students with mental health problems) and, if possible, actively offer specialized help.
- 7. Monitor students' mental health and its changes.** Ongoing monitoring of mental health and psychological well-being at the university can help to better **understand the real situation, the need for psychological support** and respond on time, which contributes to the strengthening of students' mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STUDENTS FOR OVERCOMING THE TENSION AND STRESS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

1. It is perfectly **normal if you feel anxious, tense, sad, scared or angry**. Sharing your feelings with people you trust can help you feel better. **Keep in touch** with friends, family.
2. Remember **what helped you feel better in stressful situations in the past**. Maybe breathing exercises? Sports? Being in nature? Diary? Expression through artistic activities? **Listen to your needs** and let yourself do what energizes you, relaxes you, and helps you express your feelings.
3. **Maintain a healthy lifestyle and daily routine**. Even if you feel worse or must stay home, try to eat regularly, go to bed, and get up at a similar time, move more. It is very important to **devote at least some time daily for active physical activity**.
4. Spend more time **searching for positive news** and spend less time browsing websites that spread frightening information.
5. If you feel intense heavy emotions that are difficult to cope with, **if the tension interferes** with your daily activities, if you want to hurt yourself or others, **contact a mental health specialist on a helpline online or by phone**. Remember that alcohol and other psychoactive substances can only worsen the situation.

Sources:

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Recommendations were prepared by: dr. Inga Truskauskaitė-Kunevičienė, dokt. Monika Kvedaraitė, dokt. Ieva Daniūnaitė, dr. Odeta Geleželytė, doc. dr. Ieva Norkienė, prof. dr. Evaldas Kazlauskas



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