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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ASPECTS OF WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF COLLEGE STUDENTS DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

This article primarily focused on presenting a narrative review of the literature describing the aspects of the well-being of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of well-being were presented using various examples of the challenges faced by college students during COVID-19. The article further focused on highlighting the challenges faced by college students in fulfilling their academic goals during COVID-19. Implications of the outcomes were discussed with the potential recommendations for future research.

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Introduction:-

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in chaos, disturbances, and losses in every aspect of human life (Torales et al., 2020). These aspects included everyday life activities such as going to work, connecting to people, and getting a quality education to major economic and social disruptions (Tarkar, 2020). These disturbances were given rise to by the imposition of quarantines and lockdowns in COVID-19 hotspots (Torales et al., 2020). Students were [almost] forced to miss out on quintessential college experiences and had to attend lectures from their respective homes (Belkin, 2021). Learning, which is a complex process and is often easier to carry out in an environment that enables one-on-one interaction without any distractions in one's surroundings, was simply difficult to achieve since any individual who was attending a class from the comfort of his/her home was bound to get distracted sooner or later. Furthermore, online interaction could never truly scale up to match in-person interaction. Instructors identified twice as many barriers as support in their teaching during the transition to emergency remote teaching (Donham et al., 2022).

People around the world, especially young individuals, were deprived of a crucial element of daily life, social interaction (Nardone, 2020). The classical theories presented by Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1971) have emphasized the importance of social interactions and provided us with concepts such as scaffolding, peer learning, role play, etc. with the shift of education to online platforms the social and collaborative aspects of learning became difficult. Reaching out to people became difficult because of problems like poor internet connections, overloading of websites, and crashing of online platforms; this functioned as an obstacle in peer learning activities (Mahyooob, 2020). The pandemic also led to social isolation among students which affected their mental health (Lukács, 2021). Research suggested that students who had no prior mental health issues were more likely to have their mental health deteriorate, which is associated with greater social isolation (Pietrabissa, et al., 2020). Findings indicated that colleges and universities must not only continue supporting students with previously existing mental health needs

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but also prioritize early intervention and prevention programming to minimize the effects of COVID-19 on students who are experiencing increased psychological distress as a result of increased social isolation - a consequence of the pandemic (Hamza et. al, 2021).

A very noticeable disturbance that has been ongoing since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, has affected individuals all over the world (Torales et al., 2020). It has brought impactful changes in the lives of everyone in some way or another. There have been several overwhelming developments that have resulted in the depletion of the quality of both mental and physical health (Torales et al., 2020). The consequences of a global pandemic have brought drastic changes into the lives of all individuals, it has brought a shift in normalcy. Due to the implementation of lockdowns and quarantines all over the world, people were left disconnected from their busy and interactive lives (Chou et al., 2020). All aspects of one's existing pattern of living have been deeply affected, especially amongst the student population, whose aspirations and learning experiences have been minimized to a single screen in their homes (Schmidt et al., 2020). These changes occurred abruptly which made it difficult for students to adjust and encounter the reality of the situation. As days, weeks, and months passed, it has been reported that the mental health and well-being of people have been hampered due to a lack of motivation, which is caused by a lack of schedule and rules (Torales, 2020). The emergence of negative feelings has been reported among several students, to name some, stress, anxiety, sadness, being overwhelmed, and tired. These feelings have been registered among students regardless of their academic performance (Zuñiga, Pego, Hosseini, 2021).

Apart from the negative feelings that emerged due to being disconnected and adhering to staying at home for a long period, feelings of fear of one's health and fear of death have also become a dominant part of one's daily pattern of living (Rogers, et al., 2020). Constant worrying about getting infected with COVID-19, followed by if someone in the family or the individual themselves have been infected, can have an impact on one's mental and physical health (Schimmenti et al., 2020). Another reason for feeling distressed and miserable is the constant negativity depicted through news channels (Brennen et al., 2020). During lockdowns, people resorted to their televisions and media to keep busy. However, almost all news channels flourished with news about the negative effects of COVID-19. The phrases and images used for depiction have also had a traumatic effect on one's mind (Brennen et al., 2020).

Physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of well-being are broader terms that include various factors that were affected during COVID-19. In the next sections, we will describe how social, physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of well-being were impacted during COVID-19.

Physical Aspect of Well-Being during COVID-19:-

With the implementation of lockdowns across the world, individuals were curbed from engaging in physical activity which affected their overall well-being (Chouchou et al., 2021). Even though many popular challenges encouraging good health and videos going viral containing content on weight loss had spread like wildfire across the globe; a significant shift in eating habits and physical behavior was observed. During the initial months of the pandemic, many people hoarded processed food because of the fear of scarcity of the same. This ended up in the consumption of more fried food, sugary food, drinks, dairy products, etc. among children, with the closure of schools the number of meals consumed by juveniles had increased, and the time spent on outdoor activities, physical exercise had dropped significantly bridging the gap between obesity rates before and after the pandemic in children and adolescents (Stavridou et.al, 2021).

Research has shown an increase in obesity among young individuals. Palestine reported weight gain in 41.7% of adolescents while Spain had an increase in 25% of children (Stavridou et.al, 2021). The prevalence of obesity in the USA has increased by 15% among adolescents since the onset of the pandemic. A study conducted in China indicated an increase in the obesity rates among children from 10.5% to 12.9% (Stavridou et.al, 2021). Physical well-being does not only include lack of bodily movement but also what impact it may have on one's mental health. During the pandemic, people experienced "coronavirus fear" which is the fear of getting infected by the virus. A correlational study about physical activity and mental health suggested that the fear of coronavirus and the stress, anxiety, and fatigue was increased with the decrease in the physical activity performed by an individual per day (Wright et.al, 2021). This indicated that since there was a restriction on physical activity of individuals because of COVID-19, a significant increase in stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health diseases was observed. This not only affected adults but also adolescents which hindered their academic performance.

Emotional Aspect of Well-Being during COVID-19:-

Being stuck in one place for a long time without any kind of interaction with one's peers, and lack of uniformity and discipline in one's behavior have influenced the reactions to daily life hassles. People were easily irritated and annoyed at small inconveniences in their lives (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2003). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the loss of a loved one due to being infected was another reason that has caused the emergence of negative emotions such as anxiety, panic attacks, and severe trauma (Grief and loss, 2021).

According to the World Health Organization, mankind has lost 6,170,283 people in this war against the novel coronavirus (Who coronavirus (COVID-19) dashboard). Death has been often associated with negative emotions and moods such as grief, mourning, stress, and anxiety. It was not uncommon to see emotional imbalance and disruption in the life of an individual suffering bereavement. Human beings have been known for their intrinsic need to socialize and are also known as social animals for this very reason. When the social creature gets stopped from interacting, their health gets affected. Emotional support from one's family, friends, and peers has been just as important as food, air, or water for one's proper growth and well-being. With the restrictions implemented during the last two years, this very aspect of emotional support was seized from many individuals since support systems were now reliant on telephonic communication (Alonzi et al., 2020).

Suddenly, people were asked not to physically interact with anyone who did not share the same place of residence (Jarzyna, 2020). Many were stuck in places where they could not meet friends or even family. Thus, their access to their respective social support systems was cut off which led to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. Lockdown measures during COVID-19 largely impaired mental well-being (Savage et al., 2020).

Social Aspect of Well-Being during COVID-19:-

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the social aspect of what was commonly understood as "daily life", before COVID (Emiliani et al., 2020). The pandemic forced people into their homes as a preventive measure. The impact concerning social life was mostly of two types: (i) digitalization of daily life and (ii) social isolation. The digitalization of daily life impacted people across the spectrum. From children to the elderly, from students to working professionals, from freelancers to employees, and from students to academicians, every section of society was impacted when the "work-from-home" culture was superimposed (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020). A person's daily environment was limited to their room, their mobile phone, and their laptop. This reduction in the social environment was not only applicable to one's work-life but also social life. The world went from meeting for lunch and parties to meeting over a video call, only to compensate for the lack of physical human interaction. The domain of social exploration was no longer the world, but a handheld digital device, i.e., a cell phone, screen. Social interaction was no longer fueled by the intrinsic urge to be social or engage in active interaction with people outside one's immediate family, it was now propelled by the need to avoid crippling social isolation (Banerjee & Rai, 2020).

Even though it was far more convenient than moving around and traveling, it damaged productivity, efficiency, and most importantly, motivation (Verma et al., 2021). No matter how comfortable one's home environment may be, it is not necessarily conducive to efficacy. Furthermore, prolonged social isolation induced a feeling of suffocation or "being stuck" which in turn had major psychological consequences (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017). The social aspect of well-being includes getting (dis-)connected with friends, family, colleagues, and meeting new people. The idea of studying or working in a conducive environment was demolished from the mindsets of people living and working in the comfort of their homes during COVID-19. It has also led to a reduced ability to socialize and interact. Although people have been active on social media and online video conferencing platforms to interact, learn and work, this resulted in huge amounts of stress and anxiety followed by a disbalance in their way of expressing their feelings.

Cognitive Aspect of Well-Being during COVID-19:-

Attention is one of the most essential elements when it comes to information processing (Fiorenzato, 2021). The importance of attention can be highlighted by various theories that have been crafted over the years such as the Premotor Theory of Attention, the Theory of Selective Attention, and Joint Attention. The average attention span has decreased from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8.25 seconds in 2015 (Statistic Brain, 2015; Herder & Mayer, 2008). The research also found that the use of the internet daily does result in a short attention span (Fillmore, 2015).

The pandemic was a huge transition for people when it came to attention and communication and everyday activity. People shifted their mode of communication and interaction to virtual platforms as well as their recreational activities changed colors. Sitting in front of laptop screens, tablets and mobile phones became the new normal.

Official meetings for everyone shifted to platforms like google meet, zoom, Microsoft teams, etc. Virtual communication did provide us with means to interact, but the use of social media and online mediums contributed to the decrease in attention span among individuals.

Students have identified restricted attention span as a constraint of online learning, according to a recent study on digital learning that explored the benefits and problems of distance learning. To lessen the cognitive load, they advocated increasing interactivity during online teaching (Mukhtar et.al, 2022). Research also shows that in a study conducted on Italian families 83% of parents observed a decrease in the attention span of their children especially among older children during covid-19. However, it was found that while 18.6% of them showed an improvement in their attention span a total of 28.1% displayed a dis-improvement (Mantovani et. al, 2021).

Apart from the decrease in attention span, there was a lot of uncertainty during covid-19 among students. As per the study conducted at the University of Michigan, there has been an association between the levels of high anxiety and stress with the need for cognitive closure among college students, which ended up affecting their well-being (White,2022). Individuals with a strong demand for cognitive closure will indeed be designed to overcome the stress of uncertainty that they will certainly confront in the future if they acquire strategies to lessen the psychological pain of uncertainty (White, 2022).

Academic Achievements of College Students during COVID-19:-

College life and the experiences that come with it are a part of every student's bucket list. It is supposed to be a period of life where individuals connect and explore the outside world on their own. Students learn to work hard, stay motivated, create professional and personal relationships and deal with new and unique situations. As it is known that humans are social animals, it is important to consider the fact that in the period of lockdowns and quarantines, there was no social contact (Chou et al.,2020). It was especially worse for students who are extroverted and students who were looking forward to meeting like-minded people (Sanudin, et al., 2022). Although these experiences play an important part in one's life, it was unfortunate to see students attend almost two years of their college life online. Students all over the world had aspirations and personal goals to achieve and were left feeling underwhelmed because of staying in front of a screen and attending lectures online (Chaturvedi et al., 2021). Lack of proper communication hindered the process of learning significantly, which made several students feel anxious about the quality of their education (Aristovnik, et al., 2020).

The fear of contracting the virus was hovering over every individual's head and the restrictions concerning social distancing held students from engaging in physical activities as they were asked to stay within the restraints of their house (Ahorsu, Lin, et al., 2020). Students who were highly invested in physical activity were put in an uncomfortable situation to stay in and were pushed to step out of their comfort zone. Research has shown that when a student is put out of their comfort zone it may lead to hindrance in their learning abilities (Leberman& Martin, 2002). Apart from academics and lack of social life, another aspect that affected these students was that the environment at home for many students would become toxic which contributed to the deterioration of their mental health (Hasan et al., 2020). Students who were looking forward to living in a hostile environment, away from their families for the reason to be living in a more positive environment were left feeling devastated and anxious.

Academics at the college level has also become very challenging during COVID-19 (Yang, Chen, et al., 2021). Although the student population in college comes from diverse backgrounds with different experiences and has individual learning styles to understand academic knowledge, some might cope with the stress and pressure of completing assignments, understanding concepts and doing some extra reading, however, some might require a push or appraisal from their faculty. The first semester of college itself has been a critical period where students would understand and reflect upon their learning processes in in-person classrooms. But they did not get to be on campus in person (Chaturvedi, et al., 2021). Several factors depend upon having a deep understanding of the foundational courses, some of which are longer retention of knowledge and future successes (Merhi, 2018). However, during lockdowns and quarantines, students who were in their first year of college didn't receive such outcomes, lack of communication and collaborative discussions and inaccurate ways of teaching through online platforms had impacted their learning process (Ribeiro, et al., 2019).

It is important to note that although most students opposed the idea of online education, some students started depending on the online lifestyle (Hasan et al., 2020). They enjoyed the perks of not socializing or interacting with people, and using unethical methods to cheat during exams became more frequent as there was no authority looking

over them. Student life was negatively affected in several directions during COVID-19 (Aristovnik, et al., 2020). These changes need to be addressed and directed towards a change in the environment and the development of positive feelings for a better quality of life and the experiences that come with it.

Discussion:-

COVID-19 has affected the overall mental and physical health. It has led to significant lifestyle changes in the lives of millions which affected their well-being. Several aspects have equally been affected due to the sudden and drastic change. These aspects include social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. The social aspect has been directly affected, individuals were forced to adapt to interactions taking over online platforms, and lack of engagement also contributed to social isolation. Social isolation was no longer seen just as a depressive symptom, but as a medical necessity, mandated by governments all over the world in the form of “lockdowns”. Digitalization was no longer seen as a modern developmental goal, but as a means of survival since physical interaction was put to a curb. Devastating and sudden deaths of loved ones after contesting the virus had left individuals emotionally distressed, and individuals living alone or without a support system developed anxiety and frequent panic attacks. The physical aspect was deeply affected as well. Due to quarantines and lockdowns, people were restricted to their homes and weren’t involved in any kind of physical activity for long periods of time. Several cognitive functions were severely affected, the most important one of which is attention. People found it hard to focus on their work due to distractions present at home. Interactions through screens also affected the way individuals react or respond as they usually do, as everything was online, they were less interested.

Academics and student performance have been seriously impacted by the pandemic. Students were forced to adapt to online schooling. Most of the time there were gaps in communication and these classes lacked interaction and collaborative activities amongst the students. With the lack of one-on-one interaction, in addition to the lack of physical checks and balances a classroom provides, learning became a tiring and obstacle-ridden process. Students also were not taking their academics seriously as there was no presence of authority. The use of unethical means to complete examinations became common for the same reason. Although the situation has been coming under control, it is important to note that the effects of the pandemic still exist. Most students lack motivation and have been through a tough time for the last two years. It is important for teachers and faculty to create a safe environment for the students going back to college. As they might have lost abilities to socialize and interact with people, collaborative activities that help in creating a positive environment need to be introduced.

The overall impact of COVID-19 was nothing short of multi-faceted and truly damaging. The world is starting to transition back to the regular “offline” way of functioning. In the academic world, institutions are re-opening, and many are functioning at nearly full capacity. After two long years of talking to blank screens, professionals in the field of academia are once again getting the opportunity to have a classroom full of students to themselves. This transition is a slow yet hectic process. Thus, it must be carried out with utmost care and caution. We must acknowledge that this is a “post-COVID” world, not a “non-COVID” world. The virus may be a lot more controlled as compared to before, but it has not disappeared yet. The practice of medical precaution which has been developed and adopted over the past two years must not be abandoned now. Mankind must tread lightly on this tightrope because a fall could bring it back to square one, causing a lot of damage.

Implications of the Outcomes and Future Recommendations:-

To turn these dramatic changes into feelings that bring wellness to an individual, people would have to take the first step toward improving their functioning lives. This can begin by reaching out to family, friends, and colleagues. Being connected with people, and maintaining healthy conversations and relations would help bring out any kind of frustration or anger, and suppressed emotions onto the table. Talking about one’s needs and realizing one’s needs led by positive experiences, would bring out healthy changes to one’s psychological well-being.

If a person doesn’t have any relationships that they can trust enough to talk about, they can reach out to mental health professionals, both online and offline. This would be the first step at the beginning of a new and improved pattern of living. Furthermore, as the world transitions back to the “offline” lifestyle, it is important to acknowledge and appropriately deal with the stress it may cause.

Involving any kind of physical activity, either simply walking or going to a professional, or working out around the house would contribute to a healthy mind and body. Engaging in routine experiences, also known as creating a habit of doing something productive, would bring out feelings of purpose, motivation, and subsequent achievement.

Forming a connection with the environment around us could surface emotions that trouble us and instill in us a positive feeling, help us introspect and maintain healthy relations with our thoughts. Practicing guided meditation and engaging in breathing exercises could help focus better and contribute to better psychological well-being.

Exploring new activities and engaging in small entrepreneurial ventures such as opening thrift stores, home-based bakeries, conducting online tutorials, vlogging, etc. could also be some productive ways to maintain one's psychological well-being. Another thing to focus upon is the present moment, also known as mindfulness. It would help guide the mind into bringing attention to details in one's life and thinking about things that matter.

As society is changing, and mental health is being given the attention it deserves, wellness and balanced well-being can be achieved through a little effort from within. These changes and improvements would require a lot of help from within and the environment, which consists of people such as family and friends, their support could help in building positive emotions.

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