Mental Illness Among College Students: Risk and Treatment Rates
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Take a concept from Abnormal Psychology and conduct a literature review using at least 10 relevant references to write an APA format paper. This assignment was completed for Dr. James Shepherd’s Writing in Psychology.

Abstract
Transitioning to adulthood is a stressful experience for many young adults, especially when attending college is added into the transitioning process. Due to unique environmental factors that college students face, susceptibility to mental illness is common among this population. The purpose of this research paper is to discuss mental illness among college students and describe what makes this group unique in relation to mental health. The main points of this paper discuss that college students are an at-risk population for mental illness, certain groups within the college student population have an increased risk of developing mental illness, and the treatment rate for mental illness among college students is significantly low. For the mental health of college students to improve, students, parents, and colleges and universities all need to address the issue of mental illness and take action to reduce the risk in this population.

Keywords: college, university, students, mental illness, mental health, risk, treatment

Introduction
Soon after graduating from high school, many students are buzzing with excitement about beginning new chapters in their lives as young adults. Some graduates may go straight into the workforce, but many young adults in the country today attend a college or university after high school. College years are known as the “best years” of life, allowing students to explore their identity, assert their individuality, and find their place in the world. The transition from high school to college allows students to drift away from life at home and toward life as an adult. Despite the fact that this is normally a smooth transition for numerous students, stress has become commonplace during college. Students may find that becoming an adult is a role they are not ready for quite yet. Often students are performing a juggling act with the responsibilities of classes, organizations, homework, studying, jobs, and relationships. With an enormous amount of pressure to succeed, stress has become the norm for college students. This stress makes students susceptible to a growing problem among the college population: mental illness.

Mental illnesses are conditions that can range from inconvenient to debilitating for countless people in the United States every year. According to The Jed Foundation (2015), people of a variety of ages, races, religions, and incomes can find themselves troubled with a mental illness. Some groups have been found to be more at-risk than others, but anyone can be affected by a
mental illness. The Jed Foundation (2015) also states that mental illnesses can affect people at various stages in their lives, but often appear between the young ages of 18 and 24. This is the typical age of most college students, and these mental illnesses can affect the students before or during their college experience. Many young adults in college are struggling with mental illness for various reasons, with some groups being more prone to mental illness than others. Despite the sheer number of college students experiencing mental illness, treatment rates are significantly low. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the idea of mental illness among college students and discover what makes this group unique in relation to mental health. The main points of this paper discuss why college students are an at-risk population for mental illness, which groups within the college student population have an increased risk of developing mental illness, and the treatment rate for mental illness among college students.

**College Students: A Population at Risk**

Through research, it has become apparent over the last several years that college students are a population at risk for mental illness. A reason for this is that young adulthood has been found to be the age of onset for many mental illnesses. This finding affects young adults of all ages, including those who do not attend college. Another reason college students are at risk for developing mental illness is because there are many stressors in their environment that lead to the start of mental illness. These young adults find it especially difficult to balance and fulfill all of the roles in their lives. A final factor that puts college students at risk is the diverse types of mental illnesses they experience. Although college students can find themselves suffering from any of the various mental illnesses, some mental illnesses tend to be more prominent in the population than others.

**Young Adulthood: The Age of Onset**

As students find themselves graduating from high school, they may soon have to experience the challenges that a mental illness can bring into the life of young adults. Blanco et al. (2008) interpreted the results of face-to-face interviews from the 2001-2002 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, a survey that analyzed alcohol addiction and other mental disorders. They found that one-half of young adults ages 19-25, both attending college and not attending college, met the criteria for at least one of the mental disorders listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fourth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

The incidence of mental illness has been found to increase during young adulthood (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). This is possible because young adults face a variety of challenges that they may have not experienced earlier in their lives, which could put them at risk for mental illnesses. For example, many
people transitioning into adulthood experience substantial personal, contextual, and social role changes, often at the same time (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). In fact, many young adults find it difficult to adjust their identities to the various changes that are occurring in their lives. According to Kadison (2004), new experiences and emerging relationships can leave young adults confused about their current identities. Young adulthood can induce an identity crisis, as well as several other crises that can come about with this age group.

**Stressors for College Students**

In addition to the general stressors that go along with the transition from adolescence to adulthood, college students face their own unique set of challenges. The pressure to succeed academically is very high for college students. Many students find themselves striving for perfect grades or working too hard to keep average grades, which causes students to feel overwhelmed instead of challenged (Kadison, 2004). Kadison (2004) also stated that extracurricular activities, parental expectations, and racial and cultural pressures play a large role in academic success, as well as academic stress. Financial worries are also a great burden for young adults attending college. Maintaining a job while going to school, taking out loans, and being uncertain about the economy and job market are all factors that add stress for college students (Kadison, 2004).

It is quite easy for these stressors to add up and take a toll on college students. By surveying 374 students, Beiter et al. (2015) found that when students are concerned about certain aspects of their lives, their level of concern is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress levels. In the study, there were 19 total sources of concern evaluated, including academic performance, pressure to succeed, post-graduation plans, and financial concerns. Even when accounted for individually rather than combining the concerns, all 19 sources of concern identified in the study had a significant positive correlation with depression, anxiety, and stress (Beiter et al., 2015).

**Types of Mental Illness Common Among College Students**

There are a wide variety of mental illnesses with which college students can be diagnosed. However, it seems that there are a handful of disorders that run rampant within the college population. Eisenberg, Hunt, and Speer (2013) interpreted survey data from the 2007 and 2009 Healthy Minds Study, which is a survey with the purpose of analyzing the mental health of college students. They found that 32% of college students had either depression, anxiety, serious thoughts of suicide, committed an act of non-suicidal self-injury, or a combination of these mental health problems. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) reported that one-third of undergraduate students reported that their depression made it difficult to function, and one-tenth reported serious thoughts of suicide within the past year. Substance abuse, such as alcohol or drug abuse, can be quite common in the
college population due to changes in freedoms and responsibilities when transitioning to adulthood (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, have an onset age of 18 and are prevalent on college campuses due to high stress (Kadison, 2004).

**Groups at Risk Within the College Population**

Certain groups are more at risk for developing mental illnesses than others. Demographics such as gender, race and ethnicity, class, and living situation are associated with mental illness. In other studies, there are certain behaviors and situations that can contribute to the risk of developing a mental illness. Finally, it is also possible that certain characteristics of colleges and universities may contribute to mental illness among their students. All of these factors are important to consider when observing the relationship between mental health and college students.

**Demographics Associated with Mental Illness**

Gender has been found to be associated with mental illness, but the views on whether males and females are more at risk are conflicting. Using data from the Healthy Minds studies that were conducted at 26 different universities, Eisenberg et al. (2013) found that women had a higher prevalence for mental illnesses. In a similar finding from a survey of 1,700 undergraduate students at a large southeastern university in the United States, Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, and Lennie (2012) discovered that female students are more anxious and stressed. Despite these findings that state women may be more at risk, Blanco et al. (2008) argued that the higher risk belongs to men. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) found that both genders have risk factors associated with them, stating that women are more likely to have depression and anxiety disorders, while men have a higher risk of suicide. With these studies in mind, it is safe to say that both genders are at risk for mental illness, with each gender being more susceptible to different types of disorders.

The risk of mental illness also varies between races and ethnicities but the views on this also seem conflicting. Eisenberg et al. (2013) noted that compared to white students, minorities suffered higher rates of depression. It was also found that the minorities in this study, except for African American students, were more likely to report that their mental health status caused an impairment in functioning. These findings could be due to the prejudice and discrimination that many races and ethnicities still face, even on campus. On the other hand, Blanco et al. (2008) discovered that being African American, Asian, or Hispanic actually decreased the chances of having a mental disorder. Like gender, race and ethnicity have risk factors that should be kept in mind.

There are several other variables among the college population that contribute to the risk of mental illness. Upperclassmen, transfer students, and
students living off-campus were all found to have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Beiter et al., 2015). Financial struggles and lower incomes also play an important role in whether or not students are at risk (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Blanco et al., 2008). Adding to the theory that academics are related to the mental health of students, two studies found that a low grade point average is significantly correlated with stress, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Mahmoud et al., 2012; Lipson, Gaddis, Heinze, Beck, & Eisenberg, 2015). It is important to realize that many of these risk factors are combined with one another, causing a greater amount of emotional distress to students.

**Behaviors and Situations Associated with Mental Illness**

Many students have to deal with situations that affect their mental health. For example, Blanco et al. (2008) found that loss of social support, having lost a steady relationship, and other stressful life events can increase the risk of students developing a mental illness. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) also noted that low social support, as well as relationship stressors, can set the stage for mental illnesses. Stressful situations can arise at any time for students attending college, and how students deal with stressful situations also affects their mental health. Personality traits that people have, such as perfectionism, can cause stress and may make individuals more prone to mental illnesses (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Kadison, 2004).

Mahmoud et al. (2012) found that students who had used maladaptive coping behaviors—such as self-blaming, giving up, denial, or substance abuse, reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The amount of dissatisfaction with life that students had was also found to be associated with levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Mahmoud et al., 2012). The mental health and well-being of students does not solely depend on their way of thinking, but it can certainly contribute to their distress.

**Characteristics of Colleges and Universities Associated with Mental Illness**

Along with the many characteristics students bring to the table, colleges and universities also play a role in the mental health of their students. Eisenberg et al. (2013) found that the academic rank of a college can affect students, with the middle-ranked schools rating slightly higher levels of mental health issues compared to other schools. Lipson et al. (2015) analyzed the mental health of students at 72 colleges and universities to determine if the characteristics of different institutions played a role in the mental well-being of their students. They found that mental health problems were the highest and treatment utilization was the lowest at schools that were either large, public, nonresidential, or had low graduation rates. These findings suggest that mental health problems occur on campuses that provide impersonal college experiences, or have fewer resources for their students (Lipson et
al., 2015). If students cannot access the care that they need, or feel uncomfortable accessing it, it is easy to see why mental health issues arise.

**Treatment Rates for Mental Illness Among College Students**

Despite the fact that there are many college students suffering from mental illnesses, the treatment rate among them is low. There are several reasons why college students do not receive help for mental illness, such as perceived need for treatment, time commitment for treatment, and stigma. Other times, colleges and universities are simply lacking in areas such as education, prevention, and treatment for mental illness. Finally, it is important to note that if mental illnesses are left untreated, consequences for students can arise, ranging from academic performance issues to suicide.

Treatment is vital in helping students with mental illness, and several mental illnesses can be helped with treatment.

**Reasons College Students Are Not Receiving Treatment**

Many college students are affected by mental illnesses but are not receiving the treatment that they need. The percentage of students with mental illnesses not receiving treatment has been found to be as high as 60 or even 80 percent (Lipson et al., 2015). These large numbers of students not receiving treatment are caused by a variety of factors, including factors within the students themselves. Eisenberg, Hunt, Speer, and Zivin (2011) analyzed the opinions students had about treatment and found that many students believed they could deal with their mental health problem on their own, thought they did not have enough time for treatment, or assumed the stress they were experiencing was normal. Other factors found to affect whether or not students received treatment were perceived effectiveness of treatment and privacy or financial concerns (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Many students simply believe that they do not require treatment or think that their need for treatment is not significant. Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, and Golberstein (2009) analyzed results of the 2007 and 2009 Healthy Minds Study and found that perceived need in the 2007 survey was a significant predictor of whether or not students received treatment in 2009. Perceived need can be influenced by a variety of factors, including stigma. In a survey of undergraduate students, Eisenberg, Downs, Golberstein, and Zivin (2009) found that the perceived stigma of receiving treatment was likely to create a personal stigma within students, making them less likely to seek treatment. It appears that attitudes toward mental health and treatment are improving (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010), but stigma is still present and a difficult obstacle to overcome.

**Reasons Colleges and Universities Are Lacking in Treatment**

Despite the importance of mental health, many colleges and universities lack resources in important areas that deal with education, prevention, and treatment of mental illnesses. One reason for this is that the funding for
mental health services does not match the high demand for these services. A national survey of college counseling center directors in 2008 found 95% of directors reported an increase of severe psychological problems within their student body (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2011). Kadison (2004) noted that if a college has a counseling center, there may not be enough staff, making it difficult for students to access care when there are waiting lists and busy professionals. Kadison (2004) also argued that rather than focusing solely on crisis management, a smarter investment would include funding prevention and education programs to deter the number of crisis situations. If funding for mental health services is improved, it will be easier for students to access care and get the help that they need.

**Consequences of Mental Illness Left Untreated**

When students and colleges do not invest in mental health, the consequences can be detrimental for students and the college community. Mental illnesses can cause trouble academically for students. Heiligenstein, Guenther, Hsu, and Herman (1996) analyzed the surveys of 63 students with depression, dysthymia, or adjustment disorder and found that 92 percent of them had some form of academic impairment. In this study, the risk of academic impairment increased when the disorder was considered moderate to severe. Affective impairment, such as experiencing distress or disinterest, was found to be even more prevalent than academic impairment (Heiligenstein et al., 1996). Without treatment, the mental illness can last longer, and students have a greater chance of relapsing (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Suicide is seen as the greatest risk of untreated mental illnesses. The Jed Foundation (2015) states that among college students, suicide is the second leading cause of death. The elimination of mental illness is not possible, but nearly all of these consequences and risks are diminished with proper mental health treatment.

**Conclusion**

For many, transitioning to young adulthood is a joyful experience, but causes many others distress. It is quite clear that young adults, especially college students, are a unique group when it comes to mental health and illness. College students are susceptible to mental illness because young adulthood is a common age of onset, stressors in their environments contribute to mental illness, and certain types of mental illness are common within the college student population. Various demographics of students, behaviors of students, situations, and characteristics of colleges students attend bring about additional risk factors to students. The treatment rate of mental illness among college students is low due to internal attitudes, beliefs within the student, and external factors such as unavailable or inaccessible treatment. Untreated students can result in consequences for students and college communities. Students and parents need to educate themselves about mental health and learn about the
mental health services available at college. Colleges and universities should be aware of the risks of mental illness and make changes, such as funding additional mental health services and programs, so the mental health of their students can improve. Mental illness cannot be eliminated, but taking steps to ensure education, prevention, and treatment can help reduce the risk within this vulnerable population.


References


