

Mental Health and Stress in Generation Z Students

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Abstract

Generation Z students, typically defined as those born between around 1997 and 2012, pursue higher education in times marked by rapid technological advancement, increasing academic expectations, economic uncertainty, and the lingering psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from secondary data sources consistently indicates high levels of perceived stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, academic burnout, and sleep disturbances among this cohort (American Psychological Association, 2023; Roy et al., 2025). This paper utilizes a secondary data research design and systematically synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journals, international health organization reports, and large-scale student mental-health studies. Its objectives are to examine the prevalence and nature of stress among Generation Z students, identify key academic, digital, and psychosocial stressors, review common mental-health outcomes based on established conceptual frameworks, and analyze coping mechanisms and resilience factors. Institutional and policy-level interventions are discussed, supported by available evidence. By synthesizing contemporary research, the study gives direction towards evidence-informed scalable responses to support the mental well-being and academic success of Generation Z students.

Introduction

The mental health issues among students have been identified to be a significant concern in the higher education sector. Universities have been witnessing a growing number of students being plagued by stress, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and academic burnout, coupled with a growing demand for counseling and psychological support services (World Health Organization, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2023). The growing mental health issues are also being witnessed among Generation Z students, as their learning experiences have been impacted by their never-ending digital exposure, growing academic pressures, economic uncertainty, and a host of global issues.

"Generation Z is the first generation to have come of age in a totally digital culture, in which the presence of smartphones, social media, and the internet is ubiquitous." Although digital media has opened unprecedented opportunities for information availability, education, and knowledge connectivity, it has, however, brought along a set of pressures such as those associated with social comparisons, cyber bullying, fear of missing out, information overload, to name a few (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of Gen Z students in a significant way, be it the resultant remote schooling, lack of peer engagement, loss of loved ones, and confusion about the potential future of education as well as employment opportunities.

Given these interlinking factors, in order to gain an informed understanding of mental health issues and stress within Generation Z students, it is necessary to carry out a holistic combination of existing research findings. Contrary to perceiving mental health difficulties solely at the individual level in the past, recent research underscores the need to explore the broader system-level factors that impact mental health in relation to academic, technological, and societal factors in modern society. This research applies the method of using secondary data to gain an overarching and fact-based understanding of stress and mental health patterns in Generation Z students.

Background and Literature Review

Defining Generation Z and Student Mental Health

Generation Z comprises individuals born in the late 1990s to the early 2010s; in fact, many are currently pursuing undergraduate and post-graduate levels of education in higher learning institutions. Student mental health encompasses aspects relating to one's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing; in fact, it affects learning capability and participation as well as social and life events (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Currently available literature has constantly shown that student mental health is determined through a mutual interaction between personal aspects and broader study and environmental elements (Roy, Biswas & Sharma, 2025).

Key Stressors Affecting Generation Z Students

Academic pressure represents another widely mentioned source of stress. Graded competition, internal assessment, academic load, and performance expectations in both academic and co-curricular activities significantly impact stress levels. Various studies support that academic stress patterns impact anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and academic dissatisfaction (Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker, 2020; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022).

Economic uncertainty also exacerbates academic pressure. Increased tuition, a higher cost of living, student debt, and apprehensions about employability in precarious labour markets have been associated with worse mental health outcomes for students. Studies indicate that financial burden is linked to higher levels of perceived stress and depressive symptoms, especially in students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Digital and social media exposure is a hallmark characteristic of Generation Z members. Although digital platforms promote communication and information sharing, more and less regulated social media use has been connected to greater anxiety levels, depression, poor self-esteem, and psychological issues. The mechanisms of social comparison, fear of missing out, bullying, and being constantly connected are some of the factors commonly named in such effects (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020).

Pandemic-related disruptions have created a ripple effect on mental health issues for students. International research undertaken during and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic indicates increased stress, anxiousness, depression, and sleep problems among college students worldwide (Siah, Mohammad, & Karami, 2020; Son et al., 2020; Roy, Biswas & Sharma, 2025). Secondary evidence proposes that this trend continues beyond the pandemic for students impacted by isolation, loss of learning, and loss of loved ones (Son et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2020).

Aside from these sources of stress, current students from Generation Z are also showing an increase in reported worries that are more generational in the areas of climate change, inequality, and political turmoil, which affect their uncertainty about their futures (Hickman et al., 2021).

Mental Health Outcomes and Conceptual Frameworks

There have been reports from secondary studies that there is considerable prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and depression among university students. Meta-analytical studies have revealed that there is

significant stress and psychological distress among university students, which needs further attention (Ibrahim et al., 2013; Roy, Biswas, & Sharma, 2025). Sleep disorders, such as lack of proper sleep, have been universally observed, and it has been closely associated with studies, stress, and excessive usage of electronics (Lund et al., 2010).

Numerous studies employ the concept of stress through the use of the transactional model of stress. The Perceived Stress Scale developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) has been widely regarded as a useful scale to make sense of student reactions to stress. The concepts of symptoms of stress, as well as those of anxiety, are widely measured through frameworks that relate to the concepts of Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7), while those of depression use concepts which relate to the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) (Kroenke, Spitzer, and Williams, 2001; Spitzer et al., 2006).

Increasingly, burnout in an academic setting is being noticed within a population of students. Burnout, according to Maslach and Jackson (1981), entails emotional exhaustion, detachment, or depersonalisation, and feelings of reduced personal accomplishment. Secondary evidence explains that being subjected to academic stress with no adequate recovery is considered a contributing factor in burnout.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience Factors

However, despite the high stress, many members of Generation Z exhibit resiliency in coping with stress. Social support from fellow students, family, and teachers has been rated as a protective element that minimizes the negative effects of stress on mental well-being (Wilcox et al., 2005). Students with high levels of perceived social support exhibit low levels of anxiety and depression despite stressful academic situations.

Adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving, seeking social support, physical activity, and maintaining a structured routine are shown to result in positive mental health outcomes. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance coping and substance misuse are strongly linked with elevated levels of mental health issues (Carver, 1997). Finally, mental health literacy levels increase resilience by allowing individuals to recognize early signs of mental health issues and seek help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010).

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study shall be the secondary evidence synthesis on the prevalence, characteristics, and drivers of stress and mental health issues seen in Gen Z students. Another purpose of this study shall be to explore ways and factors used to cope with stress and mental health issues illustrated in the literature.

Methodology: Secondary Data Approach

The manuscript is solely based on secondary data; the information for this paper was retrieved from current peer-reviewed journals, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and authoritative reports from organizations like the World Health Organization, the American Psychological Association, and the Pew Research Centre. Sources were identified according to relevance, methodological quality, and credibility for an overall comprehensive and ethical syntheses of existing knowledge.

Discussion and Implications

The synthesized evidence shows that the mental health issues faced by the students of Generation Z are complex in nature and have deeply rooted roots in academic, technologically driven, as well as societal contexts. The stress among this particular generation is a result of systemic pressures, as opposed to any weakness in the people facing this phase. The particular academic pressures, coupled with a technologically driven lifestyle, economic turbulence, and a tumultuous world, together paint a particular stress picture, which is different from those of the preceding generations of students (Pew Research Centre, 2020, Roy et al., 2025).

Institutions of higher learning, therefore, have a moral as well as a practical need to address student mental health issues. This has been advocated for in the literature through the use of multi-level strategies that incorporate mental health literacy interventions, screening, counselling access, peer support strategies, and academic accommodations (World Health Organization, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2023).

Conclusion

Generation Z students live amidst a uniquely complicated interplay of academic, digital, financial, and societal stresses that collectively bear down on mental health and well-being. The secondary evidence shows an increasing level of stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and sleep disturbance. Coordinated, systemic, and informed replies are needed from institutions, the policymakers, and from mental health professionals to such challenges. A comprehensive model that incorporates prevention, early identification, and accessible support services offers the best way to protect mental health and academic success for Generation Z students.

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