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Unseen Burdens: Exploring Mental Health in the Lives of Youth

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ABSTRACT: Youth is often seen as a time of dreams and possibilities. Yet many students silently struggle with emotional stress. This study explores the mental health experiences of university youth in Vadodara, Gujarat. It focuses on stress, emotional challenges, coping patterns, and resilience among 45 students aged 18–29 using a mixed-method approach. The findings reveal that academic pressure, career uncertainty, family expectations, financial concerns, and social media influence are major sources of stress. Many students reported anxiety, loneliness, mood swings, and sleep problems. While some described their mental health as “good,” deeper responses showed hidden feelings of overwhelm and hopelessness. Female students and those in transitional academic stages appeared more vulnerable. At the same time, support from friends, family, and personal coping efforts helped many students stay resilient. The study also highlights that many youth hesitate to seek professional help due to stigma or fear of judgment. Overall, the research shows that student mental health is closely linked to academic life and well-being. Creating supportive campuses, accessible counseling, and open conversations about mental health can help turn silent struggles into healing and growth.

KEYWORDS: Youth Mental Health; University Students; Academic Stress; Emotional Resilience; Help-Seeking Behaviour; Family Expectations

I. INTRODUCTION

A university campus appears full of energy and ambition. Students move through corridors with plans for the future and hope in their eyes. Yet, behind this visible confidence, many are carrying emotional burdens that remain unseen.

Youth is a powerful phase of life. It is also a vulnerable one. University students stand at a turning point. They are expected to perform well, make career decisions, support family dreams, and build their own identity. This transition brings growth, but it also brings pressure. Mental health quietly shapes this journey. When emotional balance is disturbed, even capable students begin to doubt themselves.

In India, these pressures often feel intense. Family expectations are strong and deeply rooted. Academic competition is constant. Career uncertainty creates fear about the future. Many students also face financial stress, language barriers, and the challenge of adjusting to new social environments. Social media adds another layer of comparison and self-doubt. Over time, these small pressures accumulate.

What makes the situation more serious is silence. Emotional struggles are often normalized as “just stress.” Seeking professional help is still surrounded by stigma. As a result, many students continue to function outwardly while struggling internally. They attend classes, submit assignments, and appear fine, but feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and hopelessness remain hidden.

Although research shows rising levels of psychological distress among university students, there is limited focus on the lived experiences of youth in growing educational cities like Vadodara. Numbers tell us that distress exists. They do not always tell us how it feels, why it persists, or how students cope.

This study, “Unseen Burdens: Exploring Mental Health in the Lives of Youth,” seeks to understand the emotional realities of university students in Vadodara, Gujarat. It explores the stressors they face, the coping strategies they use, the support systems available to them, and the resilience they build. By listening to students’ voices, this research aims to move beyond statistics and highlight the human side of youth mental health.

Understanding these unseen burdens is essential. When universities support emotional well-being alongside academic growth, students do not simply complete degrees. They develop confidence, strength, and a healthier path into adulthood.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research across countries shows that university students carry a heavy emotional load. **Khablein (2015)** found that more than half of the students experienced serious mental discomfort. The burden was stronger among female students and those in their final years due to career uncertainty. Similarly, **Ochnik et al. (2021)** reported high levels of stress and depression during the COVID-19 period, especially among females and early-year students. These findings show that vulnerability changes across academic stages but remains a serious concern.

Several studies highlight the intensity of anxiety and depression in campus life. **Khalil and Khalid (2011)**, using the DASS scale, found severe anxiety and moderate depression among students. **Kramer et al. (2004)** reported extreme levels of burnout and psychiatric distress in medical students. **Zeng et al. (2004)** also confirmed high levels of depression and suicidal thoughts in high-pressure academic environments. These studies suggest that competitive academic systems often push students beyond healthy limits.

Family and socio-economic background strongly shape mental health. **Ahmad et al. (2014)** showed that extended family issues and economic stress deeply affect youth in South Asian contexts. **Borjalilu et al. (2015)** and **Ratanasiripong et al. (2018)** found that family income, birth order, and self-esteem are strong predictors of depression and anxiety. **Khuwaja et al. (2010)** further linked severe anxiety with gender and family structure. These findings reflect that emotional distress is closely tied to a student's social and economic reality.

Stigma and low help-seeking remain major barriers. **Lee and Shiuhung (2002)** found that students often fear community judgment more than personal shame. **Khalil and Khalid (2011)** observed that many students were unaware of campus counseling services despite recognizing their own distress. **Dessauvague et al. (2022)** also reported low willingness to seek professional help across developing nations. This gap between distress and support makes the burden "unseen."

Protective factors are equally important. **Marjan and Lucie (2008)** highlighted that a sense of university connectedness reduces anxiety and depression. **Bas (2021) and Mofatteh (2021)** confirmed that better mental health leads to stronger academic performance. **Niemi and Vainio maki (2009)** showed that lifestyle habits such as sleep and exercise influence emotional stability. These studies suggest that resilience, social support, and healthy routines can reduce risk.

Overall, the literature confirms that student mental health is shaped by overlapping academic, social, financial, and personal factors. However, most studies focus on specific disciplines or international contexts. There is limited research that captures the lived experiences of students in cities like Vadodara, where traditional family expectations and modern competition coexist. The present study builds on this body of work by exploring stress, resilience, coping patterns, and help-seeking behaviour among university youth in this local setting.

III. RESEARCH GAP AND JUSTIFICATION

Existing research clearly shows that university students experience rising levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional strain. However, much of this work is based on metropolitan cities or focuses on specific professional courses such as medicine and engineering. There is limited attention to students studying in emerging educational cities like Vadodara, where traditional family values meet modern academic competition. Many studies measure distress through scales and statistics, but fewer explore how students personally understand their struggles, how they cope, and why they hesitate to seek help. The everyday emotional realities of youth in such local contexts remain underexplored.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on university students in Vadodara and by combining measurable data with lived experiences. It looks not only at stress and psychological distress, but also at resilience, coping strategies, social support, and silence around help-seeking. Understanding these dimensions is important for designing meaningful campus interventions. Without local evidence, policies remain general and disconnected from student realities. This research provides grounded insight that can help educational institutions respond with empathy, relevance, and practical support for youth mental health.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To understand the mental health challenges faced by young people in their daily lives.
2. To explore the impact of academic pressure, family expectations, social media, and personal relationships on youth mental well-being.
3. To examine the coping strategies used by youth to manage stress, anxiety, and emotional difficulties.
4. To assess the role of family, friends, teachers, and counsellors in supporting youth mental health.
5. To identify barriers that prevent youth from seeking help or speaking openly about their mental health concerns.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a **mixed-method research design** to understand the mental health experiences of **university students in Vadodara**. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to capture measurable patterns as well as personal experiences.

1. Survey (Quantitative Method)

- **Target Group:** 45 undergraduate and postgraduate students (aged 18–29 years)
- **Purpose:** To assess levels of stress, anxiety, emotional well-being, coping patterns, and support systems
- **Tool:** Structured questionnaire including Likert-scale items and close-ended questions
- **Analysis:** Percentage analysis and basic statistical interpretation to identify trends and levels of distress

2. Semi-Structured Interviews (Qualitative Method)

- **Participants:** Selected students from the survey sample
- **Purpose:** To understand lived experiences, sources of stress, coping strategies, and perceptions about help-seeking
- **Tool:** Semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions
- **Analysis:** Thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns such as academic pressure, family expectations, stigma, and resilience

3. Data Collection & Ethical Considerations

- **Methods:** Direct interaction with students through questionnaires and face-to-face discussions
- **Ethics:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

This design allowed the study to move beyond numbers and understand the emotional realities of youth. It ensured both clarity in measurement and depth in human experience.

VI. UNIVERSE, SAMPLE, AND SAMPLING METHOD

- **Universe:** University students (18 - 29 years) studying in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Vadodara city, Gujarat.
 - **Sample:** 45 students participated in the survey. A few selected participants were further involved in in-depth interviews.
 - **Sampling Method:** The study used purposive sampling to select students relevant to the research focus and convenience sampling to access available participants within the university setting.
- This method ensured relevant and practical representation of students' mental health experiences.

VII. FINDINGS

The findings of the study reveal that emotional stress is a common yet silent reality among university students in Vadodara. A large number of participants admitted that they struggle internally but rarely speak about it. Many believe that expressing emotional pain may make them appear weak or incapable. As a result, distress often remains hidden behind normal academic routines.

Academic pressure emerged as the most dominant source of stress. Continuous exams, deadlines, competition, and expectations to perform well create constant mental strain. Fear of failure and fear of disappointing parents or teachers deeply affect students' confidence. Family expectations, especially regarding career choices and financial stability, add

further pressure. Several students shared that they feel torn between their personal interests and parental dreams, which creates confusion and emotional tension.

Social comparison also plays a strong role. Many students reported that social media lowers their self-esteem. They compare achievements, appearance, and lifestyles, which increases feelings of inadequacy. Excessive screen time further affects sleep patterns and concentration. Along with this, financial stress, relationship conflicts, and adjustment difficulties among rural students add to the emotional burden. Feelings of loneliness were common, even among students who appeared socially active.

Gender differences were observed. Female students expressed emotional stress more openly, while male students often suppressed their feelings due to social expectations. High stress levels were linked with poor concentration, sleep problems, fatigue, and reduced academic performance. Some students described phases of hopelessness and emotional numbness during prolonged stress.

The study also revealed that most students rely on informal coping methods such as listening to music, praying, sleeping, or scrolling on social media. Very few approach professional counselors. Stigma, lack of awareness, and fear of judgment were major barriers to help-seeking. Peer support was more commonly used and was found to strengthen resilience. Students with strong emotional support systems showed better balance and confidence.

Overall, the findings confirm that youth mental health challenges are widespread, deeply personal, and often normalized as “part of student life.” While students continue to function academically, many carry unseen emotional burdens. This highlights the urgent need for supportive, confidential, and emotionally safe spaces within universities.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study reveals a clear and important reality. Many university students in Vadodara are carrying emotional burdens that often remain unseen. They manage academic pressure, family expectations, financial stress, and social comparison at the same time. Outwardly, they continue their routines. Internally, many struggle with anxiety, self-doubt, and exhaustion. These feelings are frequently normalized as part of student life, which prevents early recognition and timely support.

The findings also show that youth are not lacking strength. Resilience is present. Peer support, family understanding, and healthy coping habits help students regain balance. However, stigma and limited awareness reduce the use of professional counseling services. Emotional safety and non-judgmental listening emerged as strong needs. The study concludes that student mental health must be treated as a shared institutional responsibility. Universities must move beyond academic performance alone and create supportive systems that protect emotional well-being. When students feel heard and supported, they do not only perform better. They grow with confidence, stability, and hope for the future.

IX. SUGGESTIONS/ RECCOMENDATIONS

The study suggests that universities must treat mental health as an essential part of student development. Counselling services should be easily accessible, confidential, and clearly communicated so students know where to seek help. Regular awareness programs and open discussions can reduce stigma and normalize emotional struggles. Since many students prefer informal support, peer mentoring groups and student listening spaces should be encouraged to reduce loneliness and build connection.

Academic systems should also become more supportive. Flexible approaches during exam periods, empathetic communication from teachers, and basic mental health training for faculty can make a meaningful difference. Special stress-management activities during high-pressure times can help students cope better. Parent orientation programs may reduce unrealistic expectations and strengthen home support.

Finally, universities should create safe and inclusive environments through wellness rooms, online support platforms, and early screening initiatives. Life skills education, including emotional literacy and healthy coping strategies, should be integrated into campus life. When institutions value emotional well-being alongside academic success, students grow with greater confidence, balance, and resilience.

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