



Short Communication

The Urgent Need for a Multi-Dimensional Campus Mental Health Intervention in Nigerian Universities: The Case of Unilorin Tim-Healthcare Programme

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Abstract

The mental health of university students has become a significant cause for worry and public health concerns globally. Studies suggest that many mental health problems for example, depression, anxiety, phobia, suicidal behaviour, and substance use disorder among others, typically arise within the age bracket of 15-25 years, which coincides with the period when many individuals are pursuing higher education. Implementing structural interventions and broad organizational reforms to address student mental health has proven to be advantageous. The potential benefits that can be achieved from investing in students' mental health are improved academic performance, student success and a reduction in discontinuous school enrolment or dropout especially in resource-limited environments. This report presents a research-based multidisciplinary mental health program being implemented at a Nigerian University called the University of Ilorin Tertiary Institution Mental Health Programme (Unilorin TIM Healthcare Programme), aimed at addressing the mental health needs of tertiary institution students. The programme which incorporates preventive education such as enlightenment programs on campus, workshops on stress management, resilience building and coping strategies, amongst other initiatives has recorded significant benefits with positive feedback from the beneficiaries. It is hoped that it will be a model for other institutions within and outside Nigeria.

Newborn jaundice (NNJ), especially due to ABO incompatibility, is a major global health concern. Phototherapy is the standard treatment, with exchange transfusions reserved for severe cases. However, in some babies these therapies may be ineffective, requiring additional immunomodulatory treatments. Limited access to these.

Keywords: Mental Health Intervention; Multidimensional Approach; Universities; Nigeria.

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The mental health of university students has become a significant cause for worry and public health concern globally.¹⁻⁴ Studies suggest that many mental health problems for examples, depression, anxiety, phobia, suicidal behaviour, substance use disorder among others, typically arise within the age bracket of 15-25 years, which coincides with the period when many individuals are pursuing higher education.^{1,2} About 20-50% of university students have these problems and factors implicated could be attributed to individual, institutional and societal factors.^{1-3,6} High stress level, academic pressure, peer pressure, use of drugs are some of the individual factors, while inadequate accommodations, overcrowded lecture rooms, difficult procedural schedules, lack of comprehensive mental health services and limited trained human mental health personnel are some of institutional factors.¹⁻⁶ Societal factors include stigma, lack of social support as well as having to adjust to the new independent life away from family and friends.^{1-4,6}

Implementing structural interventions and broad organizational reforms to address student mental health have been shown to be advantageous.^{2,7,8} The potential benefits that can be amassed from investing in student mental health are improved academic performance, students' success and reduction in discontinuous school enrolment or dropout especially in resource scare environment.^{2,8} Research shows that students with mental health problems are more likely to leave an institution without graduating.^{2,8} Psychologically treated students have better career opportunities and greater lifetime incomes, which enhances economic production for students themselves and society in general.² For the schools, increase revenue generation is assured from improved student retention and tuition fee.

The current disparities between academic research and student mental health practice provide multiple opportunities for local, state, and federal entities and other benefactors to enhance student mental well-being as they can invest in enhanced practical and innovative research to address the existing gaps. It has become evident that there is a dire necessity to promote mental well-being and prevent mental health illnesses of the students' community while also providing adequate support when students face difficulties.^{2,9} As a result, there has been a growing demand for evidence-based mental health interventions that are school-based to address these issues and promote a flourishing and effective community.

Mental health interventions encompass various activities to improve mental health and wellbeing.^{4,5} They can be classified in different ways, one of which includes using the ecological model of intervention, divided into individual, interpersonal, communal, institutional, or public policy strategies.^{5,7,9} This model of classification assumes that, since health is influenced at multiple levels, appropriate changes in the social environment can produce changes in individuals and that the community is a vital part for implementation of environmental changes.^{2,7,9} By employing these interventional levels, the government, school officials, and private investors can effectively prioritize evidence-based projects that suit the school community. An exhaustive examination of the various models and frameworks reveals varying degree of effectiveness, and they involve a diverse range of evidence-based strategies for addressing student mental health at these levels.^{7,8}

Mental health education is the most commonly employed strategy in improving student mental health but as a stand-alone strategy, it has been found to be ineffective.^{2-5,7} There is compelling evidence that therapies such as supervised skill practice and mindfulness programmes, have positive impact on mental health because they help prevent as well as treat mental health problems.⁴⁻⁶ Additionally, cognitive behavioural and relaxation programmes have shown promise in this regard while meditation regimens offer limited advantages.^{2,4-7} Also, implementing comprehensive suicide prevention strategies that are beyond education, such as making environmental modifications to decrease opportunity for self-inflicted damage and enacting governmental reforms such as making harmful substances unavailable and improving socioeconomic support, contributes to enhancing mental health.^{2,7,8}

Tertiary institutions can help students live healthier and happier lives with the provision of accessible and specialized mental health services. A campus culture where students feel comfortable discussing mental health and obtaining treatment when they speak up, improves support and inclusivity while also allowing early intervention.^{2,8} To effectively address students mental wellbeing, it is crucial to establish a comprehensive and flexible mental health intervention programme that is well-structured, cuts across a variety of disciplines, promotes inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, and incorporates digital psychoeducation.^{2,6,7} Such programmes should focus on promoting

mental well-being and preventing mental illness by educating individuals about healthy behaviours, stress management strategies, effective coping techniques, and recognising early warning signs. Additionally, it should encompass helping with peer participation and establishing specific social gathering places, while promoting frequent mental health evaluations and the use of internet surveys or mobile applications. The institution should also offer mental health treatment consultations through phone, technology, and in-person services, along with specialised teams that respond promptly to crisis situations such as suicide and domestic abuse should also be provided.⁴⁻⁸

The University of Ilorin Tertiary Institution Mental Health Programme⁹ (Unilorin TIM Healthcare programme), is an ongoing research and interventional program developed by a multidisciplinary group, aimed at addressing the mental health needs of tertiary institution students. The programme hopes to achieve a successful mental health programme in a conducive university environment with its comprehensive multipronged approach following the ecological model (Figure 1) to addressing students’ mental health. Its prospective and long-term approach encourages the creation of a university community that encourages open conversations about mental health issues in a non-stigmatizing manner, thus creating a platform for continuous assessments and evaluation of the various aspects of the programme. The advantage of using this approach is multiple levels of intervention simultaneously.

Currently the program incorporates preventive education such as enlightenment programs on campus, workshops on stress management, resilience building and coping strategies, improving the skills of the counsellors at the campus counselling centers and school health center, provision of online mental health interventions/support, building peer support networks for mentorship and open conversations as well as support on campus, fostering supportive classrooms and crises intervention. It also includes the intervention aspect that targets appropriate referral and treatment for those in need. The program has continuously shown promising feedback with room for more impacts in improving the mental health of tertiary institutions population. It is hoped that it would be a model for other institutions within and outside Nigeria.



Figure 1: Ecological Model of Whole School Approach to Mental Wellbeing¹⁰

Adapted from McLeroy K.R, Steckler A. & Bibeau D (Eds) (1988). The social ecology of Health promotion interventions. Health Educations Quarterly 15(4)351-377

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