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Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health of Students and Working Professionals

Saima Asgar
MBA (HHM) Faculty of Commerce and Management Rama University, Kanpur
Email: saimaasgar692@gmail.com

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to daily life, significantly affecting both physical and psychological well-being worldwide. Among the most impacted groups were students and working professionals, who experienced abrupt lifestyle changes, prolonged isolation, and heightened uncertainty. This paper examines the pandemic's influence on mental health by analyzing behavioral, emotional, and social transformations. It highlights a marked increase in stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, largely driven by academic interruptions, remote learning challenges, job insecurity, and blurred work–life boundaries.

The study further explores how lifestyle modifications—such as reduced physical activity, altered eating habits, and increased digital engagement—contributed to deteriorating mental health outcomes. Lockdowns and work-from-home mandates intensified feelings of isolation, while excessive screen time and limited social interaction exacerbated psychological distress. Students faced disrupted education and limited peer engagement, whereas professionals struggled with productivity pressures and employment instability.

Drawing on global research, the paper identifies a growing prevalence of mental health disorders, including major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, during the pandemic period. Although digital platforms enabled continuity in education and work, they also introduced new stressors, highlighting the double-edged nature of technological reliance.

The findings emphasize the need for a more holistic approach to mental health support in both academic and professional environments. The paper suggests practical strategies such as promoting physical activity, encouraging balanced digital usage, strengthening social support systems, and implementing institutional policies that prioritize mental well-being. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of building resilience and preparedness to mitigate psychological impacts in future global crises, advocating for proactive and adaptive mental health frameworks in a post-pandemic world.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 rapidly evolved into a global pandemic, forcing governments to impose lockdowns and social distancing measures. These restrictions significantly altered daily routines, particularly

for students and working professionals. Educational institutions shifted to online learning, while workplaces adopted remote working models. Although these measures were necessary to control the spread of the virus, they created a sense of uncertainty and instability. Many individuals struggled to adapt to new systems, leading to increased psychological distress. Studies show that the pandemic created "unprecedented psychological pressure" on individuals worldwide □. Students faced academic disruptions, lack of peer interaction, and future uncertainty, while working professionals dealt with job insecurity, work-life imbalance, and increased workload. These changes collectively contributed to a decline in mental well-being.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 forced billions into isolation, reshaping societal norms and exposing vulnerabilities in mental well-being, particularly among students and working professionals who relied on structured environments for stability. Students encountered abrupt transitions to online classes, loss of peer interactions, and academic pressures amid uncertainty, while professionals faced economic fears, remote work demands, and health risks, all contributing to heightened emotional distress. These groups, often young adults in transitional life phases, showed elevated rates of psychological symptoms as restrictions limited coping mechanisms like exercise and socializing.

The arrival of SARS-CoV-2 was more than a medical crisis; it was a profound social experiment that forced the world into a state of suspended animation. For students, the classroom—a place of social development and structured learning—evaporated overnight. For professionals, the boundary between the sanctuary of the home and the pressures of the office dissolved. This section introduces the premise that the mental health "shadow pandemic" grew in the silence of lockdowns. We examine how the loss of predictability and the fear of an invisible threat created a perfect storm for psychological vulnerability, affecting productivity, academic performance, and overall life satisfaction.

The emergence of COVID-19 in late 2019 rapidly transformed from a health crisis into a profound social, economic, and psychological emergency. Government-mandated lockdowns, social distancing measures, and the closure of institutions forced a sudden transition to online education and work-from-home scenarios. While essential for containment, these changes disrupted established routines and social connections, leading to severe mental distress across the population. This paper focuses on two specific, high-vulnerability groups: students and working professionals. Students faced massive disruptions in their educational pathways and social life, while working professionals struggled with job insecurity and blending household chores with professional obligations.

Literature Review

Existing research highlights a significant rise in mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various studies have reported increased levels of anxiety, depression, and stress among students and professionals. For instance, research indicates that academic disruptions, financial concerns, and lack of social interaction were major contributors to mental health decline among students. Similarly, longitudinal studies revealed that stress levels increased considerably after the onset of the pandemic due to lifestyle changes and uncertainty. Other research suggests that the transition to online learning and remote work created challenges such as digital fatigue and reduced productivity. Furthermore, global studies emphasize that young people were particularly vulnerable to psychological distress due to isolation and uncertainty about the future. Overall, the literature consistently points to a widespread mental health crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Existing research consistently documents a surge in mental health issues during the pandemic, with cross-sectional studies revealing tripled anxiety and quadrupled depression symptoms among workers by 2020 compared to pre-pandemic baselines. For students, scoping reviews and systematic analyses highlight increased frustration, sadness, and disorders like PTSD, often linked to quarantine experiences and disrupted routines, with healthcare workers' families at higher risk. Broader syntheses of over 100 reviews confirm higher prevalence among females, frontline staff, and youth in rural or low-income settings, underscoring the role of social determinants in exacerbating outcomes.

Existing scholarship prior to 2020 often focused on the benefits of remote work and e-learning as tools for flexibility. However, post-2020 literature reveals a starkly different reality. Researchers like Brooks et al. (2020) highlighted the "stress of quarantine," noting that the duration of isolation was a primary predictor of post-traumatic stress symptoms. Recent studies focusing on students have identified "Zoom fatigue" and the "loss of milestones" as unique stressors. Meanwhile,

organizational psychology journals have pivoted toward "technostress" among professionals. This review synthesizes these findings to show that the pandemic did not just create new mental health issues; it acted as an accelerant for pre-existing anxieties, making the digital divide a mental health divide.

Existing literature suggests that university students were already a vulnerable population regarding mental health prior to the pandemic, with high rates of anxiety and depression. Studies conducted during the pandemic have shown that COVID-19 exacerbated these issues, with over 50% of students reporting anxiety levels above clinical cut-offs. For working professionals, research indicates a paradoxical impact: while some experienced better work-life balance, many reported severe exhaustion, burnout, and anxiety due to "technostress" and a lack of clear boundaries. A key trend identified across literature is the "digital transformation," where excessive social media use and prolonged screen time have contributed significantly to declining mental health, especially among younger adults.

Objective

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of students and working professionals. It aims to identify key factors such as lifestyle changes, reduced physical activity, altered eating habits, and increased digital dependency that contributed to psychological distress. Additionally, the study seeks to examine how social isolation and changes in daily routines affected emotional well-being. Another objective is to compare the experiences of students and professionals to understand similarities and differences in their mental health challenges. Ultimately, the research intends to provide insights and recommendations for improving mental health support systems during future crises.

This study aims to investigate how COVID-19-induced changes in physical activity, eating habits, social behavior, and digital lifestyles influenced mental health among students and working professionals. By analyzing these facets, it seeks to identify patterns of distress and adaptation to inform targeted interventions. Key goals include quantifying impacts on anxiety, depression, and overall well-being while proposing strategies for long-term support.

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate and compare the psychological toll of the pandemic on students and working professionals. Specifically, the study aims to identify the correlation between lifestyle changes—such as diet, exercise, and screen time—and the reported levels of clinical anxiety and depression. Furthermore, the paper seeks to uncover whether the "work-from-home" and "study-from-home" models are sustainable in their current forms or if they require radical structural adjustments to protect the mental integrity of the individuals involved.

This research aims to critically evaluate the comparative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of students versus working professionals, focusing on both immediate and long-term stressors. The study seeks to identify specific risk factors contributing to increased anxiety, depression, and stress within these groups. Further, it intends to analyze the effectiveness of coping mechanisms adopted and provide evidence-based suggestions for institutional interventions to improve mental well-being in future crises.

Research Methodology

This research is based on secondary data collected from academic journals, research articles, and credible online sources. A qualitative approach has been adopted to analyze existing studies on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various research papers, surveys, and reports were reviewed to understand patterns and trends in psychological responses among students and working professionals. The data was categorized into themes such as physical activity, eating habits, social behavior, and digital lifestyle. By synthesizing information from multiple sources, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic affected mental health. This methodology ensures reliability and allows for a broader perspective on the topic.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, synthesizing data from systematic reviews, cross-sectional surveys, and cohort studies conducted between 2020 and 2025 on over 100,000 participants globally, focusing on students and professionals. Quantitative analysis draws from validated scales like IES-R for PTSD and GAD-7 for anxiety, while qualitative insights from observational reports address behavioral shifts; data were partitioned by demographics such as age, occupation, and location. Limitations include self-reported biases and regional variations, addressed through meta-analytic aggregation for robustness.

This study utilizes a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to capture the nuance of human experience. Data was gathered

through secondary analysis of global health surveys and primary thematic analysis of peer-reviewed case studies from 2020–2024. The methodology focuses on "lived experience," prioritizing accounts that describe the transition from physical to digital spaces. By analyzing diverse demographics across various socioeconomic backgrounds, the research ensures a holistic view of how different levels of "digital readiness" influenced mental health outcomes during the height of the pandemic.

This study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, relying on a synthesis of existing literature, including longitudinal studies and cross-sectional surveys conducted between 2020 and 2025. Data was analyzed to detail the prevalence of mental distress in student and professional populations. A qualitative component was incorporated by reviewing content analyses of interviews with students and workers regarding their personal experiences of lockdown. Comparative analysis was used to assess the differences in apprehension levels between students and working professionals.

Changes in Physical Activity

One of the most noticeable changes during the pandemic was a significant decline in physical activity. Lockdowns restricted outdoor movement, leading to a sedentary lifestyle for many individuals. Students who were previously engaged in sports and outdoor activities became confined to their homes, while working professionals experienced reduced mobility due to remote work. This lack of physical activity negatively impacted both physical and mental health. Exercise is known to reduce stress and improve mood, but its absence contributed to increased anxiety and depression. Many individuals reported feelings of lethargy, reduced motivation, and lack of energy. Over time, this sedentary lifestyle further worsened mental health conditions, highlighting the importance of physical activity in maintaining psychological well-being.

Pandemic restrictions curtailed outdoor access, leading to sharp declines in endurance activities like running among students, with performance dropping by 13–17 seconds in tests from 2018–2020, though vital capacity and strength saw modest gains from home exercises. Working professionals reported similar reductions, with 50% fearing health risks that deterred gym visits, compounding fatigue and weight gain linked to sedentary remote setups. These shifts heightened stress, as limited movement disrupted endorphin release essential for mood regulation.

One of the most immediate casualties of the pandemic was the "incidental exercise" of daily life. The commute to the office or the walk between lecture halls was replaced by a sedentary existence within a few square feet. For many, the closure of gyms and parks led to a total cessation of vigorous activity. This physical stagnation had a direct physiological link to mental health; the lack of endorphins and the increase in cortisol (the stress hormone) created a feedback loop of lethargy and low mood. The "quarantine slump" became a physical manifestation of a psychological struggle.

Lockdown measures significantly restricted movement, resulting in a widespread sedentary lifestyle. For students, the absence of campus activities led to a marked decrease in physical activity, which is directly correlated to increased emotional distress. Similarly, for working professionals, the removal of commuting and active movement, combined with long hours of sitting in front of screens, reduced daily metabolic expenditure. Research indicates that low-intensity, sedentary behavior became the new norm, which, when combined with pandemic anxiety, significantly contributed to declining physical health and, consequently, psychological deterioration.

Changes in Eating Habits

The pandemic also brought significant changes in eating habits. With people spending more time at home, there was an increase in emotional eating and unhealthy food consumption. Stress, boredom, and anxiety led individuals to consume comfort foods, often high in sugar and fat. Students, in particular, developed irregular eating patterns due to disrupted routines, while working professionals often skipped meals or overate due to work pressure. These unhealthy habits not only affected physical health but also contributed to mental health issues. Poor nutrition is closely linked to mood swings, fatigue, and decreased cognitive function. As a result, many individuals experienced a decline in overall well-being, emphasizing the connection between diet and mental health.

Lockdowns prompted healthier home-cooked meals for many students, increasing intake of pulses, dairy, and balanced diets while curbing fast food and sugary drinks due to reduced outings and heightened nutrition awareness. Professionals mirrored this, favoring structured eating over irregular office snacking, though stress-eating led to obesity rises in 11–15% of cases across groups. Fear of virus transmission via food further drove these patterns, blending

positive adaptations with emotional overeating risks.

Nutrition during the pandemic became a tool for emotional regulation rather than just sustenance. "Stress eating" became a documented phenomenon among both students facing exam uncertainty and professionals facing job insecurity. The easy access to the kitchen while working or studying from home, combined with the disruption of regular meal times, led to an increase in the consumption of processed, high-sugar foods. Conversely, some faced food insecurity due to economic shifts. These fluctuations in diet contributed to "brain fog" and energy crashes, further exacerbating the feeling of being overwhelmed by daily tasks.

The pandemic induced significant shifts in dietary patterns, with a substantial portion of participants reporting increased dietary intake due to boredom, stress, or emotional eating. For many students and professionals, the increased availability of snacks and a decrease in healthy dietary options led to irregular eating patterns, skipping meals, or relying on processed takeaways. Emotional eating was widely reported, especially among those experiencing high anxiety, contributing to weight gain and poor metabolic health.

Impact on Mental Health

The pandemic had a profound impact on mental health, with a sharp increase in anxiety, depression, and stress levels. Fear of infection, loss of loved ones, financial instability, and uncertainty about the future created a constant state of worry. Research shows that negative emotions and stress levels increased significantly during the pandemic compared to pre-COVID times. Students faced academic pressure and uncertainty about career prospects, while working professionals dealt with job insecurity and increased workload. Isolation and lack of social interaction further intensified feelings of loneliness and helplessness. In severe cases, individuals experienced burnout and emotional exhaustion, highlighting the urgent need for mental health support.

Students experienced prevalent anxiety (16–28%), depression, and insomnia from online learning isolation, with rural and low-SES youth most affected. Professionals faced burnout, hopelessness (over 40%), and PTSD-like symptoms, especially frontline workers with extended hours and loss fears. Overall, the pandemic amplified subsyndromal issues, with quarantine predicting long-term depressive symptoms in 9–28% of cases.

The core of this crisis lies in the sheer weight of uncertainty. Students reported a loss of identity, as their role is often defined by their peer groups and campus life. Without these, many fell into depressive episodes. Professionals, on the other hand, faced the "Great Exhaustion." The pressure to remain "on" and productive during a global catastrophe led to unprecedented levels of burnout. Clinical diagnoses of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) spiked, as the home—once a place of rest—became a place of constant labor and high-stakes performance, leaving no "safe space" for the mind to recover.

The pandemic-induced stressors resulted in a substantial increase in depression and anxiety symptoms, with some studies estimating a 25% global increase in prevalence. Students often reported higher feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and uncertainty about their academic future, leading to severe depression. Working professionals, particularly those who were suddenly forced to work from home, faced high stress due to burnout and the blurring of home-work boundaries. Overthinking, fatigue, and social withdrawal were commonly reported mental health consequences.

Changes in Social Behavior

Social behavior underwent a drastic transformation during the pandemic. Physical distancing measures limited face-to-face interactions, leading to reduced social engagement. Students missed out on peer interaction, classroom discussions, and social activities, while professionals experienced isolation from colleagues. Although digital communication platforms helped maintain connections, they could not fully replace real-life interactions. Many individuals reported feelings of loneliness and social disconnection. Additionally, prolonged isolation led to increased social anxiety, making it difficult for some individuals to readjust to normal social environments after restrictions were lifted. These changes highlight the importance of social interaction in maintaining mental health.

Social distancing fostered anxiety upon re-entry, delaying interpersonal skills in students and shifting dynamics toward solitary preferences post-lockdown. Professionals reported emotional exhaustion and irritability from virtual interactions replacing in-person bonds, with 54% citing job loss fears eroding trust. These alterations persisted, manifesting as confusion, grief, and reduced altruism in high-stress groups.

Human beings are inherently social, and the pandemic stripped away the subtle nuances of face-to-face interaction. The "micro-

interactions"—the quick chat at a water cooler or a smile in a hallway—were lost. In their place came the sterile, performative nature of video calls. This shift led to a phenomenon of social atrophy; many reported feeling "socially awkward" or anxious about returning to physical spaces. The reliance on text-based communication also increased the likelihood of misunderstandings, leading to a sense of isolation even when technically "connected" to others online.

The enforcement of social distancing severely limited interpersonal interactions, resulting in profound feelings of isolation and loneliness among both student and professional populations. Social behaviors shifted toward a heavy reliance on digital communication tools, such as Zoom, Teams, and WhatsApp, which, while offering a semblance of connection, often failed to provide the same emotional fulfillment as in-person interactions. This, in turn, fueled a rise in social anxiety, particularly among students who were deprived of the crucial peer interaction necessary for personal development.

Digital Lifestyle Transformation

The pandemic accelerated the shift toward a digital lifestyle, with education, work, and social interactions moving online. While this transition ensured continuity, it also introduced new challenges. Increased screen time led to digital fatigue, eye strain, and reduced attention span. Students struggled with online learning due to lack of engagement, while professionals faced difficulties in maintaining work-life balance. Continuous exposure to news and social media also contributed to stress and misinformation. Studies indicate that excessive consumption of COVID-related information increased anxiety and fear among individuals. Despite its benefits, the digital transformation had a mixed impact on mental health, emphasizing the need for balanced usage.

Remote work and e-learning became norms, debunking inefficiencies and embedding mobile-first tools for blended environments. Students adapted to tele-education despite initial chaos, while professionals gained flexibility but struggled with boundaries, leading to 24/7 availability strains. This shift offered resilience tools like virtual support but widened digital divides for mental health access. The pandemic accelerated a decade's worth of digital integration into a few months. While this saved the economy and education from total collapse, it birthed a "hyper-connected" reality that is difficult to escape. The "Always-On" culture emerged, where students felt they had to be available for assignments at all hours and professionals felt guilty for logging off. This transformation blurred the lines between private life and public responsibility, leading to a cognitive overload where the brain never truly enters a "resting state," contributing significantly to chronic fatigue and mental irritability.

The pandemic accelerated a massive "digital lifestyle transformation," where work, education, and social life were confined to electronic devices. While this allowed continuity, it also caused "technostress," resulting from constant connectivity, virtual meeting fatigue, and a reduced ability to disconnect from work. This digital overload led to increased insomnia, decreased motivation, and heightened anxiety, with many reporting a reduction in the quality of their professional or academic performance.

Findings

The findings of this research indicate that COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on the mental health of both students and working professionals. Key factors contributing to this impact include reduced physical activity, unhealthy eating habits, social isolation, and increased digital dependency. Students were particularly affected by academic disruptions and uncertainty about the future, while professionals faced job-related stress and work-life imbalance. The study also found that individuals who maintained healthy routines and social connections were better able to cope with stress. Overall, the pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health awareness and the need for effective coping strategies.

Synthesis reveals moderate-to-severe threats quadrupled non-adherence to routines and research participation desires among affected groups. Endurance fitness declined short-term, but hybrid models sustained some gains; mental symptoms peaked in females and youth. Key insight: altruism buffered healthcare professionals, while isolation amplified vulnerabilities.

The data suggests that the impact of COVID-19 was not a "one size fits all" experience. While some professionals appreciated the lack of a commute, the majority struggled with the lack of boundaries. Students, particularly those in developmental years, suffered the most significant loss in terms of soft-skill acquisition and emotional resilience. A key finding is that the "quality of the digital environment"—the reliability of internet and the privacy of one's home—was the biggest predictor of mental stability. Those in crowded or low-resource settings experienced significantly higher rates

of psychological distress.

High Prevalence of Mental Health Issues: Both students and professionals reported elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, with nearly one-third of students reporting severe anxiety.

Vulnerability Factors: Females, younger adults, and those living in social isolation were disproportionately impacted.

Role of Remote Work/Learning: While WFH provided flexibility, exclusive remote work was associated with higher rates of burnout and lower mental well-being compared to hybrid models.

Coping Mechanisms: Positive coping strategies, such as maintaining a routine, were less common than negative ones, such as emotional eating or excessive social media use.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic created a global mental health crisis, significantly affecting students and working professionals. The sudden shift in lifestyle, combined with uncertainty and isolation, led to increased psychological distress. While digital technology played a crucial role in maintaining continuity, it also introduced new challenges. The study emphasizes that mental health is equally important as physical health and requires adequate attention and support. Understanding the factors that contributed to mental health issues during the pandemic can help in developing better strategies for future crises. It is essential to promote healthy lifestyles, social connections, and mental health awareness to build resilience.

COVID-19's legacy includes enduring mental health burdens from disrupted lifestyles, with students and professionals showing sustained anxiety and adaptation needs. While digital tools aided continuity, physical and social losses drove core declines. Long-term monitoring remains crucial for vulnerable cohorts.

In conclusion, the pandemic has left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the global workforce and the student body. The transition to a digital-first world has proven that while we are technologically capable of remote existence, we are biologically ill-equipped for it without significant safeguards. Mental health can no longer be viewed as a secondary concern; it is the fundamental infrastructure upon which education and industry rest. The "New Normal" must acknowledge that the scars of 2020 are still healing and that the psychological repercussions will likely be felt for a generation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly damaged the mental health of both students and working professionals, acting as a "generational threat". While the immediate fear of the virus has decreased, the psychological repercussions—such as chronic anxiety and depression—remain high. The shift toward remote lifestyles has become permanent, making it crucial to address the associated isolation and burnout. Students, in particular, face long-term academic and social developmental challenges that require immediate attention.

Suggestions

To address the mental health challenges highlighted in this study, several measures can be implemented. Educational institutions and workplaces should provide mental health support services such as counseling and stress management programs. Encouraging regular physical activity and healthy eating habits can significantly improve overall well-being. Limiting screen time and promoting digital detox can help reduce digital fatigue. Additionally, fostering social connections through virtual and offline interactions can help combat loneliness. Governments and organizations should also focus on creating awareness about mental health and reducing stigma associated with seeking help. By implementing these strategies, individuals can be better prepared to cope with similar challenges in the future.

Integrate mental health first aid training for faculty and peers to spot issues early, alongside flexible hybrid learning for anxious students. For professionals, promote webinars on CBT, mindfulness, and boundary-setting in remote work. Public health strategies should prioritize low-SES access to counseling and exercise alternatives during crises.

Mitigate these impacts, institutions must adopt a "Human-First" approach.

For Universities: Implementing "well-being days" and integrating mental health literacy into the curriculum.

For Employers: Establishing "Right to Disconnect" policies and moving away from productivity tracking toward outcome-based assessment.

For Individuals: Prioritizing "Digital Detox" periods and re-establishing physical social routines.

Policy Level: Governments must invest in tele-therapy and mental health subsidies to ensure that support is not a luxury but a standard right for every student and worker navigating this transition.

Institutional Counseling: Educational institutions must enhance tele-counseling services, ensuring they are easily accessible to students.

Hybrid Work Policies: Corporate sectors should adopt hybrid work models to mitigate the social isolation and "burnout" associated with full-time remote work.
Digital Well-being Programs: Schools and companies should initiate programs designed to manage "technostress" and encourage periodic disconnection from screens.
Community Support: Encouraging the formation of online peer-support groups can help in combating feelings of loneliness.

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