



# Is Academics Really Spreading Depression? A Study on the Pervasiveness of Depression Among University Students

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Mahnoor Shaukat <sup>1</sup> Muhammad Naeqeb UI Khalil Shaheen <sup>2</sup> Khatiba Akther <sup>3</sup> Fozia Monshi <sup>4</sup>  
Sara Abid <sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:** Depression is one of the most serious conditions that negatively affect a person's day-to-day functioning; hence, it may affect students' behaviour, emotions, and thoughts. Keeping this in view, this study was designed to find out the pervasiveness of depression among university students. This descriptive study used a cross-sectional survey including two universities, i.e. Mirpur University of Sciences and Technology (MUST), Mirpur AJ&K and the University of Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UoKAJK). The population of the study consisted of 2,920 students (1,660 from MUST and 1,260 from UoKAJK). The researchers used a stratified random sampling technique for the selection of a sample of 600 students (341 from MUST and 259 from UoKAJK). The research used the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) as a research instrument in the current study. The study used frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and independent sample t tests for analysing the data. The findings of the study showed 67 (11.2%) participants exhibited normal levels of depression, 87 (14.5%) participants experienced mild mood disturbance, 133 (22.2%) participants showed borderline clinical depression, 298 (49.7%) participants had moderate depression, and 21 (3.5%) participants suffered from severe depression. The study recommends that educational administrators organise supportive mental health programs focused on prevention and early intervention, especially for those in the moderate depression range. This support may include counselling services, stress management workshops, and peer support groups, which may help students develop resilience and coping strategies.

**Key Words:** Depression, Mild Mood Disturbance, Clinical Depression, Moderate Depression, Severe Depression

## Introduction

University life is a vibrant garden of dreams and hopes, where students nurture their aspirations and strive for success. However, the path to success is not always smooth, and distant drums of adversity often sound, reminding us that not everyone is fortunate enough to reap the desired rewards. In this connection, a troubling phenomenon called depression warrants attention from educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to ensure the well-being and academic success of vulnerable youth. Fortunately, it can be treated. According to Seligman (1973), depression is a mental illness that makes it difficult for a person to communicate with friends and family, lead a fulfilling life, and participate in society.

Depression is often described as an unsettling mood that can really disrupt everyday life. It is not just a fleeting feeling; it can come with physical symptoms too, like pain, headaches, and even a kind of loneliness that makes you want to avoid people. The Encyclopedia of Psychology points out that it's a mental health issue characterised by ongoing distress and an interest in life. In fact, the World Health Organisation (2019) has noted that depression is the third most common condition in the world, and they expect it to become even more prevalent by 2030.

<sup>1</sup> Program Officer Education, Muslim Hands, Kotli, AJK, Pakistan. Email: [mahnoorjaral27@gmail.com](mailto:mahnoorjaral27@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Kotli, AJK, Pakistan. Email: [naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com](mailto:naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Kotli, AJK, Pakistan. Email: [khatiba.akhter@yahoo.com](mailto:khatiba.akhter@yahoo.com)

<sup>4</sup> M.Phil. Scholar, Department of Education, University of Kotli, AJK, Pakistan. Email: [foziamunshi72@gmail.com](mailto:foziamunshi72@gmail.com)

<sup>5</sup> Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Kotli, AJK, Pakistan. Email: [sara.abid306@gmail.com](mailto:sara.abid306@gmail.com)

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**Corresponding Author:** Muhammad Naeqeb UI Khalil Shaheen (✉ [naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com](mailto:naqeeb.shaheen@gmail.com))

When we talk about mental health at universities, a lot of what we see is backed by research from Pakistan. Studies by folks like Bibi et al. (2019) and Saleem et al. (2013) highlight that many Pakistani students face psychological challenges and bullying, partly due to the complex social and economic landscape of the country. Now, when students head off to university, they are greeted with a buffet of choices about what to study. But honestly, starting with the basics can be really beneficial. University is not just about boosting your job prospects; it can be a transformative time for self-discovery and personal growth. It is a chance to explore who you are and what you want out of life. This phase can really set the stage for a brighter future, helping students hit those academic goals they set for themselves.

Depression is a heavy emotion, and it can really take a toll on folks. University life, on the flip side, is supposed to be this exciting leap into independence. But the financial strain, social pressures, and academic expectations can really pile up. It is no wonder students sometimes feel completely overwhelmed. During this phase, one might notice all sorts of shifts in mood and behavior, which are just part of the whirlwind of psychological, physical, and cognitive changes happening.

We all have this unique intensity in our thoughts and feelings. It is like nature's way of equipping us to tap into our potential and navigate life. But if someone does not confront the challenges, it can spiral into feelings of hopelessness and fear, which might just lead to failure.

For students grappling with depression, it is tough. When symptoms get severe, we are talking about hallucinations and delusions — that is how complex this disorder can be, with so many different behaviors and causes at play. It is pretty alarming, actually. Depression is a leading cause of premature death and disability across the globe, and it really disrupts everyday life. According to Iasevoli et al. (2016), it is the most common mental disorder out there, contributing to a lot of mortality and disability. It is a big deal, and it deserves our attention.

This study was designed to investigate depression levels among students at Mirpur University of Sciences and Technology and the University of Kotli. The research identifies the underlying causes of these mental health issues, pinpointing the precise factors contributing to violence and sadness among students.

### **Statement of Problem**

Depression among university students has become a pressing concern, and despite growing awareness, the prevalence of these mental health issues continues to escalate. This study aimed to find out the pervasiveness of depression among university students.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of the study was to find out the pervasiveness of depression among university students.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of pervasiveness of depression among university students?
2. Do male students have more depression than female students?
3. Is depression more prevalent in MUST or UoKAJK?

### **Review of the Related Literature**

#### **Depression**

Depression is a pretty serious issue that can really mess with how someone goes about their daily life. It impacts students in ways you might not even think about—like their behavior, emotions, and even how they see the world. It is something that really needs to be on the radar of teachers, mental health experts, and policymakers. We need to do what we can to support our young people and help them succeed academically and emotionally. Seligman, back in 1973, pointed out that depression can make it tough for folks to connect with their friends and family, which is such a vital part of life. It can rob people of the ability to enjoy life or even engage with society at large. The Encyclopedia of Psychology describes depression as an overwhelming, unpleasant mood that can seep into every corner of a person's

life. It often comes with physical symptoms too—think pain, feeling isolated, a general dislike of socializing, and maybe even not wanting to eat.

The World Health Organization (2019) pointed out that depression was already the third most common health issue in the world. They even predicted it might become even more widespread by 2030. So, this is something we really need to pay attention to.

### Symptoms of Depression

American Psychiatric Association (2013) points out that depression is more than just a feeling that is consistently gloomy or dismal. Serious depression can cause a wide range of symptoms. Some have an impact on your thoughts, while others have an impact on your body. The symptoms could persist or recur.

- ▶ Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- ▶ Irritability, anxiety, or restlessness
- ▶ Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- ▶ Mood swings or emotional reactivity
- ▶ Changes in appetite or weight
- ▶ Fatigue, low energy, or lethargy
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping or excessive sleepiness (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020)
- ▶ Physical pain or headaches
- ▶ Digestive problems or stomach issues
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- ▶ Memory problems or forgetfulness
- ▶ Confusion or disorganized thinking
- ▶ Negative thinking patterns or self-criticism
- ▶ Loss of interest in learning or activities
- ▶ Social withdrawal or isolation
- ▶ Loss of motivation or interest in activities
- ▶ Changes in work or school performance
- ▶ Difficulty maintaining relationships
- ▶ Substance abuse or addiction
- ▶ Increased risk of suicidal thoughts or behaviors
- ▶ Physical symptoms like tremors, muscle tension, or numbness
- ▶ Feeling overwhelmed or burdened

In addition, the following stages are to be kept in mind

- **Mild depression:** Few symptoms, minimal impact on daily life.
- **Moderate depression:** Noticeable symptoms, some impact on daily life.
- **Severe depression:** Many symptoms, significant impact on daily life.
- **Major depressive disorder:** Severe depression with suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

### Prevalence of Depression

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) reports that major depressive disorder is actually the most common form of depression, especially among students and various communities. It really hits hard—about 17.6% of folks in the US are affected by it, which is over 43 million people trying to cope with this struggle. It's pretty alarming when you think about it. Mental health issues, like stress, often get overlooked or misdiagnosed, even though there are effective treatments out there. Research consistently points out that students tend to have worse physical and mental health than their non-student peers. A study by Stewart et al. (2000) really underscores this concerning trend, showing just how crucial it is to have targeted interventions in place.

Now, shifting gears a bit, let us talk about some numbers from a 2014 UK survey. It found that 39% of people aged 16 to 74 have at least one mental health diagnosis, whether it is depression, anxiety, or something else. Overall, in 2014 alone, 1 in 6 people in England (that's about 17%) met the criteria for a common mental disorder (CMD), which ties into both depression and anxiety.

And if we look at other countries, the stats are just as striking. For instance, in a study involving American adults (with a sample size of 9,282), the lifetime prevalence of major depression was reported at 16.6%, while the prevalence of any depression was even higher at 28.8% (Kessler et al., 2005). Lastly, over in Sweden, a study found that 10.8% of students experienced anxiety, while 14.7% dealt with depression (Johansson et al., 2021).

A study by Shamsuddin et al. (2013) revealed some pretty concerning stats regarding Malaysian undergraduates. They found that about 37.2% of these students were dealing with anxiety, and a staggering 63.0% were facing depression. When you compare it to earlier research from Bayram and Bilgel (2008), the numbers tell an even more troubling story. They reported that 27.1% of students were depressed and 47.1% exhibited aggressive behavior.

Now, jumping over to Pakistan, a more recent study by Asif et al. (2020) showed even grimmer figures. They found that a whopping 88.4% of university students experienced anxiety, and 75% faced depression. That's a lot of young people struggling! The researchers combined various levels of severity—mild, moderate, and severe—to come up with these overall frequencies. Honestly, it raises a lot of questions about how we're supporting students' mental health these days.

## Research Methodology

The study was descriptive in nature, and a survey method was used to collect the data. The population of the study consisted of 2,920 students (1,660 from MUST and 1,260 from UoKAJK). The researchers used a stratified random sampling technique for the selection of a sample of 600 students (341 from MUST and 259 from UoKAJK). The research used the famous Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) as a research instrument. The study used frequency, percentage, mean and independent sample t tests for analyzing the data.

## Results

**Table 1**

*These Ups and Downs are Considered Normal*

Score	Frequency	Percent
1	32	5.3
4	5	.8
5	4	.7
6	1	.2
7	5	.8
8	3	.5
9	7	1.2
10	10	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>11.2</b>

The first form of depression is "these ups and downs are considered normal". Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage level of this depression stage. The scores ranged from 0 to 10 at this stage. Out of 600 students, 67 (11.2%) had a negligible level of depression. The first level is normal ups and downs because all the values fall within the normal range of depression according to the BDI.

**Table 2***Mild Mood Disturbance*

Score	Frequency	Percent
11	3	.5
12	11	1.8
13	14	2.3
14	15	2.5
15	18	3.0
16	20	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>13.4</b>

The second level of depression is Mild Mood Disturbance. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage level of this depression stage. The scores ranged from 11 to 16 at this stage. Out of 600 students, 81(13.4%) had Mild Mood Disturbance.

**Table 3***Borderline Clinical Depression*

Score	Frequency	Percent
17	31	5.2
18	28	4.7
19	35	5.8
20	39	6.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>22.2</b>

The third level of depression is Borderline Clinical Depression. Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage level of this depression stage. The scores ranged from 17 to 20 at this stage. Out of 600 students, 133(22.2%) had Borderline Clinical Depression.

**Table 4***Moderate Depression*

Score	Frequency	Percent
21	45	7.5
22	37	6.2
23	32	5.3
24	40	6.7
25	40	6.7
26	35	5.8
27	24	4.0
28	20	3.3
29	16	2.7
30	9	1.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>49.7</b>

The fourth level of depression is Moderate Depression. Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage level of this depression stage. The scores ranged from 21 to 30 at this stage according to BDI. Out of 600 students, 298(49.7%) had Moderate Depression.

**Table 5***Severe Depression*

Score	Frequency	Percent
31	11	1.8
32	3	.5
33	3	.5
35	1	.2
36	1	.2
37	1	.2
38	1	.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3.6</b>

The fifth level of depression is Severe Depression. Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage level of this depression stage. The scores ranged from 31 to 38 at this stage according to BDI. Table 4 shows that out of 600 students, 21 (3.6%) had Severe Depression.

**Table 6***Comparison between Male and Female Students*

Gender	N	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Male	272	86.06	-3.407	598	.001
Female	328	89.01			

Table 6 compares male and female students' depression levels using an independent sample t-test. The table also shows that male students (N = 272, Mean = 86.06) had a lower mean score as compared to Female students (N = 328, Mean = 89.01). The results also showed that  $p = 0.001 < 0.05$ . Specifically, Female students exhibited higher depression levels as compared to male students. The mean difference was 2.95, indicating a substantial effect.

**Table 7***Comparison between MUST and Kotli University Students*

Gender	N	Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
MUST	341	88.64	1.968	598	.034
UOKAJK	259	86.92			

Table 7 compares male and female students' depression levels using an independent sample t-test. The table also shows that students of Mirpur University Science and Technology (MUST) (N = 341, Mean = 86.92) had a lower mean score as compared to the students of University of Kotli, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UoKAJK) (N = 259, Mean = 88.64). The results also showed that  $p = 0.034 < 0.05$ . Specifically, MUST students exhibited higher depression levels as compared to UoKAJK students. The mean difference was 1.72, indicating a significant effect.

## Conclusions

The following are the conclusions based on the results of the study.

1. The descriptive analysis of depression was measured through five stages. The first stage i.e. "These ups and downs are considered normal" only had a handful of students in it. Then, moving on to the second stage, "Mild Mood Disturbance," the study found a few more students there, but still not a lot. In the third stage, which is known as Borderline Clinical Depression, the numbers dipped again — not many students were reported in that

category either. But here is where it gets a bit more concerning: the fourth stage, Moderate Depression, showed that nearly half of the students were experiencing this level of depression. Finally, the last stage, Severe Depression, had just a tiny group of students.

2. The study also found the depression levels among male and female students. It is measured that there was a noticeable difference. It turned out that the female students were experiencing higher levels of depression compared to the males.
3. There was a noticeable difference in the depression levels between students from MUST and UoKAJK. It seems that students from MUST are experiencing higher levels of depression compared to their peers at UoKAJK. This highlights how the depression level can vary significantly across different groups.

## Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested;

1. The findings indicate that university students experience a range of depressive symptoms, with the majority showing mild to moderate levels of depression and no extreme cases observed. It is recommended that university administration implement supportive mental health programs focused on prevention and early intervention, especially for those in the moderate depression range.
2. It is also recommended that the university teachers/counsellors provide support, including counselling services, stress management workshops, and peer support groups, especially for female students, which can help them develop resilience and coping strategies. Such resources are recommended because they can help address mild and moderate depressive symptoms early, reducing the likelihood of these symptoms escalating. By offering consistent support, universities can promote better mental well-being and academic success among their students.

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