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How **Mental Health Problems Affect College Students— The Roles of The School, Family, and The Society**

When **we** are mentioning illness, we are talking about physiological (bodily) dysfunctions and pains, including but not limited to stomachache, infection, and cancer. Since the very first flame of human intelligence, people have noticed that mind is closely related to body. Early thinkers, including Aristotle, studied the field of mind and behavior, and gradually figured out that the minds were affecting the behaviors no less than that of the body. As there exist disfunction and pain of body, there exist the phrase “mental illness” that is used to describe “a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behavior and relationships with others” (**Mental**).



Since I used the analogy of physiological illness and mental illness, I do believe that the prevalence of mental illness is no less or merely slightly less than that of physiological illness — the occurrence of mental illness is not rare. Actually, everyone has the opportunity of the being a victim of mental illness. Since no one is guaranteed of not having mental illness in their life span, inquiring about the reasons of mental illness is

exigent. Sadly, due to the complex nature of mental health, it is almost impossible to precisely determine the exact reasons of mental illness, but there are accomplished researchers answering the question of who is more vulnerable to mental health problems. Based on the research results concluded by SANE Australia, “mental illness is influenced by a complex combination of genetic, neurological, developmental, environmental, socio-economic, cultural, life experience and other factors” (Fact). College students, with extreme and constant stresses from family expectation, schoolwork, and peer-pressure, can be identified as a vulnerable group to mental health problems ranging from periodical anxiety to severe psychopathological illness. I am going to focus on this specific group, discussing about how mental illnesses participate in their lives through real examples, and analyzing the roles of their environments through psychological terms.

Although some people, including my parents, are skeptical of whether mental health problem has become an issue in college students' routine, college students are far more concerned and worried about it than most people's expectation. According to the data gathered by National Alliance on Mental Illness, about 33% of students self-reported having prolonged period of depression, 25% of students have reported suicidal attempt, and 50% of students rated that their mental health states were below the average (Garcia). Although people may argue that the self-awareness of mental health problems doesn't necessarily mean having disorders that meet the diagnostic criteria, the study conducted with community college students finds that “(mental health problems) on college campuses has contributed to increased campus violence incidents, suicide rates, and attrition rates among students” (Kalkbrenner). The study also shows only four-year

universities students, but also community college students are vulnerable to mental health disorders, based on the statistical analyzation.

Except for being negatively affected by mental health problems as a group, the relatively common and severe problems are destroying or have destroyed **individuals** academic pursuit and life. The example is a Physics major student I know who is enrolled in my university, ~~the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign~~. He is an international student from China, and after four months of out of touch, his parents became anxious and contacted his fellow students and the school officials to find out what on earth happened to him. The result was unexpected: during the past four months, he locked himself into his apartment without stepping out of the door for a single minute, and relied on delivery services. How could a normal functioning college student lock himself for such a long time? The answer is, he was not functioning normally—he had depression, a psychopathological disorder characterized by “sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, tiredness, and poor concentration” (Mental).

Moreover, although anxiety and depression are among the most common mental illness problems for college students, more severe and rare mental illness can occur. John Nash, one of the most prominent figures of mathematics, actually had suffered under prolonged schizophrenia, a relatively rare mental illness mainly caused by genetic factors (Fact), including the time when he was a college student. The film, **A Beautiful Mind**, depicts his pathology from his college years: he makes up the hallucination of a fake

roommate, an unreal agent, and a nonsexist mission. He is mocked for his behaviors by people around him, unable to function normally regardless of his extraordinary academic abilities, and becomes deadly desperate after he finds out everything is fake. When I watched the film, I was impressed and depressed by how people reacted to his symptoms, including staring and mocking at him, as if he was carrying an epidemic. I couldn't see much sympathy in his case, and the Princeton University, arguably the best university of this country, didn't have official support for students with mental illness. Fortunately, the care offered from his family, his wife, helped him to conquer schizophrenia (Beautiful).

Psychological disorder is not limited to mood disorders, but also includes behavioral disorders such as obsessive compulsive disorder and bulimia. Carly Morgan, a woman having bulimia, recollected her experience. Because of self-awareness, she dreamed about having a perfect body. After failed attempts, she learnt bulimia from media(TV), and began being bulimic. When she was a college student, she became aware that the action was unhealthy, but the changes it brought made her confident. She tried to give up bulimia for a while but regressed soon. The regression gave her both depression and bulimic mania. Finally, her friend and future husband expressed his indifference toward others' body shape and finally helped her withdraw from bulimia. During her experience with bulimia, her self-esteem, physiological health, and academic concentration were unexpectedly impacted (Morgan). If the social media had the correct direction for children during puberty, the rate of bulimia will significantly decrease. Moreover, even if some one has developed bulimia, the college education can help create

a more friendly and welcoming environment, and help the young adults to overcome bulimia.

The previously presented examples inspired me to discuss the relationship between the environments, including school and society, and mental health problems of college students. When I was learning psychology, there are three terms that can describe different aspects of mental health disorders: risk factor, which might trigger the onset of mental health problem; maintenance factor, which helps the disorders' persistence; and protective factor, which contribute to the recovery.

There are, indeed, various risk factors in colleges. As previously discussed, the schools offer students stressors, including deadlines for homework, test results, and peer pressure. The expectations of family members and the relatively limited job market also add stressors upon college students. Those stressors are in different degrees: from mild stressors to severe stressors. Mild stressors positively influence students' academic performances through acting as incentives of hard working. However, severe stressors can constantly challenge the mental states of college students, and might trigger the onset of anxiety. Actually, in a survey conducted by American Psychological Association (aka APA), anxiety ranks at the top of psychological issues for college students (College). Furthermore, first year college students can be more vulnerable to mental health problems. Due to the sudden change of academic requirements, lifestyles, and environment, the research conducted by Old Dominion University concludes that “students who are making the transition to college and living in university residence halls

are at particularly increased risks for developing MHDs (Kalkbrenner).” According to the finding in the research "School Adjustment, Social Support, and Mental Health of Mainland Chinese College Students in Hong Kong,” if entering the college means a dramatic geographical and cultural change for the new coming college students, the change of school and social environment can trigger mental health disorders (Chui).

In addition, the schools and society can also become the maintenance factors for students already haunted by mental health problems. There are two forms of unexpected attitudes that can be maintenance factors. The first one is being nonchalant or not recognizing the existence of the mental health problems. According to the data from National Alliance on Mental Illness, only seven percent of parents reported their children (that are college students) had experienced mental health issue (Rettner). **Seemingly, there is a huge gap between the actual existence of the issue and the awareness from the family. When the families are not aware of, believe in, or realize how mental health problems are affecting the college students, the students are more likely to experience a prolonged period of onset because of the emotional isolation of their current mind states from their families.** Moreover, if the school doesn't create a friendly environment toward mental health problems, students might have more stigmatic views on mental health problems (Holland), and therefore, they give up their opportunities of saving themselves from mental health problems.

Although I am alternatively using the terms “mental health problems” and “mental illnesses,” the effects of them are significantly different. Actually, study shows

that using the term “mental health problems” are more likely to remove the stigmatic views from students (Holland), and therefore encourage them to seek help. The word choice, is actually an example of protective factor that can help students to conquer mental issues and recover sufficiently. The school is capable of providing these protective factors. Research shows that “collaborative advocacy efforts could involve nursing, psychology, and human services department collaboration to create mental health awareness curriculum and implantation of education support on campus (Holland).” Fortunately, colleges are actually realizing their potentially positive roles toward the issue of mental health problems. I am proud to see that my university has increased the psychological counseling faculties in McKinley Health Center since the 1960s; moreover, when I reviewed consequentially edits and issues the handbooks of counseling, what has enhanced is not only the number of staffs, but also the proficiency of them — from merely social workers to psychological clinicians. As a result, if John Nash was a college student in our era, he would have a better opportunity to function normally with schizophrenia.

Nevertheless, some may argue that I am denying the power of individuals themselves in conquering mental illness. Actually, I have no intention to do so. Since mental health problems are dealing with people’s inner minds, the ability of coping with life problems, organized academic lives, and the willingness of recovering from mental health problems are essential — in the case of coping with stressors (the risk factor of anxiety disorder), “findings show substantial variation in college students’ use of ... coping strategies (Coiro).”

Moreover, I should mention the differences between mental health problems and neurological disorders. Compared to mental health problems, the neurological disorders are more biologically based, and for the most time, more likely to be identified as abnormal. For example, in the titled case of *A Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, the man cannot identify things because of deficits on his lobes (Sacks). The definition of neurology by Oliver Sacks is “an impairment or incapacity of neurological function, loss of speech, loss of language, loss of memory, loss of vision, loss of dexterity, loss of identity and myriad other losses and losses of specific functions (Sacks).” As a result, in the research paper, I am more focusing on mental health problems rather than neurological disorders.

The period of entering and studying in college is no less significant than puberty in people’s developments. The college experience might be the first chance for young adults to live independently without cares and controls from their parents, to engage in highly intellectual materials that shape their insights toward the world and the society, and to learn knowledges that will support their career paths. Thus, indulging mental health problems negatively influencing the college experience is unwise. Based on my research, I would like to offer a close view of how college students are impacted by mental illnesses through real examples, and I would like to explore and demonstrate how schools, families, and societies form the risk, maintenance, and protective factors for various mental disorders. The research result can be an inspiration for people who want to keep improving the current state of mental health problems in college students.

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