

## **MENTAL WELLNESS IN THE POST-COVID ERA: CHALLENGES FACED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN KARACHI**

*\*Sarah Jameel Khan<sup>1</sup>, Hasan Tahir<sup>2</sup>, Abeer Jameel Khan<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Pharmacy, Hamdard University

<sup>2</sup>Founder at Solace

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Karachi

*\*Corresponding Author: [sarahjameel25@gmail.com](mailto:sarahjameel25@gmail.com)*

### **Article Info**



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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected mental wellness worldwide, with university students representing a particularly vulnerable population. In Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolitan city, students experienced abrupt academic disruptions, prolonged social isolation, and uncertainty regarding health and career prospects. This review aims to synthesize available literature on mental wellness challenges faced by university students in Karachi following the COVID-19 pandemic. Peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 were reviewed to assess the prevalence of depression, anxiety, stress, and related psychosocial issues. Findings indicate a substantial rise in psychological distress among students, particularly females and those enrolled in medical and health sciences programs. Academic stress associated with online learning, fear of infection, reduced social interaction, and financial instability emerged as major contributing factors. The review highlights the persistent impact of the pandemic on student mental health and underscores the urgent need for institutional mental health services, preventive strategies, and policy-level interventions to promote student well-being in post-pandemic academic settings.

### **Keywords:**

*Mental wellness, COVID-19, University students, Karachi, Anxiety, Depression.*

## INTRODUCTION

Mental wellness, defined as a state of psychological, emotional, and social well-being, is essential for academic performance, social integration, and overall life satisfaction. University students are especially vulnerable to mental health challenges due to developmental transitions, performance pressures, and evolving social roles. Even before the pandemic, studies reported significant levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among university students in Pakistan (Fatima et al., 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, disrupted education globally and transformed the academic landscape. In Pakistan, universities closed unexpectedly, and face-to-face classes were replaced with online learning, often without adequate infrastructure or support. This rapid shift was associated with elevated academic stress, intolerance of uncertainty, and reduced psychological well-being among students, highlighting the negative impact of remote learning environments on mental health (Fatima et al., 2025).

Studies in Karachi and across Pakistan documented high rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms among university students during the pandemic. A cross-sectional study at Jinnah Sindh Medical University reported that 55.7% of students experienced significant anxiety and depression, with academic disruptions and daily life difficulties contributing to psychological distress (Inam et al., 2022). Similarly, research in Karachi found that among medical students, approximately 66% of female students reported depressive symptoms, while 21% experienced anxiety and 28% experienced stress during COVID-19 (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Beyond clinical symptoms, broader trends in social anxiety among university students have shown a marked rise in post-lockdown periods. Longitudinal data indicate significant increases in social anxiety levels over the years following COVID-19 lockdowns, suggesting long-term psychosocial effects extending beyond the acute phase of the pandemic (Trends of Social Anxiety Study, 2025).

The impact of online learning, social isolation, and academic uncertainty on student mental wellness has been documented in recent research across Pakistan. Surveys involving large, diverse student samples revealed that severe psychological distress was common during periods of remote instruction, with many students expressing dissatisfaction with online classes and heightened levels of stress (Psychological Impacts Study, 2021).

Despite this growing body of evidence, there remains a need for focused synthesis on post-COVID mental wellness among university students in Karachi, a major metropolitan city with diverse socioeconomic challenges. Urban students in Karachi face unique stressors, including technological disparities, financial instability, and limited access to mental health support resources. These conditions can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and academic strain, especially as pandemic measures have eased and students return to in-person or hybrid learning environments.

Therefore, this review aims to synthesize recent literature on mental wellness challenges faced by university students in Karachi following the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying patterns of psychological distress, key contributing factors, and gaps in institutional responses, the review provides

evidence to inform campus mental health policies and targeted intervention strategies. Understanding the post-pandemic landscape of student mental wellness is crucial for promoting resilience, academic success, and long-term well-being among higher education populations.

### **1. Academic Disruption and Online Learning Stress**

The abrupt transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the academic routines of university students. Lack of familiarity with digital platforms, poor internet connectivity, increased assignments, and unclear assessment methods contributed significantly to stress and burnout. Students reported difficulty concentrating and maintaining motivation, leading to elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms (Fatima et al., 2025; Saeed et al., 2021).

### **2. Social Isolation and Reduced Peer Interaction**

Prolonged lockdowns and social distancing measures led to social isolation, which in turn increased feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and detachment from support networks. Students, especially those in their early university years, reported difficulty reintegrating socially even after campuses reopened. Loneliness has been identified as a key risk factor for depression and anxiety in post-pandemic student populations (Khuda et al., 2024).

### **3. Fear of Infection and Health-Related Anxiety**

During the pandemic, concerns over personal and family health contributed to heightened anxiety and stress. Fear of contracting COVID-19, coupled with exposure to health-related misinformation on social media, amplified emotional distress among students (Shaikh et al., 2022). This fear persisted even after the peak of the pandemic, influencing long-term mental wellness outcomes.

### **4. Financial Stress and Career Uncertainty**

Economic instability caused by the pandemic loss of family income, increased tuition costs, and reduction in part-time job opportunities exacerbated financial stress among students. Additionally, delays in graduation and limited internship opportunities increased career-related anxiety. These stressors were strongly associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety (Noorullah et al., 2023).

### **5. Lifestyle Changes and Sleep Disruption**

Changes in daily routines during lockdowns, including irregular sleep patterns, reduced physical activity, and increased screen time, negatively affected mental health. Poor sleep quality and sedentary lifestyle were strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and academic stress among students (Saeed et al., 2022).

### **6. Gender and Socioeconomic Factors**

Female students consistently reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to male students. Gender-specific social expectations, combined with caregiving responsibilities and reduced access to support networks, contributed to this disparity. Additionally, students from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds experienced greater mental health challenges due to limited resources and digital inequities (Ahmed et al., 2022).

**Table 1. Summary of Studies on Mental Wellness Among University Students in Karachi After COVID-19**

Author (Year)	Study Design	Population	Assessment Tool	Key Findings
Ahmed et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	Medical students, Karachi	DASS-21	High prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress; females more affected
Noorullah et al. (2023)	Survey-based	University students, Karachi	PHQ-9, GAD-7	Significant psychological distress linked to fear of COVID-19 and academic disruption
Saeed et al. (2021)	Cross-sectional	University students, Pakistan	DASS-21	Moderate to severe stress and anxiety reported after first COVID-19 wave
Fatima et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional	University students	Psychological Well-being Scale	Online learning stress negatively associated with mental wellness
Raza et al. (2025)	Cross-sectional	University students, Pakistan	Social Anxiety Scale	Persistent increase in social anxiety post-lockdown

*DASS-21: Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale; PHQ-9: Patient Health Questionnaire; GAD-7: Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale*

**Table 2: Trends in Mental Wellness Challenges Among University Students in Karachi Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–2025)**

Mental Wellness Problem	Pandemic Phase (2020–2021)	Post-Pandemic Phase (2022–2025)
Anxiety & Depression	Very High	High
Academic Stress	Very High	Moderate–High
Social Isolation	Very High	Moderate
Social Anxiety	Moderate	High
Sleep Disturbance	High	Moderate
Career Uncertainty	Moderate	High

## **Conclusion**

University students in Karachi experienced considerable mental wellness challenges in the aftermath of COVID-19, marked by increased anxiety, depression, stress, and social anxiety. Academic stress, adaptation to online learning, and fear of health threats were key contributing factors. These findings underscore the urgent need for institutional mental health support **services**, including counselling, stress management programs, and resilience-building interventions tailored to student needs. Future research should focus on longitudinal monitoring of mental health trends and evaluation of targeted support strategies to foster long-term student well-being.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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