

University Students gripped by Depression

Psychological distress among university students is attracting more attention around the world. In 2003, a HKU study revealed that first-year undergraduate students had high psychological morbidity in Hong Kong. To improve service planning and prevent long term adverse effects, the research group extended the study to examine the severity and prevalence of psychological morbidity among all students.

The Department of Psychiatry, HKU Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine and the Hong Kong Tertiary Institutions Health Care Working Group have jointly conducted a follow-up research on Depression, Anxiety and Stress in full-time undergraduate students in 10 tertiary education institutes. The survey, consisting of a record of demographic details, a questionnaire on help-seeking behaviour, and the 21-item Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS), was established.

14,073 students completed the survey. 32% (n = 4,508), 48% (n = 6,764) and 31% (n = 4,297) of the respondents scored within the 'moderate', 'severe' to 'extremely severe' ranges in their depression, anxiety and stress scores respectively. These are higher than the corresponding percentages in the previous 2003 study examining year 1 students only (21% for depression, 41% for anxiety and 27% for stress).

This study indicated that psychological morbidity was common among university students and the prevalence is higher than generally expected. Extra supports should be provided, especially for career advice, time management, study problems, examinations and stress. Students commonly make use of online resources, friends and hobbies to deal with stress, but professional help such as psychological and counselling services were rarely sought.

To improve students' psychological wellbeing, efforts should be made to enhance mental health awareness among higher education students, for example through health education campaigns. Early detection and early intervention are also essential, so tertiary education institutions should consider increasing resources on and accessibility to professional counselling services for university students.