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A Study on Imposter Syndrome and Psychological Distress among College Students.

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Abstract

The relationship between psychological distress and imposter syndrome is complex and cyclical. Students experiencing imposter syndrome may feel heightened levels of anxiety and stress due to their fear of being exposed as a "fraud," which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and lead to further psychological distress. This distress can hinder academic performance and overall well-being, creating a detrimental cycle that can be challenging to break. Data was collected from 40 college students using standardized scales. The results found significant positive correlation

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between imposter syndrome and psychological distress. Understanding the interplay between psychological distress and imposter syndrome is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems. By addressing these issues, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that fosters mental health and encourages students to recognize their achievements and capabilities.

Keywords: *Social media, Imposter syndrome, psychological distress, College students*

Introduction

Psychological distress is a common issue among students and can be defined as an unpleasant state that leads to poor mental health. It can include emotional changes, maladjustments, or adverse experiences that can result from unmet needs or poor stress management. Psychological distress can have negative impact on a student's academic performance and lead to other issues such as substance abuse, suicidality, and ADHD. Attention towards psychological distress has become a problem among college students that has soared over the years. Students often deal with such problems as isolation, stress, anxiety, and depression. There are numerous causes that can be associated with the issue in the said population.

To begin with, every student for the first time in college must face a lot of difficulties in coping up with a new atmosphere, engaging in new social interactions, all while being able to cope with the pressure that comes with studies. Such kind of factors can trigger a considerable increase in levels of anxiety and stress. In addition, a student's life can be made or broken by academic performance, as the expectations for good grades and on time submissions along with other activities can be a lot at times that can have a long-lasting effect on their mental health. Moreover, personal loans and rent expenses alongside students' loans can further increase levels of stress.

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Social situations can also play a major role. Students, especially freshers in college who are living out of their homes for the first time suffer from a feeling of depression and loneliness. Colleges are competitive spaces and there is a tendency to indulge in social comparison including the perceived sense of competition among students which can damage self-esteem with time bringing imperial effects on mental health.

Psychological Distress

According to Lazarus et al. (1984), psychological distress is explained "as the emotional condition a person feels when coping with situations that are unsettling, frustrating or perceived as harmful or threatening". Psychological distress has also been defined as prevalence of emotional states such as lack of enthusiasm, sleep disturbances, feelings of blue, hopelessness about the future, emotional vulnerability, extensive boredom and thoughts of suicide.

Mirowsky et al. (2002), described psychological distress as a "state of emotional suffering which is characterized by symptoms of depression which are prolonged sadness, hopelessness and loss of interest". These symptoms may also be tied with physiological symptoms such as insomnia, headaches and lack of energy, however they are likely to vary across cultures.

Research was conducted on future health outcomes and the evaluation to measure distress in prospective studies were evaluated through 10 different distress assessment instruments in the analysis of 19 papers from four interdisciplinary databases. Regardless of the measurement method used, the results consistently showed that psychological distress negatively impacts health outcomes for a variety of populations. A pooled hazard ratio of 1.29 (95% CI: 1.15–1.46) indicated a substantial correlation between elevated mortality risk and high levels of distress, according to a meta-analysis of the data. The strong correlation between distress and unfavorable health outcomes

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is highlighted in this study, underscoring the significance of precise distress evaluation in both clinical and research settings (Barry et al., 2019).

The K10 and K6 psychological distress indicators were elaborated and validated in this publication according to the Methods subsection. Here, we can see that the study was done in several stages including the implementation of the first set of questions as a part of the mail survey of the nationwide population (N=1401 and K=1414) and the testing of these questions via a phone survey (N=1574). The Item Response Theory models were used for developing those scales and validation was carried out through combination of clinical judgments and survey assessment in two steps. The authors concluded that K10 and K6 can be useful in determining levels of mental distress among a population in whom large epidemiological studies are conducted and to clinicians and those studying public health.

Impostor Syndrome

Impostor Syndrome, as defined by Dr. Pauline Clance in her Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (IP), refers to the psychological experience of feeling like a "fraud" despite evidence of success or competence (Clance, 1978). People experiencing Impostor Syndrome often have a persistent fear of being exposed as inadequate, despite their achievements or external validation. It is characterized by self-doubt, insecurity, and the belief that one's success is due to luck or external factors rather than personal ability or effort.

Impostor Syndrome, as outlined by Dr. Pauline Clance, is a pervasive, self-imposed sense of fraudulence that affects many individuals who are otherwise highly capable and successful. It involves chronic self-doubt, a tendency to attribute success to external factors, and a deep fear of being exposed as unworthy or incompetent. This phenomenon can have significant psychological and emotional impacts, leading to stress, burnout, and a reluctance to pursue new opportunities.

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Clance's work has been instrumental in identifying and conceptualizing this phenomenon, providing insight into how it affects individuals and how they can address and overcome these feelings. Clance also emphasized that Impostor Syndrome is often experienced by high achievers and perfectionists who place extremely high standards on themselves. These individuals might experience a fear of failure or a reluctance to make mistakes, which can lead to them feeling unworthy of success or recognition if they do not perform at a perfect level. They may also believe that their accomplishments are easily attainable by others and that their success is somehow less meaningful.

According to Dr. Valerie Young, a leading expert on Impostor Syndrome and author of the book The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women, offered a nuanced perspective on the phenomenon. She defined it as "a psychological experience where individuals cannot internalize their success, feeling that it is undeserved and that they have fooled others into thinking they are more competent than they actually are." Additionally, Gediman (2005) defined this phenomenon as "perceived fraudulence is a kind of personality characteristics in which individuals imagine their competencies are not real".

Originally called the impostor phenomenon by Clance and Imes (1978), this phenomenon was studied and confirmed on a large scale in this research. This article's target population follows an intellectual impersonation syndrome that persists regardless of success or achievements in academic success and career paths. In methodological terms, the research employed clinical observations, therapeutic group interactions as well as case studies. Another implication emerging from the study was the influence of family, social-cultural gender roles, and attitudes towards the production of impostor feelings.

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The discovered dynamics were also accompanied by therapeutic strategies towards those directions. It has since been used as a historic benchmark in the identification of the psychological architecture of impostor syndrome and as a reference point in mapping out treatment methodologies for patients who present impostor syndrome.

Purpose

The aim is to study the Severity of Imposter Syndrome and Psychological Distress among College Students.

Hypothesis

There will be a significant positive correlation between psychological distress and imposter syndrome.

Method

Sample

A total sample of 40 participants was collected from the age group 18-24 years from Mohali.

Measures

- ***Kessler's Psychological distress scale (K10)*****:** developed by Kessler and his Colleagues (2002) used to measure the psychological distress. It consists of 10 items with 5 rating response scales which are 1 "none of the time," 2 "a little of the time," 3 "some of the time," 4 "most of the time," 5 "all of the time."
- ***Clance IP Scale*****:** developed by Clance (1985) used to measure the Imposter Phenomenon (IP), also known as the Imposter Syndrome. It consists of 20 items with 5 rating response scales which are 1 "not at all true," 2 "rarely," 3 "sometimes," 4 "often," 5 "very true."

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Procedures

Here, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms, each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized psychological tests were administered to the participants.

Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1. *Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Psychological Distress	**Imposter Syndrome**
N	40	40
Mean	23.8	62.3
Standard deviation	7.05	13.5

Table 2. *Correlation between Psychological distress and Imposter Syndrome*

	Psychological distress	**Imposter syndrome**
Psychological distress	—	
Imposter syndrome	0.631***	—
Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001		

Discussion of Results

The result found that psychological distress is positively correlated with imposter syndrome (r=0.631, p<.001). Evidence from research indicates a strong positive relationship between psychological distress and imposter syndrome, with studies suggesting that people

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experiencing imposter feelings are more likely to report high levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This relationship is particularly well known among different populations, including students and professionals.

Ajmani (2024) did a study on young adults to study the relationship between imposter syndrome and self-esteem. The results found that there is a significant negative correlation between imposter syndrome and self-esteem, highlighting that individuals with low self-esteem are vulnerable to imposter feelings. In another study by Manoj (2024) it was found that imposter syndrome is prevalent in female students that attend co-ed colleges than those who attend girls only college. The researcher, additionally, found in their study a significant negative correlation between general self-efficacy and imposter syndrome.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant relationship between psychological distress and imposter syndrome among college students. The results indicate a positive correlation, suggesting that as levels of psychological distress increase, so do feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt associate with imposter syndrome. This cyclical relationship highlights the importance of addressing both psychological distress and imposter syndrome in educational settings, as they can exacerbate each other and lead to detrimental effects on students' mental health and academic performance.

Given the high-stress environment of colleges and universities, it is crucial for educational institutions to implement effective support systems and interventions that target these issues. Strategies may include mental health resources, workshops on self-acceptance and resilience, and peer support programs that foster a sense of community and belonging. By creating an inclusive

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environment that acknowledges and addresses the challenges of psychological distress and imposter syndrome, institutions can help students recognize their achievements and capabilities, ultimately promoting their overall well-being and success.

Future research should continue to explore the dynamics of this relationship, including the role of social media and peer comparison, which may further influence students' mental health. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how these issues evolve over time and the effectiveness of various interventions. Overall, addressing psychological distress and imposter syndrome is essential for fostering a healthier, more supportive academic environment for all students.

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