



## Prevalence of depression among Afghan university students

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### Abstract

*Depression is a prominent mental disorder among university students around the world. Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) reported that most Afghans suffer from different degree of depression. Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) also states insufficient health care in the country. However, MoHE has just established a few counseling centers in some universities to assist students in relation to their academic stress and other psychological barriers. The aim of the study was to find out the prevalence of depression among Afghanistan public universities. 721 questionnaires were distributed to the participants in all three universities. The results show that students suffer from different levels of depression. 30% of the participants suffer from moderate depression, 20% from mild mood swings, 15% border line clinical depression, 12% severe depression, and 3% extreme depression. The findings warrant providing greater mental health assistance and counseling centers at universities.*

**Keywords:** Depression, prevalence, and university students.

### Introduction

The consequences of three decades of civil war and conflict in Afghanistan cannot be ignored, and almost all aspects of life have been affected. Millions of Afghans were killed; millions of others had to leave their homeland, and migrate to other countries such as Iran and Pakistan. For years they had to live in refugee camps, and tolerate poverty and hunger. Some lost their jobs and livelihoods, and others were imprisoned. Many people were injured, and countless homes were destroyed. In addition, the separation of families, friends and illness were additional challenges that people experienced. However, Afghans are remarkably resilient, have learned not to be too worried about these challenges and they rarely discuss them. Afghans are able to live with tragedies, to continue their lives, attempt to make the best situation, tell joke to each other, and try to create brightness out of their past. Nonetheless, the impact of war is quite clear, and the mental health of many young has been negatively affected<sup>1,2</sup>. Due to protracted conflicts, it is rare to find an Afghan family who has not lost a member of the family. Furthermore, accessing low-cost unlawful drugs was easy to most Afghans, and as a result many have become drug users. According to estimates from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), one million young Afghans are drug users. Mental health disorders and drug abuse have an interrelated cycle, and are jointly causes and consequence of each other. In Afghanistan health indicators are considered as one of the lowest in the world. According to a recent WHO report, about two million people in Afghanistan suffer from mental health disorders<sup>3</sup>. These factors can contribute to violence in family and other societal levels. The violence in Afghan families is not limited to husbands against wives, but includes the rest of members of the family as well. Mental

illness among women is higher due to the socio-cultural environment such as getting married at a young age, and lack of control over their own life<sup>4</sup>. The consequences of mental health disorders were inevitable due to the extended violence and political upheaval in Afghanistan. Very few mental health services are available in Afghanistan, as the central psychiatric hospitals in Kabul were damaged and the few mental health organizations stopped working<sup>5,6</sup>. The prevalence of symptoms of depression and anxiety has been reported to be high in Afghanistan. A review of studies carried out during the Taliban regime shows a high level of depression and anxiety among women. The findings of a survey of 160 women in Kabul and Pakistan during the Taliban regime shows that 42% had signs of diagnostic posttraumatic stress disorder, 97% main depression, 86% harsh anxiety. A significant number of women (84%) in the study described that they lost one or more family members during the war<sup>3,7</sup>. The defeat of the Taliban regime, however, has not resulted in a sudden bettering in the mental health conditions across the country. In Afghanistan, conflict has been recognized as the important cause of unrest for the people and all levels of society, thus hindering social functioning<sup>8</sup>. Mental health in Afghanistan is a public issue, and adults have considerable mental health problems<sup>9,10</sup>. Furthermore, a great cause of disability across the globe is mental health disorders as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO). Three out of the ten causes of disability are mental disorders for the people between the ages of 15 and 44, and the remaining causes are often connected with mental disorders. Improving mental health is expressed in the WHO mental health action plan for 2013-2020<sup>11</sup>. The improvement of depressive symptoms may have an important influence on the ability of students to successfully complete academic demands<sup>12</sup>. Due to the war and conflict, the

nation of Afghanistan across different sectors needs a comprehensive approach to address mental health problems as a national priority. The Afghanistan Higher Education Strategic Plan indicated that health care in Afghanistan is not sufficient<sup>2</sup>. MoHE is also committed to work on students' mental health and establish counseling centers at universities in order to provide counseling guidance. However, having qualified mental health professional in the country is the primary concern, and the country lacks sufficient systems for producing qualified professionals in order to meet the needs of society. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's higher education system is unable to respond to the mental health needs of Afghan society due to the decades of war and conflict. Furthermore, lecturers, students and staff of Afghan universities themselves suffer from trauma and are experiencing their own mental health issues<sup>1</sup>. There is also very little research has been carried out on mental health issues. Therefore, it is important to carry out a study on depression in Afghanistan universities.

**Purpose of the study:** The purpose of the study was to find out the prevalence of depression among Afghan university students.

**Literature Review:** The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that one of the four largest health problems in the world is mental disorders and depression<sup>13</sup>. One of the most common psychiatric disorders is depression, and some have seen it as a type of reaction to tragedies and some acknowledge it as an important disease. Depression can influence everyone and it is caused by genetic, environmental, and social factors. Depression is connected with guilty feelings, decreased energy and passion, deficiency of concentration, and poor appetite. Depression is seen in both sexes and in various age groups and nationalities. Its prevalence is almost double in females and is present in 10-64% of young people. University students are seen as an important part of the society but are also vulnerable to depression<sup>13</sup>. University students face an important and stressful period of time that seems to be different from their previous life experiences. For instance, the system of university requires students to perform well, accomplish assignments and obtain good grades. In addition, planning for the future, and tolerating absence of family and friends can be stressful for most students. Hence, students suffer from various levels of stress and depression<sup>14</sup>. Students are an important investment for the future of a society. Their mental health and wellbeing are essential for both themselves and society. Anxiety and Depression are well-known mental health problems among university students. College students often have a greater array of complex problems today than they had in the past few decades. This is due to the higher academic expectations, new life experiences, exposure to new friends, and ideas. Some of the prominent problems for university students are, time pressure, examinations, strong competition, and pressure of academic excellence<sup>15</sup>. For a majority of students, university is the first experience staying far away from family and friends. When they are faced with difficulties, their support system such as family and friends may be too far away to assist them. This may strengthen feelings of

isolation, homesickness and loneliness. The college and university system requires students to accomplish academic tasks and perform well<sup>16</sup>. Depression is one of the well-known mental disorders around the world. It is expressed as deterioration from earlier use with the presence of psychological difficulties namely a depressed manner, loss of pleasure or interest, feelings of regret or uselessness, suicidal mood, along with somatic symptoms that contain important weight change, sleep problems, having problems concentrating, and physical agitation<sup>17</sup>. The university years sometimes have a lot of bad effects on the intellectual and emotional functioning of every student more than nearly any other phase of education. University life has a potentially negative impact on the academic achievement, psychological well-being and physical health of students. Depression is accepted as a global and disastrous problem amongst students, and depressive symptoms among university students are reported as ranging from 10.2% to 71.2%<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, depression can be a challenge to most university students, especially in Afghanistan as a country that had a lot of problems over the past three decades.

## Methodology

**Participants:** the participants of the study were 721 tertiary students from the three public universities namely Bamyán University (BU), Ghazni University (GU), and Parwan University (PU). The participants were from different faculties. In particular, third and fourth year students were randomly selected for the study. 37% of the participants were from Ghazni University, 33% from Bamyán University, and 30% of them were from Parwan University. The participants were from different provinces of Afghanistan. They introduced to the universities by Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) after the national entrance exam (Kankor). In addition, the participants were from different nationalities such as Tajik, Pashton, Hazara, Uzbek, and others.

**Research instrument:** The Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) was used as questionnaire. The BDI-II is one of the well-known instruments for detecting depression. Studies reported good validity and reliability of the instrument and that's why it is used in the current study. Segal and his colleagues conducted a study in a group of community –dewelling among older and younger adults. They reported internal reliability of the BDI-II good among the participants. The average score of BDI-II was not different between older and younger adults<sup>19</sup>. In addition, internal consistency of the BDI-II was reported 0.9, and retest reliability ranged from 0.73 to 0.96. The criterion-based validity was also good in terms of sensitivity and specificity for finding depression<sup>20</sup>. The instrument can distinguish between depressed and non-depressed one. The BDI-II was translated into Afghan language (Persian) by a group of expert in the faculty. The translated version (Persian) of Beck Depression Inventory was distributed to 30 participants in faculty of education in order to find out the reliability and validity. The Chronbach's alpha of the translated version of the questionnaire was 0.8 which

indicates that the questionnaire is valid and reliable. The BDI-II questionnaire consists of 21 items which examines behavioral, cognitive, affective and somatic symptoms of depression. In addition, the statements are about sadness, pessimism, past failure, loss of pleasure, guilty feelings, punishment feelings, self-dislike, self-criticalness, suicidal thoughts or wishes, crying, agitation, loss of interest, indecisiveness, worthlessness, loss of energy, changes in sleeping pattern, irritability, changes in appetite, concentration difficulty, tiredness or fatigue, and reduction of libido. Every item of the BDI-II consists of a sequence of rank-ordered statements. Every statement is allocated from 0 to 3, considering the harsh of the symptom<sup>21</sup>. Students were required to circle the number connected with the statement that highly expresses their feelings over the past month.

**Procedure:** The study was conducted during the first and second semesters of 2017. Permission was obtained from the head of department and dean of each faculty. The questionnaire was distributed in the classroom. The data collection from each university took about 20 days. The participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study.

## Results and discussion

The results of the study are presented in the tables below. The findings of the current study are compared with previous studies.

**Table-1:** Prevalence of depression among Bamyan University students.

Variable	n	%
Normal ups and downs	42	18
Mild mood disturbances	43	18
Borderline clinical depression	43	18
Moderate depression	77	32
Severe depression	25	11
Extreme depression	8	3

Table-1 illustrates that 77 (32%) of the participants suffer from moderate depression which indicates the greatest number. 43(18%) of the participants experience mild mood disturbances, and borderline clinical depression which indicates the second greatest numbers. On the other hand, 8 (3%) of the participants suffer from extreme depression which shows the lowest number.

**Table-2:** Prevalence of depression among Parwan University students.

Variable	n	%
Normal ups and downs	46	22
Mild mood disturbances	52	24
Borderline clinical depression	25	12
Moderate depression	56	26
Severe depression	29	14
Extreme depression	4	2

Table-2 shows that the greatest number (56) of the participants have moderate depression while 52(24%) of the participants suffer from mild mood disturbances, which indicates the second greatest number. On the other hand, only 4(2%) of the participants suffer from extreme depression.

**Table-3:** Prevalence of depression among Ghazni University.

Variable	n	%
Normal ups and downs	53	20
Mild mood disturbances	46	18
Borderline clinical depression	40	15
Moderate depression	80	30
Severe depression	34	13
Extreme depression	10	4

Table-3 illustrate that 80 (30%) of the participants in GU suffer from moderate depression which shows the greatest number among all six levels. 53(20%) of the participants experience normal depression which indicates the second greatest number. However, only 10 (4%) of the participants suffer from extreme depression which depicts the lowest number.

**Table-4:** Prevalence of depression based on the three main classifications.

University	Level of Depression N (%)			
	Low	Moderate	Significant	Total Frequency
BU	85(36%)	120(50%)	33(14%)	238
PU	98(46%)	81(38%)	33(16%)	212
GU	99(38%)	120(45%)	44(17%)	263

Table-4 indicates that 120 (50%) of the participants from BU suffer from moderate depression, similarly 120(45%) of the participants from GU also experience moderate depression. 98(46%) of the participants from PU have a low level of depression, 99(38%) from GU, 85(36%) from BU also have a low level of depression. 44(17%) of the participants from GU experience significant depression, 33(16%) from PU, and 33(14%) of the participants from BU experience significant depression which indicates severe and extreme depression.

**Discussion:** The current study aimed was to determine the prevalence of depression among Afghan university students. The data were gathered from 721 tertiary level students aged from 18 years to more than 30 years old from the third and fourth academic years. The highest percentage of participants in the 21-23 age group were from BU (71.9%), GU (70.1%), PU (64.8%) respectively, whereas only 7% of the participants were more than 30 years. 71.8% of the participants were male and 28.2% were female. The participants were from different provinces, faculties, and nationalities. Based on the Beck Depression Inventory-II, the participants were asked to circle the number that best expresses their feelings regarding a range of statements. The findings show that students suffer from depression in different degrees from mild mood disturbance to extreme depression. 30% of the participants from all three universities suffer from moderate depression, 20% from mild mood swings, 15% from border-line clinical depression, 12% severe depression, and 3% extreme depression respectively. However, the level of depression for each university is different. 120(50%) of the participants from Bamyan University, 81(38%) from Parwan University, and 120(45%) from Ghazni University suffer from moderate depression. 33(14%) of Bamyan University participants, 33(16%) of Parwan University, and 44(17%) suffer from significant depression. These findings are supported by previous studies. In our neighbor countries such as Iran and Pakistan students also suffer from various degrees of depression. For instance, a cross sectional survey was used to find out levels of, stress depression, and anxiety among 66 medical students of private and public universities in Pakistan<sup>22</sup>. Their findings show a great level of anxiety, stress and depression. In particular, 40.9% of them have depression, where 9.09% suffer from mild mood disturbances, 16.67% moderate, 13.64% severe, and 1.52% from extreme depression<sup>22</sup>. Daryanavard, Madani and Mahmoodi conducted a study in one of the schools in Iran. Their findings reveal that overall 31.3% of students have a degree of depression, which indicates that 23.11% of males and 39.85% of females suffer from some degree of depression<sup>23</sup>. Similar to this, a study using a cross sectional survey was carried out to estimate the prevalence of depression among students of the School of Health and Nutrition at Tabriz University, Iran<sup>13</sup>. Safiri and his colleagues' findings show that 62.7% of the students suffer from depression and from these 10.9% have severe depression. However, there are some differences among our neighbor countries such as Iran and Pakistan in terms of economy, security, and higher education system. Afghanistan has experienced three decades of

war and conflict, and still the war is going on whereas Iran and Pakistan experienced peace and development. Universities in Iran and Pakistan have a lot of facilities compared with Afghanistan. It seems that regardless of facilities, university students suffer from various level of depression, and the reasons could be high academic demands, examinations, and other barriers. Furthermore, studies carried out in other countries reveal that university students have different degrees of depression. Sharma and Kirmani carried out a study in one of the State Universities of Bangalore City India. They used the Beck Depression Inventory (1961) as research instrument in order to find levels of depression and anxiety in a group of college students<sup>24</sup>. Their findings depict a higher rate of depression and anxiety among female students, and the empirical study found that professional students have higher levels of depression and anxiety compared with non-professional students. In the University Sao Paulo, Brazil a study was conducted by Moreira and Furegato among two bachelor nursing courses, and 88 students. Their findings show that 69.8% had no depression, 18.2% had dysphoria, 6.8% experienced moderate depression, and 5.7% had severe depression<sup>25</sup>.

The findings of a study conducted by Lowe and her colleagues illustrate that six in ten students (62.1%) presented some symptoms of depression, specifically, 14.8% moderate to severe, and 9.7% reported severe symptoms of depression<sup>21</sup>. They reported that females have higher levels of depression. The prevalence of depression in first year university students in Japan was 20.7% with the Beck depression Inventory being used a research instrument<sup>26,27</sup>. Furthermore, a study was carried out in Sultan Qaboos University Oman and 481 (243 males and 238 females) students participated in the study<sup>28</sup>. They reported that 133(27.7%) of the participants (66 males and 67 females) suffer from different levels of depression. Studies in different countries around the world show that university students suffer from a degree of depression regardless of geographical situation, economy and education system. Afghanistan University students are not the only group that has depression, but other countries with having a lot of facilities also suffers from a degree of depression. In addition, Afghan university students regardless of ethnicity and culture also have a level of depression. It can be inferred that three decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan cannot be the only reason of students' depression. As indicated earlier that Afghans are strongly resilient. As a result, depression can be a serious problem for university students, and it is important for the authorities of higher education to create counseling centers and other social activities to combat this problem.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate that students in all three universities suffer from different levels of depression. Although these three provinces have a lot of similarities in terms of culture and geographical characteristics, students' level of

depression is not the same. The findings suggest the MoHE create counseling centers and assist students with their academic stress and mental health disorders.

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