



Mental Health Among Arts College and Science College Students

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Abstract

Mental health among college students is a growing global concern, with increasing evidence showing significant psychological distress across academic disciplines. College students face numerous stressors — academic workload, social pressures, identity formation, future career uncertainty, and life transitions — which contribute to elevated rates of anxiety, depression, stress, and other mental health conditions. While research broadly shows that college students overall have high levels of psychological symptoms, academic stream (i.e., arts vs science) may influence prevalence and types of mental health challenges. Emerging data suggest that students in arts and design fields experience higher rates of mental health problems than many other majors, potentially due to creative pressure, performance evaluation anxieties, and less structured career pathways. Conversely, science students confront heavy academic loads, performance competition, and intense examinations, leading to stress and burnout. Comparative studies in Indian and global contexts reveal mixed results: some show no significant mental health differences between arts and science students, while others indicate higher psychological distress in certain streams, influenced by variables like workload, coping strategies, social support, gender, and socio-economic status. Mental well-being disparities may also relate to curriculum intensity, assessment styles, and personality traits prevalent in disciplinary groups. Understanding these differences — including academic, social, institutional, and cultural factors — is crucial for targeted mental health interventions on campus. This article synthesizes existing evidence, identifies key stressors for arts and science students, and outlines recommendations for institutions, educators, and policymakers to support student well-being effectively.

Introduction

College years are transformative yet challenging. Emerging adulthood (typically ages 18–24) encompasses major developmental tasks such as autonomy formation, identity exploration, and future planning. At this life stage, mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and stress are highly prevalent compared to other age groups. College environments — often competitive, socially demanding, and academically rigorous — can exacerbate vulnerability to psychological distress.



Mental health in tertiary education is a multifaceted concern influenced by individual, social, and institutional factors. Key stressors include academic workload, performance pressure, social comparison, financial strain, family expectations, and transitions into independent living. Students may also struggle with loneliness, stigma around help-seeking, and limited access to campus mental health resources.

Academic stream — whether a student is enrolled in arts/humanities or science disciplines — appears to intersect with these stressors in nuanced ways. Some evidence suggests differential mental health patterns by academic major, influenced by curricular demands, creativity expectations, and career ambiguity.

Understanding these differences is essential for designing supportive structures that promote well-being across diverse educational programs.

Mental Health in College Students: General Trends

Multiple large-scale studies have documented that a significant proportion of college students experience mental health problems.

- Surveys show high rates of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among undergraduate populations globally. For example, an Indian multi-city study reported nearly 70% of students experiencing moderate to severe anxiety and about 60% showing signs of depression, with emotional distress reported by over 70% of respondents.
- Research in international contexts (e.g., Healthy Minds Study) found that prevalence of any mental health concern among undergraduates was around 33.9%, but this varied by academic major.

The rising prevalence of mental health symptoms signals an urgent need for holistic campus mental health strategies.

Academic Stream and Mental Health: Arts vs Science

1. Arts Students

Studies and surveys point toward a trend where students in arts, design, and humanities fields report higher prevalence of mental health problems compared to other majors.

- Research from the *Healthy Minds Study* indicated that arts and design majors had one of the highest point prevalences of mental health problems among undergraduates, with over 45% reporting symptoms, compared to an average rate of 33.9% across all majors.



Possible Reasons:

- **Creative Pressure:** Arts education emphasizes originality, subjective performance assessment, and self-expression, which can heighten self-criticism and psychological vulnerability.
- **Employment Uncertainty:** Arts streams may present ambiguous career pathways, leading to anxiety about future stability.
- **Isolation in Process:** Solo creative work and irregular schedules may reduce peer social support.

2. Science Students

Science disciplines (e.g., biology, chemistry, physics, engineering) are known for rigorous academic demands which can foster distinct and intense stress:

- Science students often endure heavy coursework, frequent testing, and performance competition, all of which are linked to stress and burnout.
- Though specific comparative prevalence data vary, research suggests that the **intensity of academic demands** contributes significantly to stress regardless of observed differences with arts students.

Stress-related Factors:

- **Workload Intensity:** Dense conceptual content and frequent assessments can lead to chronic stress.
- **High Stakes Exams:** Competitive examinations (especially in STEM fields) can contribute to anxiety and reduced psychological well-being.
- **Performance Expectations:** Pressure from self and family regarding grades and future careers can exacerbate distress.

Comparative Research Findings

Mixed Evidence on Difference by Discipline

Several comparative studies have explored mental health differences across academic streams:

- A study comparing mental health among arts, commerce, and science students in India reported *no significant difference* among streams for several mental health dimensions such as emotional stability, overall adjustment, autonomy, and self-concept.
- Another research synthesis found significant differences involving academic stream, with arts students scoring higher on measured mental health indices compared to



science and commerce students, suggesting that academic stream *does* play a role in shaping well-being outcomes.

- Research on academic stress in senior secondary students showed relations among academic pressure, socio-economic background, and mental health, hinting that context and support systems may mediate disciplinary stress.

Thus, while some studies show stream-related differences, others find no significant differences — indicating that mental health is influenced by additional contextual variables such as gender, socio-economic status, and institutional support, rather than academic stream alone.

Key Stressors Among Arts and Science Students

Academic Workload and Performance Pressure

Science students may experience:

- Heavy reading and lab schedules.
- High performance expectations.
- Competitive peer environment.

Arts students face:

- Subjectivity in evaluation.
- Creative execution deadlines.
- Unstructured study patterns.

Career and Future Uncertainty

Arts programs often lead to broader career possibilities without strict pipelines, which can increase uncertainty and anxiety. Science students, while often funnelled into clearer technical careers, face intense competition for postgraduate entrances, scholarships, and job placements.

Social Support and Peer Networks

Social support systems — friends, mentors, and group activities — can buffer stress. Differences in cohort culture (e.g., collaborative projects in arts vs. lab groups in science) may influence the nature and quality of social networks.

Gender and Cultural Influences

Gender differences also intersect with academic stress: national studies show female students may report higher distress and lower well-being compared to male students.



Cultural factors — such as family expectations, stigma, and collectivist versus individualist values — further modulate students' experiences.

Mental Health Outcomes: Anxiety, Depression, Stress

Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms are widely reported among college students in both arts and science streams. Factors contributing include performance pressure, fear of failure, and future uncertainties.

Depression

Depressive symptoms — including persistent sadness and low motivation — are common and can be worsened by academic over-commitment and lack of social support.

Stress and Burnout

Stress — particularly chronic stress — can lead to physical symptoms, sleep disturbances, and academic disengagement. Science students may report stress linked to heavy workload, while arts students may experience stress tied to creative expectations and self-judgment.

Coping Strategies and Help-Seeking Behavior

Prevalence of mental health problems does not always align with help-seeking. Students in both streams often hesitate to seek support due to stigma or lack of awareness.

Common coping mechanisms include:

- Peer social support
- Physical exercise
- Mindfulness and relaxation
- Professional counseling services

Institutions that integrate mental health awareness, supportive counseling, and destigmatisation initiatives can improve well-being outcomes across disciplines.

Interventions and Institutional Strategies

- 1. Counseling and Support Services** Colleges should provide accessible, confidential counseling, to address anxiety, depression, and academic stress.
- 2. Peer Support Networks** Peer mentoring and support groups can enhance connectedness and reduce isolation.



3. Faculty Training Training faculty to recognize stress signals and refer students to resources is valuable. For instance, initiatives to train college faculty to handle student stress are being piloted in Tamil Nadu, India, highlighting early support models.

4. Stress Management Programs Workshops on time management, resilience, and coping strategies can empower students.

Conclusion

Mental health issues — including anxiety, depression, and stress — are widespread among college students across academic streams. While differences in mental health by discipline (arts vs science) are observed in some research, findings are mixed, suggesting that stream alone is not the sole determinant. A constellation of factors including academic workload, career pressures, social support, gender, and cultural context shape students' psychological well-being.

Educational institutions must adopt holistic strategies, tailoring mental health services and supportive environments to the needs of diverse student populations. Understanding the unique challenges faced by arts and science students will help educators and policymakers craft effective interventions to foster mental wellbeing and academic success.

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