

The role of academic libraries in supporting students' mental health in Nigeria: A review of literature

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Abstract

All over the world, the pursuit of education is accompanied by challenges that can take a toll on the mental health of students, the demanding curriculum, course loads, economic problem, high expectations and societal pressures can lead to stress and anxiety. The prevalence of mental issues among students in Nigeria have caused the need for academic libraries to intervene in supporting wellness and de-stressing among students. Good health includes physical, mental and emotional well-being which are condition precedents for optimal academic and social success. The purpose of the study is to look at the support academic libraries can provide for students to fight mental health disorder and stress and to discuss library support for escaping stress emanating from academic challenges, how students can manage stress through library resources and services and the role library has played in supporting students' mental health. The study is based on literature review and documentary analysis on supports academic libraries have given to students in higher institutions in Nigeria. The study result from the literature reviewed showed that despite the growing recognition of mental health challenges among students, support for mental health in academic libraries remains limited. Many libraries have yet to implement comprehensive mental health initiatives in Nigeria and there is need for more structured and proactive interventions.

Keywords: Academic stress, stressor, stress management techniques, mental health support, Nigerian students, academic library,

Introduction

World Health Organisation (2003) stated that mental health is crucial to the overall well-being of mental health issues among students in higher education institutions have become a growing concern, with increasing cases of stress, anxiety, and depression affecting academic performance and overall well-being. Studies indicate that academic pressures, financial difficulties, social isolation, and lack of coping mechanisms contribute significantly to students' mental health challenges individuals, societies and countries. Today's students are facing lots of challenges from academic work, financial instability, security problems, economic problems, political instability which are daunting on their mental health. However, there are coping mechanisms and strategies to ameliorate some of the challenges. Research have

shown that academic libraries are supporting hubs for stress management.

Mental health challenges affect society as a whole, irrespective of race, age, colour or profession, it is a major phenomenon hindering global development and posing risk among adolescents who are majorly of school ages and at the stage of developing their career who form larger percentage of library users. Some of the activities at this stage are overload with course work, examination, sleep deprivation, late night studying, could lead to stress and other mental health conditions such as anxiety disorder, eating disorders, impulse control, addiction disorders, personality disorders, obsessive- compulsive disorders and post- traumatic stress among other conditions affecting academic performance of students. Mental health issues among students in higher education institutions have become a growing concern, with

increasing cases of stress, anxiety, and depression affecting academic performance and overall well-being. Studies indicate that academic pressures, financial difficulties, social isolation, and lack of coping mechanisms contribute significantly to students' mental health challenges (Brown & Taylor, 2021). Johnson (2023) stated that academic libraries have embraced the opportunity of providing support for students with mental health issues by developing wellness programmes and other initiatives through stress reduced resources, electronic materials online tools on the library website such as gratitude applications. Academic libraries serve as safe spaces where students can find solace from the pressures of academic life. The availability of mindfulness programs, relaxation zones, and mental health awareness materials helps promote emotional resilience (Brown et al., 2019). Mental health has not been a focus among academic libraries in Nigeria, Research indicates that academic libraries in Nigeria have not fully leveraged their potential to support mental health initiatives. A study by Igbinovia and Ejiroghene (2023) highlights that while library personnel in Edo State are somewhat aware of mental health issues, there is a lack of structured programs within academic libraries to address these challenges effectively. Furthermore, Alex-Nmecha and Onifade (2023) reveal that although bibliotherapy is utilized by clinical psychologists in Nigerian neuropsychiatric hospitals, Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals often lack the necessary knowledge and skills to implement such therapeutic approaches within academic libraries. This suggests a missed opportunity for libraries to contribute meaningfully to mental health support.

It is on this premise that this paper was written. The main purpose of the study is to look at the support academic libraries can provide for students to fight mental

health disorders and stress. Despite the extensive research on mental health, there was little exploration into the potential of libraries to enhance mental wellbeing of Nigerian students

Literature review

What is mental health?

The World Health Organization (2024) defined mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his ability to cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and be able to contribute to their community. Mental Health Foundation (2008) defined mental health as the way individuals think, feel and act about themselves and their life and how they cope and manages in time of adversity. Mental health is the absence of disease and a state of organism that allows full performance of body functions and full interaction with the physical and social environment. Mental health has to do with positive feeling and making one worthy of living. Paolo et al (2020) described good health as a state of wellbeing that enable individuals to cope with the normal stresses of life and function efficiently. Similarly, United Nations (2023) stated that mental health is the ability of individual to cope physically, socially, emotionally in the communities and this relates with ability to enjoy life, cope with stress and sadness and have a sense of connection with others. Sivakumar (2018) posited that mental health is the state of wellness with ability to cope with the normal stresses of life and perform activities effectively and optimally. Dogra (2009) stated that mental health is concept of good life with a sense of purpose, self-respect and quality relationship and the optimum use of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor coordination.

What is mental health disorder?

Mental, physical and social health are vital strands of life and crucial to the overall well-

being of individuals. The conditions are prevalent among young people in countries across the world.

American Psychiatric Association (2013) defined mental health disorder as conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behaviour or a combination of the three associated with distress or inability to function in daily activities with diverse range of conditions such as schizophrenia, anxiety disorder and eating disorders.

The World Health Organization (2024) defined mental health disorder as specific conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, eating disorders, impulse control, addiction disorders, personality disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and post-traumatic stress among other conditions. Smith (2020) mental illness is a condition affecting a person's mood, emotion, thinking, and can interfere with a person's ability to relate to others and function well in their daily life.

Definition of stress and stressor

Stress is a natural phenomenon and part of life which nobody can run away from. The term stress was first introduced by Hans Hugo Bruno Selye in 1936 as non-specific response of the body to any demand for change, it is a physical, mental, emotional and psychological factors that causes mental tension. He further stated that there is no way to avoid stress in life since staying alive creates and performs metabolism activities like breathing, digestive system, nervous system and freedom from these means death. (Fink 2010). According to Promise (2016) defined stress as an automatic physical, Emotional, mental response to a harmful event. The causes of stress are known as stressors which can be physical, psychological, social and emotional, stressors are described as conditions that are harmful to individual well-being coupled with Individuals' perceptions of stress depending on a situation and events.

Shahsavararu et al (2015) stated that human daily activities are full of stress and stress is inevitable same way as death and defined stress as a feeling of mental tension caused by environmental or internal sources such as feeling of sadness, psychological and emotional disorder. In students change of environment could be a source of stress. Smith (2020) reiterated that individual react to physical and mental changes, events and situation which is based on perception of such event and situation. Stress is always an impediment to academic success having adverse effect on human body from internal and external challenges resulting in anxiety, unhappiness, burnout, and pain and affect both physical, emotional and psychological well-being of individual. Frank (2023) stated that not all stress is negative and that there are two types of stress, eustress and distress. Eustress is good stress causes psychological and cognitive changes that are positive and approve for optimal levels of performance or situation which can lead to growth and development and equally manageable while distress results in negative impact. (American Psychological Association, 2023). Chong (2011) reiterated that stress may reduce the way individual function and increase vulnerability to chronic pain and affects quality of life and is detrimental to physical and mental health of individuals.

The situation that warrants stress is known as stressor. Common stressors among students include change of environment, academic pressure, examination, course loads and academic performance, economic situation of the country, financial challenge, missing meals, missing family members, studying long hours and waking up early all these are form of stressor. Rizzolo et al (2009) attributed stress to negative consequences to personal life which can lead to academic failure, poor relationship and dissatisfaction with life and it is beneficial to encourage the use of stress management techniques.

Stress management techniques

We live in a world full of threat and uncertainty, however, there are lots of coping strategies or stress management techniques for the prevention of stressors will encounter on daily basis. Varvogli and Darviri (2011) stated that life exists through the maintenance of complex dynamic equilibrium termed homeostasis constantly challenged by internal or external adverse forces termed stressors which can be physical or emotional in nature. Stress management are set of skills or mechanisms that enables one to prevent, manage, anticipate and recover from the wear and tear from perceived threat. Stress management is a spectrum of mechanism and psychotherapies to control emotional and mental stress. Stress management is the act of looking after one's lifestyles, thoughts, emotion and physical wellbeing as well as was of reducing stress through self-care, relaxation and meditation.

Some of these techniques are hereby discussed in this paper and some of them are prayer, pet therapy, mindfulness, meditation, Yoga, journal writing, gratitude, exercise, time management and dieting. According to Johnson (2023) stress management should begin with relaxation of muscles, breathing and stretching exercises, meditation, listening to music, sitting quietly and sense imagery.

Rizzolo et al (2009) mentioned yoga as a form of technique to manage stress and yoga is one of the most recognise form of exercise involving stretching of body and meditation, yoga has been found to improve mental well-being, creating a feeling of relaxation, calmness and self-confidence. Research has also shown that reading for a period of one hour can significantly reduce anxiety, improve heart rate and mood.

According to Kolko (1980) time management is a good mechanism for managing academic stress by students,

planning of daily activities, accessing of progress, analyses progress and check for mistakes, strength and weakness will measure productivity and ameliorate stress in students.

American Psychological Association reiterated that mindfulness can lead to reduced rumination, stress reduction and even less emotional reactivity. Stress management technique and has gained tremendous attention as a concept, mindfulness means living now as a moment-to moment, awareness by purposefully paying attention to the present moment. It was first introduced by Buddhism, it involves bringing an attitude of curiosity, acceptance and friendliness to what is experienced rather than habitual patterns of judgment and criticism by focusing on the present moment by engaging with sense organs. Mindfulness helps to balance emotion, thought and behaviour. The focus of mindfulness is for the control of mind rather than mind controlling you. Mindfulness are vehicle for balancing emotion.

Kolko (1980) stressed that application of stress management techniques is important and individuals undergo stress laden experiences and coping strategies include time management intervention, cognitive coping strategy and problem-solving mechanism to escape academic stress.

The role of academic libraries in supporting mental health

The Library of the Ancient Greek in the time of King Ramses 11 of Egypt was known as a house for healing soul. As far back as 1272 the Quran was prescribed reading in the Al-Mansur hospital in Cairo as medical treatment. During World War 1, the library War services stationed librarians in military hospitals where they dispensed books to patients. Samuel Crothers as far back as 1916 prescribed books to change behaviour

and ameliorate distress (Grimes et al. 2023). Bibliotherapy is one of the mechanisms to manage mental health and was first introduced in ancient Greek as a psychotherapeutic practice which the libraries have also adopted by selecting information resources such as books, electronic resources, fiction or poetry for people suffering with mental issues. It is a way of selecting materials relating to their mental conditions with the aim of alleviating these ailments.

In the modern days, Libraries of all types are contributing to the mental health of their users through their collections and services. Academic libraries are uniquely positioned to render services and support teaching, research and learning activities, they provide information resources, reference and instructional supports, reading space with opportunities for socializing and healing purposes. (Ayub et al. 2023). Academic libraries today have changed their outlook and services from physical collections by including services to students on management of mental health challenges. Students spend a great deal of time in the library, it is an ideal place for mental health support and wellness where students can interact with one another, read and meditate to improve mental health and wellbeing. According to Bladek (2021) academic libraries are important institutions in any university with many roles to play to support students' mental health and wellbeing to enhance students learning, research and productivity. Some of these roles are highlighted below:

Providing access to mental health information

Samo et al (2024) reiterated that academic libraries provide information and resources such as books, study space, technological tools, information literacy and guidance in enhancing mental health of students. The academic libraries have well nurtured

physical landscape, intellectual social environment and other design attributed to making them a comfortable haven to promote well-being of students.

One of the primary ways academic libraries support mental health is by providing access to high-quality information on mental health issues. Libraries curate resources such as books, articles, and digital content related to stress management, anxiety, depression, and mindfulness (Hendriks et al., 2019). These resources help students develop coping strategies and improve their understanding of mental health challenges. In addition, libraries facilitate access to open-access journals, databases, and institutional repositories that house research on mental health (Brewster, 2014). Through these platforms, students and faculty can stay informed about the latest findings in psychology, counseling, and psychiatry. Libraries also develop mental health research guides and collaborate with faculty to integrate mental health literacy into academic curricula (Kranich, 2021).

Providing safe and inclusive spaces

Academic libraries have been described as a safe place where students spend long hours to read which makes it a haven for promoting and fostering positive mental health and wellness with their duties of attending to students queries and providing solutions which is their core functions. Academic libraries have transformed their physical spaces to provide a conducive environment for relaxation and stress reduction. Many libraries now offer designated quiet zones, relaxation areas, and wellness rooms where students can take a break from academic stress (Harper & Mayhew, 2021). Comfortable seating, greenery, and natural lighting contribute to a soothing atmosphere that promotes mental well-being. Libraries also promote inclusivity by ensuring accessibility for

students with disabilities, including those with mental health conditions. Providing assistive technologies, sensory-friendly areas, and trained staff helps create an environment that caters to diverse student needs (Kumar & Edwards, 2020). Libraries also implement flexible policies, such as extended loan periods and reduced fines for students with mental health challenges (Matthews, 2018). Academic libraries have untapped potential to support mental health wellness of students through diverse resources, extended hours for meditation and yoga, awareness and inclusion.

Supporting academic success and stress management

Academic stress is a major contributor to mental health issues among students. Libraries play a crucial role in reducing this stress by offering academic support services such as research assistance, citation management, and time management workshops (Miller & Murillo, 2021). By helping students navigate academic challenges, libraries indirectly alleviate stress and anxiety associated with coursework.

Many academic libraries also provide extended hours during exam periods, recognizing that students may need additional time and space for studying. Some institutions incorporate wellness programs, such as therapy dog visits, mindfulness sessions, and relaxation events, to help students manage stress effectively (Smith & Pietraszewski, 2019). Libraries also organize peer-support groups where students can discuss academic and mental health challenges in a safe environment (Cunningham & Walton, 2016). According to Green (2020) Academic libraries can provide a quiet and focused environment where students can escape the noise in their surroundings, academic environment is full of activities that can distract students and affect their mental health, academic library

is a safe place for meditation, concentration, relaxation de-stressing activities such as crossword puzzles, sudoku, Legos and telehealth space to facilitate remote access to health consultation and calming music.

According to Smith (2020) Academic libraries come in contact with students of various background and they spend more time in the libraries especially for reading, research and recreation purposes.

Providing digital and virtual mental health support

Academic libraries have both physical and electronic resources various subject areas including resources on mental health which can be made accessible to students, these resources will reduce the stress of students struggling to get relevant resources for their studies and also curb information overloads which can be daunting on their mental health (Grimes, 2024). With the rise of digital learning, academic libraries have expanded their support services to include virtual mental health resources. Online guides, webinars, and digital repositories on mental health topics ensure that students can access help at any time (Nicholson, 2020). Additionally, many libraries provide links to campus counseling services, mental health hotlines, and self-help tools through their websites. Some libraries have integrated chat services where students can anonymously seek guidance on mental health resources. These digital initiatives make mental health support more accessible, particularly for students who may be hesitant to seek help in person. Libraries have also incorporated AI-driven mental health chatbots that provide students with immediate assistance and direct them to professional services when necessary (Jones & Wexler, 2023).

Provision of mental health awareness programmes

Johnson (2023) opined that academic library can organise stress -relief activities like meditation sessions, mindfulness workshops or yoga classes to help students manage stress, academic libraries can serve as a space for students to come together, share experiences and form study groups thus combating feelings of isolation, can organize talks, seminars or webinars to raise awareness about mental health issues and provide students with coping strategies and can partner or collaborate with other stakeholders most especially counseling unit of the university to provide relevant information on mental health for students.

Academic libraries play an active role in promoting mental health awareness by organizing workshops, lectures, and exhibitions on mental health topics. Collaborations with student organizations, faculty, and health professionals ensure that these programs are impactful and reach a broad audience (Lanier et al., 2022). Such initiatives help de-stigmatize mental health issues and encourage students to seek help when needed. Libraries also create mental health-themed book clubs, where students can discuss literature related to emotional resilience and coping strategies (McNicol, 2018). By fostering open conversations about mental health, libraries contribute to a culture of awareness and support within academic institutions.

Collaboration with mental health services

Academic libraries increasingly collaborate with campus counseling centers, student affairs offices, and mental health organizations to promote awareness and support. Hosting mental health awareness events, workshops, and panel discussions in library spaces fosters dialogue on mental well-being (Lanier et al., 2022). Librarians are also being trained in mental health first aid, enabling them to recognize signs of

distress and guide students toward appropriate support services (Stewart & Walker, 2021). This proactive approach strengthens the library's role as a supportive space for student well-being.

Encouraging work-life balance

Academic libraries have introduced initiatives that encourage students to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Some libraries offer leisure reading sections, movie nights, and creative spaces for art and music therapy (Okanagan Library, 2020). By providing opportunities for relaxation and recreation, libraries help students disconnect from academic stress and engage in self-care activities.

Conclusion

The issue of stress management and techniques of managing stress is not well adopted in developing countries particularly Nigeria. There are statistics, facts and action plans regarding mental health issues in developed countries which need to be emulated by stakeholders in the Africa as a continent. Academic libraries should include comfortable spaces that can be used for calmness and relaxation, mindfulness, gratitude, pet therapy, yoga and other techniques of managing stress in the academic community.

The paper recommends that University administrators should invest further in physical space to accommodate facilities for mental health practice. Academic libraries should organise awareness programme to promote students' mental health and well-being. Academic libraries should include resources on mental health in their collections and there should be a designated library staff who have acquired training and become knowledgeable in mental health practice.

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