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Original Article

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Loneliness, Meaning in Life and Depressive Symptoms among First Year Engineering Students

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Abstract

Aim: To assess the relationship between loneliness, meaning in life and depressive symptoms among first year engineering students.

Method: The study adapted a descriptive and co-relational research design. Data was collected from a sample of 205 first year engineering students from colleges in Kozhikode, using convenient sampling method. The scales used were UCLA Loneliness Scale (version 3), Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and DASS-21.

Results: An inverse relationship exists between loneliness and meaning in life (r= -0.369, p< 0.01), and between meaning in life and depressive symptoms (r= -0.438, p< 0.01). A positive correlation was found between loneliness and depressive symptoms (r= 0.577, p<0.01). The regression coefficient of loneliness on meaning in life was 0.130, of meaning in life on depressive symptoms was 0.192, and of loneliness on depressive symptoms was 0.333. **Conclusion:** Loneliness explained a greater variance in depressive symptoms. Meaning in life was found to have a greater effect on depressive symptoms of non-depressed population than of the depressed population.

Key words: Loneliness, Meaning in Life and Depressive symptoms

Background

Depression as a common illness is increasing among people of all ages, genders, socioeconomic groups and religions in India and all over the world. A wide range of social, economic, cultural and psychosocial factors, especially changing life styles with lack of support systems in an environment of globalization, urbanization and migration are often linked with depression in young and middle-aged groups (World Health Organisation, 2017). Depression and suicide rates have been on a rise among students in India. Sources around the country have repeatedly reported suicides among students especially in engineering colleges. Engineering is a demanding course, and the high academic pressure along with the expectations of parents and the society to perform is a constant source of stress to the students. Students often fail to communicate effectively in such environment and as a result may experience loneliness, which may consequently lead to experiencing depressive symptoms. Lack of social support is an important risk factor for depression. When people feel that the quality and quantity of their social relationships are not met, they experience loneliness (Matthews, et al., 2015).

Loneliness corresponds to a discrepancy between an individual's preferred and actual social relations (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), and leads to the negative experience of feeling alone and distress of feeling socially isolated even when among family and friends (Weiss, 1973). The first year of college brings about a lot of changes in a student's life. The student separating from the family and existing peer group enters a new place where they are flooded with responsibilities and a sudden lack of social relations. The sudden reduction of social networks upon transitioning to college may contribute to loneliness, causing students to be more susceptible to disorders such as depression because their social relationships feel threatened (Dill & Anderson, 1999).

Another variable that has associations with both symptoms of depression and loneliness is the construct of meaning in life. Humans often seek to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Increased depressive symptoms have been linked with low meaning in life. The higher one's meaning in life, the less depressive symptoms they exhibit (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012). Also, people experience more meaning when they were involved in social activities which in turn were related to

decrease in depressive symptomatology. As the number of positive social experiences increases, so does meaning in life. Meaning in Life is an important construct to consider

Methodology

The study used descriptive research design. Population of the study were all the first year students of engineering colleges in Kozhikode district of Kerala.

Inclusion Criteria

1. First year engineering students.

2. Students in the age group of 17-19.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Students who are undergoing any

   psychological treatment or counselling.

Sampling: The study used a convenient sampling method. The sample size was 205.

Tools:

1. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): The scale was developed by Russell, Peplau and Ferguson and was revised in 1986. The scale has a high internal consistency having a coefficient alpha of 0.96. The scale has shown good psychometric properties in

because it can affect overall well-being and has been linked to both loneliness and depressive symptoms.

Studies done in different cultures (Durak & Senol-Durak, 2010; Shettar, Karkal, Kakunje, Mendonsa, & Chandran, 2017).

2. DASS-21: Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 items was developed by Lovibond, S.H. & Lovibond, P.F. (1995). For the present study only questions related to depression was used. The internal consistency of the scale sample was: dep-α=.87. The tool has been validated in India (Singh, Junnarkar, & Sharma, 2015).

3. Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Developed by Steger et al., (2006), the MLQ is a 10-item self-report questionnaire. The reliability of the scale was found to be 0.92. The tool has been used in Indian studies and is validated for use in India (Deb, Thomas, Bose, & Aswathi, 2019; Singh, Junnarkar, Jaswal, & Kaur, 2016) Collected data were

Results

The mean age of the participants was 18.79 and the age ranged from 17-20. The sample constituted of 55.1% males and 44.9% females. 60% of participants resided in their homes while the rest 40% in hostel.

Table 1 (Appendix) shows that loneliness does not differ among male and female students. However meaning in life was significantly higher among males (Mean=49.11, SD= 8.486) than females (Mean= 46.07, SD= 9.488) with a t-value of 0.198. This finding of the study indicates male students reporting higher meaning in life than female students. Also, the presence of depressive symptoms was significantly higher in females (Mean= 16.74, SD= 9.556) than in males (Mean= 13.04, SD= 8.969) obtaining a t-value of 2.420, indicating that female students experience higher levels of depressive symptoms than male students.

Significant correlation can be seen between the three variables from Table 2 (Appendix). Loneliness has a negative correlation with Meaning in Life (r= -0.361, $p<0.01$). Meaning in Life has an inverse relationship with Depressive Symptoms (r= -0.438, $p<0.01$). Also, loneliness has a positive relationship with depressive symptoms (r=0.577, $p<0.01$). This indicates that the more loneliness people experience higher is their experience of depressive symptoms.

Table 3 (Appendix) shows the influence of loneliness on meaning in life (R^2= 0.130, $p<0.01$) and indicates that loneliness is responsible for 13% of change in meaning in life among students. Meaning in life also has an influence on depressive symptoms (R^2= 0.192, $p<0.01$) and implies that meaning in life explains 19.2% of change in depressive symptoms. Further loneliness had a positive influence on depressive symptoms (R^2=0.333, $p<0.01$). Loneliness thus explains a 33.3% of variance in depressive

symptoms. Together these findings reveal that the experience loneliness has a higher impact on depressive symptoms than does lack of meaning in life.

Table 4 (Appendix) shows the influence of meaning in life on depressive symptoms of two groups – depressed and non-depressed group. For the non-depressed group, meaning in life influenced depressive symptoms with the R^2 value of 0.231, and for the depressed group the R^2 value was 0.174. This result implies that meaning in life played a greater role in leading to depressive symptoms in the non-depressed group than in the depressed group. The influence of meaning in life on depressive symptoms is much less in depressed population. This may be because in the depressed population there are other factors which play a more important role in causing depression. Factors like heredity, dysfunctional family environment, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem etc were found to be important risk factors for depressive symptoms in previous studies.

Suggestions

Results of the study confirm that loneliness is an important contributing factor to depressive symptoms. Since more and more people are experiencing loneliness in today's fast moving world, it is important for people to connect to each other and reduce the feelings of loneliness. Making efforts to deal with loneliness would help to reduce the chances of depression.

Also, the finding that meaning in life plays more important role on depressive symptoms among non-depressed population implies that, lack of meaning in life is an important contributing factor for them. So, having a sense of purpose and meaning in life is essential for people. Parents, education system, and the society must focus on making students find their own meaning in life, something to look forward to, in

order that they are not easily prone to depressive symptoms in the future.

It would be of interest to further study the relationship between meaning in life and loneliness to better understand why loneliness is a larger predictor of depression. Perhaps one can feel life has meaning but lack relationships with people to share that meaning with, which could lead to loneliness and subsequent depressive symptoms.

Conclusion

Male students have higher meaning in life than female students, and females experience higher depressive symptoms than male students. Loneliness is inversely related to meaning in life; and positively related to depressive symptoms. Meaning in life is inversely related to depressive symptoms. Loneliness was found to explain greater variance than meaning in life in depressive symptoms. Meaning in life

caused greater variance in depressive symptoms among the non-depressed population than the depressed population.

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Appendix

Table1. t-test for gender differences in Loneliness, Meaning in Life and Depressive Symptoms

		Mean	SD	p-value	t-value
Loneliness	Male	44.58	9.468	0.843	2.849
	Female	44.32	9.218		
Meaning in Life	Male	49.11	8.486	0.016	0.198**
	Female	46.07	9.488		
Depressive symptoms	Male	13.04	8.969	0.005	2.420**
	Female	16.74	9.556		

*-p< 0.05　　**-p< 0.01

Table2. Correlations between Loneliness, Meaning in Life and Depressive Symptoms

	Loneliness	Meaning in life	Depressive symptoms
Loneliness	1		
Meaning in life	-0.361**	1	
Depressive symptoms	0.577**	-0.438**	1

**-p< 0.01

Table3. Regression analysis of Loneliness, Meaning in Life and Depressive Symptoms

Independent variable	Dependent variable	β	t	Model summary
Loneliness	Meaning in life	-0.350	5.513	F = 30.389 P < 0.000 R^2 = 0.130
Meaning in life	Depressive symptoms	-0.227	6.936	F= 48.107 P < 0.000 R^2 = 0.192
Loneliness	Depressive symptoms	-0.290	10.066	F = 101.316 P < 0.000 R^2=0.333

Table4. Regression analysis of Meaning in Life on Depressive symptoms grouped into non-depressed and depressed groups

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	β	t	Model Summary
Meaning in Life	Depressive symptoms (non-depressed)	-0.566	4.320	F= 18.661 p<0.000 R^2= 0.231
Meaning in Life	Depressive symptoms (depressed)	-0.413	5.416	F=29.337 p<0.000 R^2= 0.174