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## Mental Health and Higher Education

Menelik Desta, M.D<sup>†</sup>

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It is known that one of the causes of student failures to complete studies in institutions of higher education is mental or emotional disorder. The term 'mental disorders' is a general name for any of the hundreds of clinical conditions that give rise to unstable or abnormal psychological, personal, social or occupational functioning of an individual. Student failures, thus, caused contribute to wastage of useful human resources and loss of the country's already meagre economy. It is sad that some such problems of students disorders occur due to ignorance about the existence of or lack of access to effective services. This was discovered during interviews with students referred to the unit of Special Professional Support for University students (SPSUS).

This is a multidisciplinary unit composed of individuals with psychiatric and psychological backgrounds. It was established two years ago within the premises of IER with the objective of reducing the wastage resulting from failures of students with mental disorders. The maxim was, and still is, that the

majority of mental disturbances could be managed by providing appropriate therapeutic and prophylactic counselling services. So far, many students referred from the clinics of the Faculties have been observed for diagnoses ranging from mild to severe mental disorders.

It is interesting to note that some students had been suffering from serious mental illness for years before they were referred for appropriate help for the first time. This is partly due to the negative attitude of the public towards existing services on the one hand and lack of awareness of the existence of such services on the other.

Knowledge and experience are the bases for attitude formation. In order for individuals to develop positive attitude towards modern mental health services, they need either to be given helpful, curative and preventive services and/or to be repeatedly informed about

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<sup>†</sup>The author is a psychiatrist at Amanuel Hospital and is affiliated with IER SPSUS

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such treatments. The SPSUS has travelled some distance giving services and could boast of considerable gain in developing positive attitude among students who now, unlike in earlier days, do come and talk freely about their private problems. Counselling is given to those coming to the unit and a handout is also being prepared to be distributed to University students. This will enable them to understand the commonest emotional problems and to take appropriate measures if and when a student finds himself or herself in some common adverse circumstances in his/her University life. Such counselling on mental health is also recommendable to the staff of the university as a whole. This will have different advantages; it will help teachers to understand their students better, to facilitate harmonious teacher-student relationships and to help their emotionally disturbed students through counselling and referral for further professional help.

Not many teachers take time to enquire about causes when they notice behavioural or performance changes in their students. On the contrary, it is customary to label students as 'bad' whenever they show such behaviours as irritability, hostility or aggression, truancy or decline in academic performance. Once the teachers label the student as 'bad', the corrective measures they often take is

punitive. Examples of such measures are insulting or ridiculing in class, suspending from class, or giving low marks. If teachers get some knowledge about why a student shows certain 'bad' behaviours, there will be less of such negative attitudes or negligent measures. Moreover, teachers might be sympathetic towards their students and help them accordingly. Besides, teachers can easily avoid anger and resentment whenever a student acts or behaves 'badly'.

Mental disorder may result mostly from excessive stress or tension. Everyone experiences this from time to time but it is only individuals who are unable to cope with it that develop mental disorder. There are different reasons for susceptibility but it is not necessary to go into the details here.

In general, when a person fails to control a stressful situation, the mental tension shows up in various forms. Some of these are so conspicuous or unusual and disruptive that they are easily noticed as abnormal behaviour or illnesses. However, in the majority of cases, the way stress shows up is not as obvious as illness. Instead, the individual with such 'milder' behavioural changes may appear to an observer as if acting out of nastiness, laziness or incompetence. Often times, such milder signs are also interpreted by

both the sufferer and the observer as signs of physical illness rather than of psychological problems.

The purpose of this article is to increase awareness in the university community about the major features or signs of the 'milder' but very incapacitating mental or psychological illnesses. These are anxiety and depression. Both can, in most cases, be effectively controlled with appropriate psychological and drug treatment.

It should be noted that every human being can and does have any of the signs or symptoms below as a reaction to adverse circumstances in life. In situations of normal reactions, the signs or symptoms are short lived and do not hence lead to instability or abnormality in

the individual's psychological, social or occupational relationships.

**ANXIETY:** A person is said to have anxiety when he is alarmed in his mind. The anxious person is fearful in his mind or he is apprehensive. The level of anxiety varies from person to person or from time to time in the same person.

#### Signs and symptoms of anxiety

- Feeling fearful as if something might happen to one;
- \* Inability to concentrate;

- \* Being easily startled such as when someone knocks at the door;
- \* Feelings of fainting;
- Having poor sleep;
- Palpitations - feeling one's own heart beating forcefully;
- Irritability or having a feeling of anger or feeling wounded by something/or someone;
- \* Tensions (inability to relax) in the muscles such as around the neck, arms, legs or forehead;
- \* Shaking of hands;
- \* Sweating;
- Discomfort, a feeling of tense in the stomach;
- Dizziness;
- Being easily tired;
- \* Looking tense or frightened;

The anxious person looks around now and again as if searching for something;

- Increased frequency or urge to urinate or defecate. Sometimes there can be sudden, unexpected and intense anxiety symptoms which are very frightening to an observer. Such unexpected surges of anxiety are called panic. Some students show symptoms of anxiety

when they, for examples, ask or answer questions, attend or present seminar papers etc. Such individuals are called socio-phobic.

**DEPRESSION:** Some of us respond to stress with the condition known as depression. A person becomes or is said to be depressed when his spirits are gloomy or low. Such a person can have the following symptoms and signs:

- Feeling unhappy or being in a bad mood;
- \* Appearing miserable and depressed;
- \* Losing interest in activities which used to be pleasurable;
- Showing poor, or in rare cases too much appetite;
- lacking or having excess sleep;
- \* Losing self-confidence;
- \* Being slow in thinking and carrying out activities;
- Feeling of hopelessness;
- \* Difficulty in making decisions;
- \* Poor self-care;
- Looking down at one self;
- \* Loneliness or dislike to be with others;

- \* Irritability, easily provoked or querulous aggression;
- \* restlessness;

When depression is severe, these symptoms become intense. The person fails to do usual activities because of lack of energy. Getting out of bed in the morning becomes very difficult. There is loss of interest in life and some such people may even have ideas of killing themselves.

Other Signs of Mental Disorders

- Loneliness - A person with abnormal loneliness sits away from others in dining halls, in class and libraries.

The best way of relieving stress is by identifying its cause(s). This may not be simple for a lot of people. To some, it is totally impossible to guess. Others may think they have identified the cause when in reality they haven't. Some identify the cause(s) but take inappropriate measures as solutions. In all cases, the individual continues to suffer mentally, and deteriorate in his/her activities. It is for such people that professional help should be sought for.

Besides helping emotionally disturbed students, the university staff can also contribute to the prevention of the development of such

emotional problems among students, by improving, for examples, their academic performance. One of the causes of stress in the university is difficulty in one's study. Many students complain of problems in finding references, preparing formats, selecting reading material...etc. The university traditionally assigns advisers to help in such matters. Nevertheless, it appears that not all advisers discharge their responsibilities as well as expected. Some advisers refuse to cooperate when requested others respond with outright aggression, while some are not available at all.

For the country's investment in higher education to be fruitful and for the teachers' efforts of training to be successful, such negative attitudes have to be avoided. The university or the departments should have to review the criteria for

advisement and the number of students that should be assigned to an adviser. The unit of SPSUS will continue to indicate further areas of intervention to promote the psychosocial well-being of university students and suggest to teachers to closely observe their students for preventive measures.

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