

# Measuring Stress Levels Among Social Work Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

Uncontrolled stress can affect university students' learning performance, health, and well-being. Therefore, this research aimed to identify the level of stress social work students face during the COVID-19 pandemic. The quantitative research was conducted by using surveys through Google Form. A total of 127 social work students studying at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM, were selected as respondents. The data were analyzed using descriptive tests. The research results found that the majority of social work students showed moderate levels of stress (88%) to low levels (7.9%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 3.9% of students showed high-stress levels and needed intervention to reduce stress. The research results have implications for the university administration, especially the management of social work programs to provide support programs that reduce stress and improve a healthy lifestyle among students.

**Keywords:** Students, Social Work, Stress, Pandemic, COVID-19

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has hit the world has led to the temporary closure of public and private universities to prevent university residents, including students, from being infected with the COVID-19 virus. This temporary closure has brought innovations in the implementation of teaching and learning at home (PdPR) (Kecojevic et al., 2020). Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Malaysian government decided to implement the Movement Control Order (PKP) starting in March 2020 (Salleh et al., 2021). During the pandemic period, most students faced challenges such as studying alone without the assistance of lecturers in a face-to-face session and the absence of classmates (Bu et al., 2020). Their movement is also limited to sitting in front of the computer from morning to evening for learning sessions. This condition affects their learning and is stressful due to a sense of 'restriction', loneliness, and inability to move freely (Rose, 2020). The sudden changes following the COVID-19 outbreak require students to adapt, impacting their health and learning performance. The impact of a

pandemic includes psychological, emotional, feelings, mental and invite factors of anxiety among most students (Jafar et al., 2020).

Stress is frequently discussed in the academic environment, students, and the surrounding community (Agolla & Ongori, 2009; Michaela et al., 2020), especially when the COVID-19 epidemic spread globally. Several studies have found that stress levels, anxiety, loneliness and suicidal thoughts are the most serious things most societies face when the COVID-19 pandemic hits the world (Elmier et al., 2020; Chandratre, 2020; Fu et al., 2021). A study conducted by Ruba (2020) before the COVID-19 pandemic found that among the factors that stressed students were due to aspects related to exams, assignments, teaching time, home environment and learning, use of applications to attend lectures and exams online. Ruba (2020) deduced that stress occurs when an individual is worried about something and at the same time affects their physical and mental health. Excessive psychological stress can affect personal well-being and increase the risk of disease (Katja et al., 2010), and pose a significant threat to mental health (Awang, 2016). Concerns about the future due to possible delays in graduation due to the COVID-19 outbreak have also been among the factors students feel depressed (Woon et al., 2021; Ramli & Dawood, 2020). In addition, other factors put pressure on students, such as disruption to obtain stable internet access, limited use of internet quotas, financial constraints to provide suitable devices for PDP and burdensome and unattractive PDP implementation methods. Coupled with external environmental factors such as the atmosphere in the home that is not conducive for concentrating on PDP, completing increasing tasks and lack of support from family members throughout attending lectures in PDP add more stress among students (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020).

Josephine et al (2004) conducted a study related to the psychological stress faced by medical students during the SARS virus spread around 2003. Their study focused on comparing 215 medical students consisting of 159 students from the medical field, 56 students from the nursing field and 68 students in medicine. The study results found that medical and non - medical students experienced high stress during the SARS virus spread at that time. On the other hand, the results of a comparative study between doctoral students, nursing and non-medical students found that among the three students, doctoral students have lower levels of stress because they have higher knowledge in the handling and management of the SARS virus compared to students in nursing and non -medical students. Since the aspect of stress is important because it affects the well-being, performance, and excellence of students, this research was conducted to identify the level of stress among social work students studying at UKM. Measuring and identifying aspects of stress among social work students is an important aspect because social work students are trained and given skills professionally to help other individuals, families, and the surrounding community function well and live a more peaceful life (Morales and Sheafor, 1998).

### **Research Methodology**

**Research Design:** This study uses a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The survey is done online using Google Forms. Quantitative research is a study that uses numerical data throughout the research process, starting with data collection, data interpretation and presentation of research findings (Arikunto, 2006).

**Population, Sample, Study Location:** In this research, the population refers to 127 students following a social work program at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. The instruments used in this study are as follows:

**Study Instrument:** Stress Scale: contains 20 questions and was constructed by (Zuri, 2009). The type of items used in this instrument is in the form of a four (4) Likert scale where the choices are arranged according to the following suitability, namely (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree and (4) Strongly agree. The reliability value for this scale is strong at 0.77.

**Data Analysis:** The data were analyzed using the "Statistical Package for the Social Science for Windows" (SPSS for Windows). Descriptive analysis such as frequency was used for the research objective to measure the level of stress among social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

### Research Findings and Discussions

Studies related to the stress faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic are important aspects that need to be identified to enable programs and interventions as well as action strategies to be mobilized to help manage the stress faced by social work students. The results of a study conducted on 127 students found that the majority (88.9%) of those involved in this research showed moderate to low levels of stress (7.9 per cent). Only 3.9 per cent of the students involved in this study were identified as experiencing high stress and should be given serious attention by the faculty management.

Table 1

*Distribution of Stress Levels among Social Work Students, UKM*

Levels	N=127	Percentage (%)
Low	10	7.9
Moderate	112	88.2
High	5	3.9
TOTAL	127	100

Overall, this research demonstrates that most social work students, UKM, can still control the stress faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there are some aspects that need to be given attention by stakeholders, especially the faculty management. This is due to the research findings that the majority of students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that it is difficult for them to make decisions (58.2%), can be better in the activities they engaged themselves in but do not have the opportunity to do so (61.4%) and feel worried about academic achievement for fear of not able to maintain excellent performance as previously (66.9%). These concerns have contributed to stress among students during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Table 2

*Distribution of Stress Percentage among Social Work Students, UKM*

No	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Min
		P(%)	P(%)	P(%)	P(%)	
1.	Not happy with my accomplishments and want more than what I have already achieved	17.3	40.9	32.3	9.4	2.34
2.	Difficult to decide	5.5	36.2	54.3	3.9	2.57
3.	Could have improved in the activities I was involved in but did not get the chance	4.7	33.9	50.4	11	2.68
4.	Always worried about academic achievement for fear of not being able to continue to excel as before	6.3	28.8	47.2	19.7	2.80
5.	Stressed out studying at this university	15.0	58.3	21.3	5.5	2.17
6.	Rarely pay attention to the stressful things in my life	8.7	44.9	42.5	3.9	2.42
7.	Always feel scared and worried without reason	18.9	44.1	33.1	3.9	2.22
8.	Want the best but not being able to do so	6.3	46.5	39.4	7.9	2.49
9.	Lack of confidence in self abilities	12.6	39.4	38.6	9.4	2.45
10.	A lot of things for me to do at one time	7.9	22	53.5	16.5	2.79
11.	Always thinking about the future and various things	4.7	18.9	53.5	22.8	2.94
12.	Sad when faced with a situation that can be stressful	5.5	21.3	61.4	11.8	2.80
13.	Often cried thinking about my fate and family	11.8	48.8	31.5	7.9	2.35
14.	The activities at this university are very tiring for me	11.8	48.0	33.9	6.3	2.35
15.	My parents have high hopes and I am worried about not meeting their expectations	13.4	42.5	32.3	11.8	2.43

16.	Stressed out studying at this university, due to constant reminders from lecturers to maintain performance	22.0	54.3	18.9	4.7	2.06
17.	The learning schedule at the university is too packed and tiring	12.6	49.6	30.7	7.1	2.32
18.	Do not like to be labelled as a smart student since I am just the same as everyone else	8.7	16.5	57.5	17.3	2.83
19.	Wish to rebel when dissatisfaction arises	14.2	45.7	32.3	7.9	2.34
20.	Able to deal with stress and problems quickly	5.5	33.1	56.7	4.7	2.61

The research findings also found that stress among social work students was at a controlled level. The research found that a total of 58.2% of students were happy with their achievements, could be better in the activities they were involved in (61.4%), were less stressed studying at university (73.3%), did not feel afraid and worried (63%) and wanted the best and able to do so (52.8%). Hence, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country, most social work students were found to still have confidence in their abilities (52%), can do many things at one time (70%), do not consider the learning schedule at the university is tight (59.6%) and do not wish to rebel when dissatisfaction arises. This level of controlled stress is seen to positively impact personal well-being among social work students despite being in a challenging situation in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, Hena et al (2020) found that healthy lifestyle practices and positive thinking can improve physical well-being and reduce stress and anxiety among students. At the same time, Macam et al (1990) and Sinha (2014) stated that managing and organizing learning sessions and assignments could help students be calmer and cope with life as students better.

### Conclusion

Overall, the research found that the majority of social work students showed moderate to low levels of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the country and around the world. The findings of this study give the impression that the level of stress of social work students is still at a controlled level. Only 3.9% of students showed high stress and needed intervention. The study results have implications for the university, especially the administration of social work-study programs to plan support programs that can reduce stress and improve a healthy lifestyle among students. Programs such as stress management, healthy mind programs, nutritional awareness, and self-therapy can be implemented by the program management to give students enthusiasm and motivation to stay healthy. Mentor-mentee programs among lecturers and students also need to be strengthened to help build morale, motivation, increase self-confidence and provide social support to students to reduce the stress they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty management is also advised to provide guidance and counselling services to help deal with stress among students and promote a healthy lifestyle. Good health can make students excel academically and from the aspects of personality and identity.

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