



## **Depression, Disability and Student Well-being: A Conceptual Exploration**

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**Abstract-** This paper looks at how depression and disability come together in the lives of students, and tries to understand the heavy and often overlooked burden carried by this group. Students with disabilities face all kinds of barriers such as physical, mental, social, institutional, and even technological. These walls do not just make life harder; they also push them toward depression. And once depression sets in, it starts eating away at their confidence, their grades, their friendships, and their sense of wellbeing. It becomes a loop that is hard to break; one that often ends in dropping out and shutting the door on many future opportunities. The paper argues that we need to step back and look at the whole picture. Quick fixes will not work. What we need is real inclusion; campuses that are truly accessible, people who are genuinely aware, mental health support that is actually available, and strong partnerships between teachers, policymakers, and the community. When we get this right, students with disabilities are not just surviving school; they are finding their footing, growing, and contributing. And when that happens, the whole campus becomes a better place for everyone.

**Keywords-** Depression, Disability, Students, Wellbeing, Inclusive Education.

### **I. Introduction**

Depression is a common mental health issue that deeply affects students in schools and colleges (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013). According to the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment, around 30% of college students reported feeling so depressed at some point in the past year that it became hard to carry on with their daily activities (American College Health Association, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) points out that depression is one of the leading causes of disability across the world, affecting nearly 264 million people globally (World Health Organization, 2020). Among students, depression often leads to serious problems like poor academic performance, irregular attendance, and a higher chance of dropping out (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

The reasons behind depression in students are many and layered. They include academic pressure, social difficulties, financial worries, and personal struggles (Beiter et al., 2015). Academic pressure; like the constant chase for high marks and the need to perform better than others can create intense stress and anxiety. If this is not addressed, it can slowly turn into depression (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). At the same time, social challenges such as feeling isolated or finding it hard to build close friendships can make loneliness and depression worse (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009).



Students with disabilities face their own set of struggles, which can make them even more vulnerable to depression (Salzer, 2012). These struggles include physical and cognitive barriers, facing stigma from others, and not having enough access to proper resources and support (Hong, 2015). Disabilities can be visible or hidden; they may include difficulty in moving around, sensory challenges, learning difficulties, or long-term health conditions (Heiman & Prechel, 2003).

In educational settings, physical and cognitive barriers often leave students with disabilities feeling left out and frustrated (Dowrick et al., 2005). For example, if classrooms, libraries, or labs are not easily accessible, it becomes harder for them to take part and stay engaged in learning (Hong, 2015). On top of that, they may face social stigma and unfair treatment, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and low self-worth (Hong, 2015). When peers and teachers lack awareness or understanding, the situation becomes even more difficult, making the campus feel unwelcoming (Hong, 2015).

Another major issue is the limited access to proper resources and support services (Dowrick et al., 2005). Although many colleges and universities offer disability services, the quality and reach of these services are not the same everywhere (Hadley, 2006). When students do not get the right accommodations, enough mental health support, or academic help tailored to their needs, their stress increases and their mental health suffer (Hadley, 2006).

Studying how depression and disability come together in students' lives is important for several reasons. First, it brings attention to the extra burden carried by this already vulnerable group, and shows why we need support systems designed specifically for them (Salzer, 2012). Understanding the link between disability and depression can help build services that take care of both physical and mental health needs together (Salzer, 2012). Second, research in this area can guide schools and colleges in becoming more inclusive (Hartley, 2010). When we know exactly what barriers and pressures lead to depression among students with disabilities, educators and policymakers can take meaningful steps to reduce these problems and support mental wellbeing (Hartley, 2010). This means better accessibility, more inclusive attitudes, and stronger mental health support (Hartley, 2010).

Finally, caring for the mental health of students with disabilities is essential if we want them to succeed academically and feel good about their lives (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Depression does not just harm their mental state; it also pulls them away from their studies and from building connections with others (Eisenberg et al., 2013). When educational institutions make mental health a priority for students with disabilities, they help these students perform better and move closer to reaching their full potential (Hartley, 2010).

### **Research Objectives**

- i. To add to the current body of knowledge on how depression and disability affect students in educational environments.
- ii. To pinpoint the particular difficulties that students with disabilities face, which may lead to or worsen depression.



iii. To explore how depression affects the overall wellbeing of students.

## II. Review of Related Literature

When depression and disability come together in educational settings, students face a unique and often difficult set of challenges. Understanding how these two experiences overlap is crucial if we want to build support systems that actually work and create learning environments where every student feels included.

Research has consistently shown that students with disabilities are more likely to experience depression compared to their peers without disabilities (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Eisenberg & Lipson, 2019; Salzer, 2012; Hartley, 2010). These students deal with a range of barriers as physical, cognitive, and social that add to their stress and increase the risk of depression (Salzer, 2012; Hong, 2015; Dowrick et al., 2005). Physical barriers like poor accessibility in buildings and classrooms make it hard for them to take part fully in academic life (Hong, 2015). Cognitive barriers such as trouble concentrating or processing information; make learning even more difficult (Heiman & Prechel, 2003). Then there are social barriers, including stigma and unfair treatment from both classmates and teachers, which deepen feelings of isolation and harm mental health (Salzer, 2012; Dowrick et al., 2005). When all these challenges pile up, students with disabilities often end up under intense stress and at greater risk of falling into depression (Hartley, 2010).

Hartley (2010) pointed out how academic pressure, lack of accessibility, and social isolation affect the mental health of students with disabilities. Academic stress comes from trying to meet high expectations while also needing extra time and effort to complete work because of their disability (Hartley, 2010). When educational spaces are not accessible like classrooms that are hard to enter or accommodations that fall short; it becomes even harder for these students to stay engaged and participate (Dowrick et al., 2005). Social isolation is another major factor. Many students with disabilities face exclusion or negative attitudes from others, which leaves them feeling lonely and can lead to depression (Hong, 2015; Salzer, 2012). All these pressures together don't just hurt their mental health; they also pull down their academic performance and overall sense of well-being (Hartley, 2010; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011).

The impact of social stigma and discrimination on the mental health of students with disabilities is hard to overstate (Salzer, 2012). They often have to deal with prejudice and negative assumptions from peers and even teachers. This can lead to feelings of shame, low self-worth, and deeper psychological distress (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Stigma shows up in many ways; being left out of social events, hearing hurtful comments, or noticing that teachers expect less from them. All of this eats away at their confidence and sense of belonging (Hong, 2015). Hartley (2010) found that when peers and faculty hold negative views or treat students with disabilities differently, it increases their feelings of isolation and low self-esteem.

If students with disabilities are constantly seen as less capable or treated unfairly because of their condition, they may start to withdraw socially and hesitate to ask for help (Hartley, 2010; Heiman & Prechel, 2003). This withdrawal only worsens existing



mental health struggles and can trap them in a cycle where both their mental state and academic performance keep declining (Shattuck et al., 2014). Over time, some students begin to internalize these negative messages. This self-stigmatization; believing the hurtful stereotypes about themselves; further damages their mental health and makes them disengage from academic life (Corrigan et al., 2006).

But not all students with disabilities experience these outcomes in the same way. Coping strategies and resilience factors play a huge role in protecting their mental well-being (Salzer, 2012). When students are equipped with effective ways to cope, they are better able to handle the unique pressures they face; whether academic, social, or physical (Hartley, 2010). Resilience factors like having a positive self-image, being able to solve problems, and managing emotions are key to softening the blow of these challenges (Masten, 2001). Students who learn to speak up for themselves, build strong support networks, and use smart, adaptive strategies tend to show higher levels of resilience (Hartley, 2010).

Self-advocacy skills help them clearly express what they need and push for the accommodations and support they deserve, which improves both their academic and social experiences (Test et al., 2005). Having a support system; whether friends, family, or disability services; gives them emotional backing and practical help, which can ease feelings of loneliness and stress (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). And adaptive strategies like managing time well, staying organized, and using stress-reduction techniques help them keep up with academic demands without burning out or slipping into depression (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010).

### III. Disability and Challenges for Students

Students with disabilities face many different kinds of challenges in schools and colleges, and these difficulties can seriously affect both their academic performance and their overall sense of wellbeing. These challenges are not simple or one-dimensional; they include physical, cognitive, social, institutional, and even technological barriers.

- **Physical Barriers:** - Many educational institutions still do not have proper physical facilities that are accessible to all. For students with mobility issues, this becomes a major hurdle. When classrooms, labs, or other campus buildings are not designed keeping their needs in mind, it becomes difficult for them to take part fully in both academic work and extracurricular activities (Hong, 2015; Dowrick et al., 2005). For example, a student may struggle to move around a building if there are no ramps or elevators. Even basic facilities like restrooms may not be designed in a way that is usable for them (Hong, 2015).
- **Cognitive Barriers:** - Students who have cognitive disabilities such as learning disabilities or ADHD; face their own set of difficulties. These include trouble processing information, staying focused, and managing time effectively (Heiman & Precel, 2003). To do well academically, these students often need teaching methods that are tailored to their needs, along with specific accommodations like extra time during exams or access to assistive tools (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Unfortunately, many teachers are not trained well enough to



understand these needs, which makes things even harder for the students (Heiman & Preceel, 2003).

- **Social Barriers:** - Social stigma and discrimination are very real problems that students with disabilities face regularly. Negative attitudes and wrong ideas about disability often lead to them being left out or isolated (Salzer, 2012). Both classmates and teachers may carry biases, which can result in lower expectations or unfair treatment. This kind of behaviour damages the student's confidence and kills their motivation to do well (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Many students also hesitate to talk about their disability or ask for help because they are afraid of being judged or labelled (Hartley, 2010; Shattuck et al., 2014).
- **Institutional Barriers:** - A large number of educational institutions do not have proper policies or support systems in place to truly help students with disabilities. Even when colleges have a disability services office, the quality and reach of these services are not consistent (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). When accommodations are not enough, mental health support is weak, and academic help is not personalised, students end up dealing with more stress and mental health struggles (Dowrick et al., 2005). On top of that, complicated paperwork and difficult procedures to get approved for accommodations often discourage students from even trying to access the support they are entitled to (Hong, 2015).
- **Technological Barriers:** - The digital divide is another major issue. Many students with disabilities do not have proper access to assistive technologies or adaptive software that could help them complete their work or participate in online classes (Fichten et al., 2009). Even when such tools exist, poorly designed digital content and learning platforms that do not follow accessibility guidelines can create new obstacles (Seale, 2013).

All these challenges show that we cannot take a simple or one-sided approach to supporting students with disabilities. What is needed is a comprehensive effort—one where educational institution, policymakers, and the wider community work together to create learning environments that are truly inclusive and accessible for everyone.

#### **IV. Negative Impact of Depression on Well-Being**

Depression has a deep and lasting effect on students' self-esteem and self-efficacy, slowly eating away at their sense of self-worth and their belief in what they can achieve. Students dealing with depression often carry a heavy load of self-doubt and harsh self-criticism. They constantly feel like they are not good enough, and this inner voice of failure weakens their motivation and pulls down their academic performance (Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). When self-efficacy takes a hit, it becomes even harder. Students stop believing they can reach their academic goals. They begin to shy away from challenges, and when things get tough, they give up more easily instead of pushing through (Bandura, 1997).

The toll depression takes on a student's overall mental health is profound. It shows up as a persistent sadness that does not seem to lift, constant anxiety, and a deep sense of hopelessness about the future. Depression rarely comes alone; it often brings other mental health issues along with it, like anxiety disorders or substance abuse. These problems tangle together, creating a complicated web of struggles that makes every day



functioning even more difficult (Kessler et al., 2005). Because depression is often chronic, it also disturbs basic physical rhythms; sleep becomes irregular, appetite changes, and fatigue becomes a constant companion. All of this makes it that much harder for students to keep up with their studies and manage their personal lives (APA, 2013).

When it comes to academics, the effects are clear and damaging. Depression makes it difficult to concentrate, to hold onto information, and to find any motivation to keep going. Grades drop. Absences increase. Students stop raising their hands in class or participating in discussions (Eisenberg, Golberstein, & Hunt, 2009). The cognitive side of depression; trouble with memory, difficulty making decisions; gets in the way of learning and engagement (Hysenbegasi, Hass, & Rowland, 2005).

These academic struggles are not just temporary. They can shape a student's entire future. Poor grades and low participation close doors. Opportunities for higher education and professional growth become harder to reach. Career prospects shrink, and with them, the chance of building a stable, secure life (Mojtabai et al., 2015). When depression goes untreated for too long, it raises the risk of dropping out completely. And dropping out often means lower earnings over a lifetime. This is why catching it early and offering real support matters so much (Kessler et al., 1995). Depression also reaches into a student's social world, often with cruel effect. It becomes hard to build friendships or hold onto them. Students withdraw. Feelings of worthlessness convince them that they do not belong, that others would not want them around (Hammen, 2005). This withdrawal only deepens the depression. They become more isolated, more cut off from the very people who might offer support. It becomes a vicious cycle; the more they pull away, the worse they feel, and the harder it is to break free (Joiner, 2002).

Feeling like you belong somewhere is essential for doing well in school and for feeling okay in your own skin. But depression often steals that sense of belonging. Students start to feel like outsiders in their own campus. They feel disconnected, invisible, unsupported (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Without a network of people who care, their experience of education becomes hollow. Satisfaction drops. The risk of failing or walking away entirely grows dangerously high (Tinto, 1993).

## **V. Conclusion**

Taking a close look at how depression and disability come together in the lives of students is extremely important. It helps us build schools and colleges where every student feels supported, respected, and able to do well; not just in exams, but in life. When we truly understand the layered difficulties that students with disabilities go through, we can start putting real support systems in place. These systems can help reduce the weight of depression and, at the same time, encourage the kind of strength and resilience these students already carry.

What we need is a well-rounded approach; one that puts accessibility first, spreads genuine awareness, offers strong support services, and brings people together to work as a team. When all of this comes together, we create spaces where every student, no matter what challenges they face, can grow; academically, socially, and emotionally.



This is not just about helping one group of students. When we make room for diversity and truly include everyone, the whole campus becomes richer, more alive, and more human.

The findings of this discussion make one thing very clear: we cannot afford to ignore the struggles that come from the overlap of depression and disability. These are not small or rare problems. They are real, and they affect real students every day. By bringing these issues into the light, educational institutions can start taking meaningful steps toward fairness and inclusion. It will take effort from all sides; teachers, staff, students, and people and organisations outside the campus too. But when we work together, we can bring about real change. We can make support systems stronger, make campuses more accessible, and build a culture of awareness that lasts.

At the end of the day, when we stand up for the wellbeing and success of every student, we are doing more than just following the principles of diversity and justice. We are building academic communities where every single person; regardless of ability or mental health struggle; has a real chance to grow, to contribute, and to reach their full potential.

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