

# COUNSELLING STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING DEPRESSION AND SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG STUDENTS OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

Students undergo a significant transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood, which is widely recognized as one of the most challenging periods in an individual's life. These students grapple with various issues such as adapting to school life, impulsive behaviour, feelings of isolation, cultural identity, academic performance, homesickness, financial difficulties, and depression, among other concerns. *The paper therefore highlights the concept and types of depression, concept and types of suicidal ideation, symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation, risk factors for depression and suicidal ideation, effects of depression and suicidal ideation, and counselling strategies for reducing depression and suicidal ideation. Based on the review, it was suggested that students in school should seek guidance and counselling when experiencing depression so that early intervention would prevent the problem of suicidal ideation from escalating. Counsellors and other professional personnel should become aware of the potential factors that can lead to depression and suicidal ideation in order to provide adequate counselling to students where necessary on campus.*

*Keywords: Counselling, Depression, Suicidal ideation, Students, Tertiary institutions, Nigeria*

## Introduction

University students represent a unique population undergoing a crucial transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood. This period is often highly challenging and, if not managed properly, can lead to the development of depression. Depression is a severe mental health condition characterized by feelings of sadness or anxiety. Unfortunately, this trend is on the rise and impacts students regardless of their social status, educational background, gender, or race. Depression not only affects one's physical and psychological well-being but also operates as a silent affliction among students. It manifests through various symptoms, including diminished appetite, weight loss, fatigue, mental anguish, sleep disturbances, as well as physical and emotional pain.

In Nigeria, there is a high prevalence of depressive illness among students, primarily attributed to academic stress, examination anxiety, frustration with academic challenges, financial difficulties, psychological trauma, and low academic performance (Edet, 2023). Students struggling with depression often experience fatigue, hindering their ability to carry out daily activities, mood swings affecting interpersonal relationships, and absent-mindedness that may lead to severe suicidal thoughts. Suicidal ideation stands out as a particularly concerning psychological issue, contributing to increased suicide attempts or completed suicides among students in Nigerian educational institutions. Suicidal ideation involves contemplating suicide without necessarily intending or planning to carry it out, and it can be categorised into passive and active suicidal ideation.

The indications of suicidal ideation encompass many factors like mental disorders, psychological characteristics such as impulsivity and aggression, anger, severe headaches, psychological trauma, and feelings of isolation and alienation. According to Johansson, Côté, Hogg-Johnson, and Skillgate (2021), they underscored the significance of stressful life events in an individual's life as contributors to the development of depression and thoughts of suicide. There exists a strong correlation between heightened risk factors for depression and increased rates of suicidal ideation. These connections are primarily attributed to stressful life events, but they may also be influenced or triggered by an individual's predisposition to emotional distress.

Depression significantly influences suicidal ideation by impeding normal functioning and inducing psychological distress. Both depression and thoughts of suicide represent critical challenges necessitating psychological support for a majority of students. Unfortunately, depression often remains untreated among students due to the stigma

associated with it or seeking counselling, the lack of available counselling centers, or counsellors ill-equipped to effectively address the situation. Consequently, there is a pressing need to establish suitable counselling interventions in higher education institutions to identify and assist students at risk of depression and suicidal thoughts.

### Concept of Depression

The term "depression" originates from the Latin word "depressio," meaning sinking. It refers to a mood disorder that ranges from normal, fleeting low moods in daily life to a clinical syndrome with prolonged and severe duration, exhibiting distinct signs and symptoms that deviate from normalcy (Nyenabone, 2023). Depression is characterised by a state of low mood and a reluctance to engage in activities, influencing a person's thoughts, behaviour, emotions, and overall well-being. Regarded as a mental illness, it involves disrupted sleep, irritability, feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, emptiness, and worries, among other symptomatic indicators. Key symptoms of depression encompass painful experiences, a negative emotional state, anxiety, panic attacks, delayed cognitive functions, a tendency towards isolation, demotivation, apathy, hopelessness, negative thoughts, delusions, a sense of dejection, and overall unhappiness (Animba, 2020). When individual experiences depression, there is a noticeable shift in their condition, leading to increased pessimism, self-criticism, and a tendency to attribute blame to themselves for negative occurrences.

Depression is frequently associated with other mental disorders, and statistics suggest that approximately two-thirds of Nigerian students experiencing depression also have at least one additional coexisting mental disorder, a prevalence notably higher than that observed in non-depressed students (Hovey & King, 2022). This disorder is widespread in various societies, particularly among student populations. Depression, considered a mental health issue, shows signs like ongoing sadness, loss of interest in things, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, changes in sleep or appetite, tiredness, and trouble focusing on studies (Nzoh, Nwatu, Chinaza, Anikene, & Omeje, 2024). Among university students, depression poses a significant health concern, with its prevalence notably elevated due to the challenges associated with the transition to adulthood and the increased responsibilities in this new phase of their lives.

Goldsmith, Pellmar, Kleinman, and Bunney (2022) have highlighted that depression is a prevalent condition among university students. Those students experiencing significant stress may exhibit behaviours such as missing classes, frequent crying, or withdrawing from social interactions. Depression often exhibits cyclical patterns, with recurrences observed even in students who appear to have overcome their initial depressive symptoms (Chukwuemeka, Too-chukwu, Ifedigbo & Godwin, 2021). According to Nyenabone, 2023), academic frustration is one of the most potent known risk factors for depression, with approximately seven hundred students contemplating suicide in Nigeria, and half of this population undergoing a Major Depressive Episode. Understanding the factors contributing to the development, intensity, and duration of depression and its symptoms serves as a valuable foundation for addressing depression prevalence, providing a basis for screening assessment and adequate counselling (Ogboghodo, Osadiaye & Omosun, 2023).

### Types of Depression

1. Major Depressive Disorder (MDD): Students diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder typically go through at least one major depressive episode, characterised by the presence of five or more symptoms lasting for a minimum of two weeks. In some cases, this disorder becomes recurrent, indicating that affected students may undergo episodes on a monthly, yearly, or multiple times throughout their lives. When students experience recurrent episodes of major depression, they are occasionally referred to as having unipolar depression, formerly known as "clinical depression," as their mood cycles exclusively between periods of low or depressed mood.

2. Persistent Depressive Disorder: Formerly known as dysthymia, persistent depressive disorder represents a prolonged, chronic condition characterized by a consistently low-level depressed mood. In adults, this state persists for a minimum of two years, while in children, it endures for at least one year. Although the depressed state associated with persistent depressive disorder is not as intense as that seen in major depression, it can still have a notable impact on daily functioning.

3. Postpartum Depression: Postpartum depression is characterised by feelings of sadness, indifference, fatigue, and anxiety that a woman may experience after the birth of her baby. This condition affects about one in nine women who have given birth and can impact women regardless of their age, race, or economic background.

4. Bipolar Depression: Students diagnosed with bipolar disorder undergo mood swings that encompass both depressive lows and manic highs (severe mania or mild hypomania). During the depressive lows of bipolar disorder, also known as bipolar depression, students exhibit symptoms closely resembling those experienced by individuals with unipolar depression.

5. **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):** SAD is a mood disorder exhibiting a seasonal pattern, and its precise cause remains unclear, although it is believed to be linked to variations in light exposure across different seasons. The disorder is characterized by mood disturbances, involving either periods of depression or mania that initiate and conclude during specific seasons. The most prevalent form involves depression starting in winter and alleviating with the arrival of a new season. Typically, diagnosis occurs after the individual has consistently displayed the same symptoms during winter for multiple years. Students affected by SAD depression are more prone to experiencing reduced energy levels, excessive sleep, overeating, weight gain, and cravings for carbohydrates.

6. **Psychotic Depression:** Psychotic depression occurs when a severe depressive episode is coupled with psychotic features like hallucinations and delusions. These psychotic symptoms usually center on depressive themes such as guilt, worthlessness, and thoughts of death.

## Concept of Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal ideation refers to the contemplation of suicide without the intention or plans to carry it out, serving as a significant indicator of major mental health issues. It is more prevalent than actual suicide attempts or completions and is a crucial precursor to the planning, attempting, and completion of suicide. Suicidal thoughts across all age groups, with a higher frequency observed among university students grappling with severe mood disorders. Completed suicides are about five times more common in males than in females, while the rate of suicide attempts is at least three times higher among females compared to males. Suicidal thoughts and threats are more widespread than instances of completed suicide (Animba, 2020). Risky situations and events that may trigger suicide attempts include those perceived as injurious, particularly by vulnerable individuals such as children, adolescents, and suicidal students. These individuals may interpret even minor incidents as deeply injurious, leading to heightened anxiety and disordered behaviour, as they perceive such situations as threats to their self-image, resulting in a sense of wounded personal dignity.

## Types of Suicidal Ideation

There are two types of suicidal ideation, commonly known as passive and active suicidal ideation.

(a) **Passive suicidal ideation** describes when someone thinks about suicide without having a detailed plan or an immediate urge to act on those thoughts. Students experiencing passive suicidal ideation may keep these thoughts to themselves, continuously thinking about suicide without reaching the point of making a plan. They might display behaviours like spending long periods in bed while pretending everything is fine outwardly. It's crucial to understand that students with passive suicidal ideation don't have a clear plan for ending their lives; instead, they may imagine scenarios like dying in their sleep or being in a fatal accident.

(b) **Active suicidal ideation** involves a student's thoughts progressing to a genuine intention to end their life, accompanied by concrete plans on how to execute it. Students experiencing active suicidal ideation engage in direct thoughts expressing the desire to take their own life. They actively formulate plans detailing the how, when, and where of completing suicide. Behaviours associated with active suicidal ideation may include saying goodbye, giving away some items, experiencing sudden bursts of elevated mood following periods of low mood, and actively preparing for suicide by collecting prescription medications, acquiring lethal drugs, purchasing a firearm, or researching suicide methods online.

## Signs and Symptoms of Depression and Suicidal Ideation

### (a) Depression

As outlined by the Black Dog Institute (2012), the indications and manifestations of depression encompass negative self-perception, alterations in sleep patterns, changes in appetite, overwhelming feelings of pessimism, anger, guilt, shame, desperation, worthlessness, or self-hatred, heightened irritability and anxiety, experiences of loneliness, fluctuating emotions throughout the day (worse in the morning and improving as the day progresses), difficulties in concentration, persistent fatigue, persistent feelings of guilt or low self-esteem, and a decline in academic performance.

### (b) Suicidal Ideation

The American Psychiatric Association (2023) outlines several signs and symptoms of suicidal ideation, including expressing thoughts about suicide and death, substance abuse, withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities, displaying apathy and a disregard for consequences, and engaging in self-destructive behaviours like reckless driving, promiscuity, violence, and criminal activity. Students experiencing suicidal ideation may harm themselves physically or be found with objects intended for self-harm, such as pills, knives, or ropes. Other indicators may include making final arrangements, giving away prized possessions, stockpiling medication, avoiding prescribed medication while turning to non-prescribed drugs, writing suicide notes, expressing feelings

of hopelessness, isolating themselves, feeling self-hatred, neglecting responsibilities at work, home, or school, and showing a lack of concern for personal appearance.

The signs and symptoms outlined for both depression and suicidal ideation highlight a close interrelation between the two. While it's important to note that not all students experiencing depression will necessarily engage in suicidal thoughts or actions, the connection underscores the severity of untreated depression potentially escalating to suicidal ideation. Addressing and treating depression is crucial in mitigating the risk of developing suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Early intervention and appropriate mental health support can play a vital role in preventing the progression from depression to more severe conditions involving suicidal ideation.

### Risk Factors for Depression and suicidal ideation

University students in Nigeria face various challenges such as independent living, academic stress, peer pressure, and family issues, predisposing them to depression (Nyenabone, 2023). The emotional and mental stresses associated with these challenges can lead to high-risk behaviours, including increased smoking, heightened alcohol and drug consumption, and elevated engagement in self-injurious behaviours. Risk factors associated with depression and suicidal ideation include having a mental disorder, psychological traits like impulsivity and aggression, feelings of loneliness and alienation, and affiliation with specific cultural groups. Early diagnosis and treatment of depression and suicidal ideation among Nigerian students are crucial to prevent the progression of suicide.

- Academic performance

Academic performance plays a crucial role in the university experience, and when students encounter challenges in this aspect, it can contribute to the development of depression. One of the primary expectations upon entering university is the ability to meet academic standards, and this capability is vital for ongoing success in university studies. The academic environment often imposes significant pressures on students, and a decline in academic performance can evoke feelings of frustration and pressure. If not effectively managed, these pressures and frustrations may escalate, potentially leading to an increase in depression and even suicidal ideation, as highlighted by Hawton (2015). Therefore, addressing academic challenges and providing adequate support is essential for promoting the mental well-being of university students.

- Aggression

Research indicates that students displaying heightened levels of emotionally charged, impulsive aggression are at risk for depression and suicidal ideation (Kaur & Rani, 2012). More aggressive acts have been associated with an increased risk of suicidal behaviour, specifically in terms of past planned suicide attempts, although this does not necessarily translate to higher levels of suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association, 2023). The presence of aggressive behaviour is linked to the use of more lethal means in suicide attempts (Wafula, Margaret & Muhati, 2020). However, findings across studies vary regarding the evidence of a consistent relationship between aggression and the severity of suicide attempts (The Irish Association of Suicidology, 2022). One biological link explored in connection with aggression and suicide involves the level of serotonin among suicide attempters (Mazza, 2021). Decreased serotonin levels, which are connected to aggression, are related to more aggressive suicide attempts in students experiencing depression (Thompson & Olofin, 2022).

- Mood Disorders

Mood disorders, such as major depressive disorder, are commonly associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation and depression (The Irish Association of Suicidology, 2022). The DSM-5, a diagnostic manual, specifically includes suicidal ideation as one of the criteria for diagnosing major depressive disorder (Ladi-Akinyemi, Okpue, Onigbinde, Okafor, Akodu & Odeyemi, 2023). There is a correlation between suicidal ideation and depressive symptoms, indicating a strong link between the two (Nyenabone, 2023). Furthermore, comorbid anxiety disorders significantly contribute to the risk of suicidal ideation among students diagnosed with major depression or bipolar disorder (Mazza, 2021). Students exhibiting depressive symptoms are particularly vulnerable to experiencing suicidal ideation and engaging in suicide attempts (Lazarus, 2023).

- Substance Use Disorders

Students diagnosed with alcohol use disorder, particularly those with high levels of impulsivity and depression, are more prone to developing suicidal ideation or attempting suicide (Harter, 2023). A study in Nigeria revealed that 43% of students with severe alcohol dependence had made at least one suicide attempt in their lifetime, and 63% of depressed or impulsive students lacked premeditation in their attempts (Okechukwu, 2024). The coexistence of substance use disorders with other psychological disorders is significantly associated with suicidal ideation (Wafula, Margaret & Muhati, 2020). The abuse or dependence on alcohol or cannabis among students with depressive symptoms is linked to a higher likelihood of engaging in suicidal acts (Ali, Siddiqui, Arshad,

Iqbal & Arif, 2022). Additionally, students diagnosed with substance use disorder at any point in their lives are at a heightened risk of suicidal ideation (Lazarus, 2023).

- **Psychache and Mental Pain**

Persistent negative emotions such as shame, hopelessness, and defeat can lead to a state of intense and unbearable emotional distress known as psychache or mental pain (Lazarus, 2023). Psychache may stem from traumatic experiences that deprive students of their fundamental needs (Kaur & Rani, 2012). It is suggested that many suicidal behaviours are prompted by prolonged periods of psychache and driven by the desire to end enduring emotional suffering (Nyenabone, 2023). For those struggling with psychache, suicide may appear as a viable means to escape relentless psychological pain (Lazarus, 2023). Recognizing the role of psychache in suicidal tendencies is crucial for developing targeted interventions to alleviate emotional distress and prevent severe outcomes.

## Effects of Depression and Suicidal Ideation

The effects of depression are significant, with a long-established association between depression and suicidal ideation. Depression ranks among the top 10 factors contributing to thoughts of suicide among students in the past 2 years (Thompson & Olofin, 2022). Depression can lead to an elevated risk of self-injury, dropping out or failing in college, attempting or committing suicide, and engaging in other risky behaviours (Harter, 2023). Psychiatric disorders and depressive symptoms have been linked to various negative health behaviours, including tobacco use, alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, and experiences of partner violence (physical, psychological, or sexual victimization) (Nyenabone, 2023). Understanding the wide-ranging effects of depression is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies to address mental health issues among students.

According to Thompson and Olofin (2022), depression in students can be associated with various physical diseases such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and Parkinson's disease. Additionally, emotional and mental stresses can lead students to engage in alcohol consumption and self-injurious behaviours (Lazarus, 2023). Furthermore, depression is linked to suicidal ideation (Harter, 2023), and in severe cases, it can lead to suicide (Ali, Siddiqui, Arshad, Iqbal & Arif, 2022). Harter (2023) emphasized that students experiencing depression and suicidal ideation may manifest varying symptoms and effects, with the severity, frequency, and duration of symptoms varying between individuals. Students report different experiences during depression, including feelings of loneliness, loss of appetite, increased anger and frustration, and, significantly, strong tendencies toward suicidal thoughts. The Irish Association of Suicidology (2022) noted gender differences in the manifestation of depressive symptoms, with females more likely to experience pronounced feelings of guilt, excessive sleep, overeating, and weight gain. In contrast, males may be less inclined to acknowledge feelings of self-loathing and hopelessness, instead expressing complaints about fatigue, irritability, sleep problems, and a loss of interest in work and hobbies. Understanding these diverse manifestations of depression is crucial for tailored interventions and support.

Depression and suicidal ideation can have profound consequences on the mental and physical well-being of university students, who play crucial roles in society. The impact of these conditions on academic life is significant, encompassing personal, cognitive, and emotional challenges. Notably, students experiencing depression and suicidal ideation may encounter difficulties such as a lack of concentration, impaired decision-making, and challenges in time management. These issues contribute to poor academic achievement and low exam performance, making depression and suicidal ideation serious risk factors for academic impairment. Students grappling with depression and suicidal thoughts often struggle to concentrate on their studies, find it challenging to attend classes, and face difficulties in studying. This translates into poor academic performance, failure, and a significant drop in grades. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting that depression can predispose students to various physical ailments, including diabetes, myocardial infarction, HIV infection, and an increased risk of death from suicide (Ali, Siddiqui, Arshad, Iqbal & Arif, 2022). Recognizing and addressing the impact of mental health issues on academic life is crucial for supporting students and fostering a healthy learning environment.

## Counseling strategies for Reducing Depression and Suicidal Ideation

Reducing depression and suicidal ideation among students requires a multifaceted approach that includes counselling strategies aimed at addressing their emotional or psychological distress. Here are several effective counselling strategies commonly employed by guidance counsellors in schools to support students dealing with depression and suicidal ideation:

1. **Establishing a Safe and Trusting Therapeutic Relationship**

- **Active Listening and Empathy:** Encouraging students to express their feelings openly and providing empathetic support without judgment fosters trust and a sense of safety.

- **Building Rapport:** Creating a supportive and non-threatening environment where students feel comfortable discussing their thoughts and emotions is crucial.

## **2. Psycho-education and Assessment**

- **Educating about Depression and Suicidal ideation:** Providing information about depression, its symptoms, and the risk factors associated with suicidal ideation helps students understand their feelings and thoughts.
- **Assessment and Risk Evaluation:** Conducting a thorough assessment to evaluate the severity of depression and suicidal ideation, identifying risk factors, and developing appropriate interventions based on the assessment findings.

## **3. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) Techniques**

- **Cognitive Restructuring:** Helping students identify and challenge negative thought patterns and replace them with more adaptive and realistic beliefs.
- **Behavioural Activation:** Encouraging engagement in activities that provide a sense of achievement and pleasure, thus countering feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness.

## **4. Mindfulness and Relaxation Techniques**

- **Mindfulness Practices:** Teaching mindfulness exercises and techniques to help students stay grounded in the present moment, manage overwhelming emotions, and reduce anxiety.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Guiding students through relaxation exercises to alleviate physical tension and promote relaxation.

## **5. Support Groups and Peer Counselling**

- **Group Therapy:** Providing a safe space for students to share their experiences, learn from others, and gain social support from peers facing similar challenges.
- **Peer Support Programmes:** Establishing peer counselling programmes where trained students can provide support and guidance to their peers under the supervision of qualified professionals.

## **6. Safety Planning and Crisis Intervention**

- **Developing Safety Plans:** Collaboratively creating safety plans that include coping strategies, support networks, and emergency contacts in case of a crisis.
- **Crisis Intervention:** Implementing immediate interventions and protocols for managing acute crises or situations where a student is at imminent risk of self-harm or suicide.

## **7. Collaboration with Other Professionals**

- **Collaborative Care:** Working in coordination with mental health professionals, psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, and other relevant professionals to ensure comprehensive care and support.
- **Referral to Specialised Services:** Making appropriate referrals to specialized mental health services or healthcare providers for further assessment and treatment if needed.

## **Conclusion**

Depression presents a significant hurdle, often accompanied by psychosis or anxiety, leading to feelings of despair and thoughts of suicide. Students, particularly in academic settings, are prone to depression and suicidal ideation due to various risk factors, such as difficulties in relationships, lack of social support, loneliness, high levels of aggression or impulsivity, hopelessness, severe alcohol abuse, significant medical conditions, communication of suicidal thoughts, and previous suicidal behaviour. The effects of depression and suicidal thoughts include poor academic performance, emotional distress, disturbed sleep patterns, and substance misuse, among other adverse effects. To prevent depression and suicidal thoughts, effective counselling programmes and the establishment of a supportive and non-judgmental environment are essential. Equipping students with the necessary tools and support to address mental health issues can foster a healthier and more resilient academic community.

## **Suggestions**

The paper suggests that implementing a school-sponsored programme involving periodic check-ins by staff and counsellors could be instrumental in assisting high-risk students and fostering a culture of seeking help within the university. Students are encouraged to seek adequate counselling when experiencing depression or suicidal ideation, as early intervention can prevent the escalation of these problems. Counsellors and other professional personnel on campus should be attuned to potential factors that may lead to depression and suicidal ideation among students--They should work towards providing more counselling services and alternative therapeutic interventions, especially when unusual life strains are detected, particularly in the school environment. Parents are encouraged to create time for their children, attending to their educational, social, emotional, and health and

psychological needs. Lecturers in schools are advised to maintain a friendly disposition towards students, creating an environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves rather than succumbing to depression or engaging in self-destructive acts. Furthermore, the paper suggests the establishment of specific school-based mental health services in various schools in Nigeria. These services should aim to identify and support depressed and at-risk students to prevent incidents of suicidal ideation.

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