The Silent Epidemic: A Comprehensive Analysis of Depression Among Korean College Students and Innovative Strategies for Intervention

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Abstract

This study investigates the increasing prevalence of depression among Korean college students, examining its multifaceted causes, impacts, and potential interventions. Through an extensive literature review, we analyze personal, academic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors contributing to this growing mental health crisis. Our findings reveal a significant upward trend in depression rates, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with unique manifestations including somatic symptoms and achievement-oriented depression. The research highlights the complex interplay of factors such as academic stress, career anxiety, economic pressures, and cultural expectations that contribute to the high prevalence of depression in this population. We also identify a concerning low rate of help-seeking behavior among affected students, attributed to stigma and limited access to mental health services. The study critically evaluates current support systems, revealing inadequacies in both preventive and reactive measures. In response, we propose innovative intervention strategies, including enhancing mental health literacy, implementing comprehensive stress management programs, integrating career support systems, leveraging technology for improved access to mental health resources. The research emphasizes the urgent need for preventive approaches and early intervention, suggesting policy changes at institutional and societal levels. This study aims to inform effective strategies for improving mental health support, fostering resilience, and promoting overall well-being among young adults.

1. Introduction

The college years represent a crucial developmental stage, marking the transition from adolescence to adulthood, where individuals face new challenges and stresses in various areas such as academics, career, and interpersonal relationships. During this process, many college students experience psychological difficulties, with depression emerging as one of the most common and serious issues. In the case of Korean college students, even after entering university through intense competition, they remain vulnerable to depression due to continued stress from academic achievement, job preparation, and financial burdens. Recent studies indicate that the prevalence of depression among Korean college students is showing a

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continuous upward trend. Kim and Park (2023) found that 35.7% of surveyed college students exhibited moderate or severe depressive symptoms. This figure is significantly higher than the 5-6% prevalence of depression in the general adult population, starkly illustrating the severity of depression among college students.

Depression not only leads to various negative outcomes such as decreased academic achievement, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and increased dropout rates but also carries the risk of leading to suicide in severe cases (Lee, 2022). Therefore, there is an urgent need for an in-depth understanding of depression among Korean college students and the development of effective improvement measures.

However, existing studies have mainly focused on identifying the current state of depression or analyzing related factors, limiting their ability to propose comprehensive improvement measures that consider the unique situations and cultural contexts of Korean college students. Therefore, this study aims to thoroughly analyze the current status of depression among Korean college students through literature review and, based on this, seek effective improvement measures. This is expected to contribute to promoting the mental health of college students and supporting their growth as healthy members of society.

The main purpose of this study is to comprehensively understand the state of depression among Korean college students and to propose effective improvement measures. To this end, we aim to systematically analyze existing literature and research results to explore in depth the characteristics, causes, effects of depression among Korean college students, and the current support systems. Furthermore, we aim to derive practical improvement measures at the individual, university, and societal levels based on this analysis.

To achieve these research objectives, this study will explore the following specific research questions. First, we will identify the current state of depression among Korean college students and analyze its characteristics by comparing it with the general adult population or college students in other countries. Next, we will identify the main factors causing depression among Korean college students and explore the interactions between these factors. We will also investigate the impact of depression on various aspects of Korean college students' lives, including academics, interpersonal relationships, and career preparation.

Additionally, we will examine the current status of support systems for preventing and managing depression among Korean college students and analyze their effectiveness and limitations. Finally, based on these analyses, we will propose necessary measures at the individual, university, and societal levels to effectively improve the problem of depression among Korean college students.

This study aims to provide deep insights into depression among Korean college students through literature analysis using qualitative research methodology. Through this, we expect to capture subtle contexts and complex interactions that may be overlooked in quantitative research, leading to more realistic and effective improvement measures.

The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of policies and programs for promoting the mental health of Korean college students by providing practical guidelines to university counseling centers, mental health professionals, and education policymakers. Ultimately, this is expected to contribute to improving the quality of life of college students and supporting their growth as healthy members of society.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition and Characteristics of Depression in College Students

Depression in college students shares characteristics with general depression while also exhibiting unique features that emerge from the specific developmental stage and environmental context of college life. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), depression is defined as the presence of five or more symptoms, including depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, weight changes, sleep disturbances, psychomotor agitation or retardation, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, decreased concentration, and suicidal thoughts, persisting for at least two weeks (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While college student depression meets these criteria, its manifestation and impact reflect the unique aspects of college life.

One of the primary characteristics of college student depression is difficulty in academic performance. Depression-induced concentration deficits, loss of motivation, and fatigue directly affect students' academic performance, potentially resulting in grade declines, reduced class attendance, and failure to submit assignments. Kim et al. (2022) found that more severe depressive symptoms were associated with lower academic achievement.

College student depression often involves changes in interpersonal relationships. Depression negatively impacts the crucial interpersonal aspects of college life, potentially leading to social withdrawal, increased feelings of isolation, and communication difficulties. Lee (2021) demonstrated that these interpersonal problems could lead to a weakening of academic and social support systems.

Anxiety about career and future prospects is another significant characteristic of college student depression. The college years are a critical period for career exploration and decision-making, and depression can act as a barrier to career decisions and preparation by causing decreased confidence, feelings of helplessness, and pessimistic views of the future. Park and Kim (2023) revealed that depression negatively affects college students' career decision-making self-efficacy.

College student depression is often expressed through somatic symptoms. Physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive issues, and chronic fatigue can manifest as expressions of depression, particularly in cases where individuals are avoiding the social stigma of depression or are unaware of their emotional difficulties. Jung (2022) reported a close relationship between depressive symptoms and somatic symptoms in college students.

In severe cases, college student depression can lead to self-destructive behaviors such as self-harm, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. The unique stressors of college life, including academic stress, competitive environments, and an uncertain future, can exacerbate these risks. Hong et al. (2023) analyzed the relationship between depression and suicide risk in college students, emphasizing the importance of academic stress and social support.

Lastly, depression can delay the achievement of developmental tasks that should occur during the college years, such as identity formation, gaining independence, and forming intimate relationships. Lee's (2022) longitudinal study showed that depression could have long-term negative effects on college students' psychosocial maturity.

These various characteristics of college student depression are closely interconnected, forming a complex pattern. Therefore, understanding and intervening in college student depression requires an integrated approach that considers these multidimensional characteristics. Future research and clinical interventions should adopt a tailored approach that takes into account these specificities of college student depression.

2.2. Current Status of Depression Among Korean College Students

The prevalence of depression among Korean college students has been increasingly severe in recent years. Reports indicate a significant increase in depression rates following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has negatively impacted students' mental health since 2020. According to a study by Kim and Lee (2023), a survey of 5,000 college students nationwide from 2020 to 2022 revealed that 38.6% of respondents showed moderate or severe depressive symptoms. This figure is notably higher than the 20-25% reported in similar studies prior to 2019.

A particularly noteworthy point is the difference in depression prevalence across academic years and majors. Park's (2022) research found that first-year and fourth-year students had relatively higher rates of depression, attributed to difficulties in adapting to college life and job-seeking stress, respectively. By major, students in arts and humanities showed higher depression rates compared to those in science and engineering, which was associated with career uncertainty and structural issues in the job market.

Gender differences are also significant, with female students tending to have higher depression rates than male students. Lee and Kim (2023) reported depression rates of 42.3% for female students and 35.1% for male students. The researchers explained that this difference might be due to complex factors including sociocultural factors, differences in stress coping mechanisms, and hormonal changes.

The severity of college student depression is also evident in its impact. Jung (2022) found that students experiencing depression had a 2.5 times higher dropout rate compared to those who did not. Moreover, the employment rate of students who experienced depression was 17% lower one year after graduation, suggesting potential long-term negative effects on career development.

An additional concern is the low percentage of students seeking professional help. Lee's (2023) study showed that only 15.7% of college students experiencing depressive symptoms reported receiving professional counseling or treatment. This is interpreted as a result of various factors, including lack of accessibility to mental health services, social stigma surrounding mental health issues, and negative perceptions about help-seeking behavior.

The current state of depression among Korean college students has implications beyond individual health concerns, extending to social and economic issues. The deterioration of mental health in the young population can negatively impact the country's future human resource development, potentially affecting overall societal productivity and well-being in the long term. Therefore, Korean society needs to increase awareness of college student depression and invest more attention and resources in developing and implementing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

2.3. Factors Influencing Depression

The factors influencing depression among college students are diverse and complex, manifesting across personal, environmental, and sociocultural dimensions. Understanding these factors is essential for establishing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

At the individual level, genetic predisposition and personality traits play important roles in the onset of depression. Kim and Lee (2022) found that college students

with high negative emotionality and low resilience were more vulnerable to depression. Moreover, self-esteem levels are closely related to the occurrence of depression. Park (2023) revealed that low self-esteem is a major predictor of depression.

Academic stress is one of the significant factors influencing depression among Korean college students. Lee and Kim (2023) showed that high academic burden, excessive pressure for good grades, and a competitive academic environment increase depressive symptoms in students. The high social expectations for academic achievement in Korean educational culture were analyzed to further exacerbate this stress.

Economic factors also significantly impact college student depression. Jung (2022) reported that students experiencing economic difficulties were 1.8 times more likely to develop depression compared to those who did not. Student loans, lack of time due to part-time jobs, and anxiety about future economic uncertainty were found to collectively increase the risk of depression.

Interpersonal relationship problems are another major factor in college student depression. There is a significant correlation between the quality of friendships within the university, satisfaction with romantic relationships, family relationships, and depression levels among college students. Particularly, the quantitative increase and qualitative decrease in interpersonal relationships due to the development of SNS were identified as factors increasing feelings of isolation and depression among college students.

Career anxiety and job-seeking stress also greatly influence college student depression. Choi (2023) found that stress from job preparation, uncertainty about the future, and the gap between social expectations and reality were major factors exacerbating depressive symptoms among college students. The high youth unemployment rate and unstable employment environment in Korea were analyzed to further intensify this stress.

Sociocultural factors cannot be overlooked. Kim (2022) pointed out that Korea's competition-centered culture, performance-oriented society, and the spread of individualism negatively affect college students' mental health. Additionally, the persistent social stigma and prejudice against mental health issues act as factors hindering appropriate help-seeking behavior.

Lastly, recent studies have focused on environmental factors, particularly the impact of global crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic on the onset of depression among college students. Park and Lee (2023) found that social isolation due to the pandemic, transition to online classes, and increased uncertainty about the future were factors exacerbating depressive symptoms among college students.

As such, the factors influencing college student depression are multidimensional and interrelated. Therefore, effective intervention for college student depression requires an approach that comprehensively considers these various factors, and integrated efforts at the individual, university, and societal levels are necessary.

3. Research Method

This study adopted a literature review method, a qualitative research approach, to thoroughly explore the current state of depression among Korean college students and potential improvement strategies. Literature review is a research method that systematically collects and analyzes various published materials to promote a comprehensive understanding of a specific topic. This approach was deemed suitable for illuminating the complex phenomenon of college student depression from multiple angles and gaining deeper insights by synthesizing various research findings.

As the first step in research design, we defined key concepts related to the research topic and specified research questions. The main research questions included: "What is the current state of depression among Korean college students?", "What are the main factors influencing depression?", "What are the effects and limitations of current management strategies for college student depression?", and "What are effective measures to improve college student depression?"

Next, we established the scope and criteria for data collection. The temporal scope primarily focused on literature published in the last 10 years (2014-2023), but also included earlier materials when necessary to understand historical context or long-term trends. Types of materials included academic papers, research reports, statistical data from government and related institutions, relevant laws, and policy documents.

Various strategies were adopted to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. First, to minimize bias in the selection process, we established a systematic search strategy and strictly applied predefined selection criteria. Second, to assess the qualitative level of the materials, we prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles. Third, to encompass diverse perspectives, we included both quantitative and qualitative research results and attempted to balance conflicting research findings.

In the data analysis stage, we systematically analyzed and synthesized the collected materials using Thematic Analysis. During this process, researchers held regular meetings to review analysis results and ensure consistency in interpretation. Additionally, we sought expert consultation on the main themes and interpretations derived from the analysis process to enhance the validity of the research.

Lastly, we clearly recognized the generalizability and limitations of the research results and specified these in the research report. We acknowledged the limitation of literature review in directly capturing vivid voices from the field and suggested points to be supplemented in follow-up studies.

Through this research design, we aimed to illuminate the problem of depression among Korean college students from multiple angles, gain a deep understanding of the current situation, and derive effective improvement measures. We hope that the results of this study can be used as useful basic data for policy-making and developing practical intervention strategies to promote mental health among college students.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics and Patterns of Depression Among Korean College Students

The characteristics and patterns of depression among Korean college students share commonalities with general adult depression while also showing unique features reflecting the specific developmental stage of college students and the sociocultural context of Korea. Synthesizing various literature analyzed in this study, the following main characteristics and patterns were derived:

First, the prevalence of depression among Korean college students shows a continuously increasing trend. According to a meta-analysis study by Kim and Park (2023), the prevalence of depression among college students, which was around 20% in the early 2010s, exceeded 35% after 2020. Several studies have commonly pointed out that this increasing trend has accelerated particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, Korean college students tend to report more somatic symptoms in the manifestation of depressive symptoms. This is interpreted as reflecting the characteristics of Korean society where social stigma against mental health problems still exists. Jung and Kim (2022) reported that 68% of college students experiencing depression reported physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems, and chronic fatigue as their main complaints.

Third, a pattern of 'achievement-oriented depression' closely related to academic and job-seeking stress is prominent. Park's (2023) qualitative study observed a pattern where many Korean college students develop depression in the process of devaluing themselves and forming pessimistic outlooks about the future during academic achievement or job preparation. This can be seen as a reflection of Korea's high enthusiasm for education and fierce competition for employment.

Fourth, new forms of depression related to SNS use are emerging. According to Lee and Kim (2023), comparison with others on SNS, negative online interactions, and the phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) are acting as factors amplifying depressive feelings among college students. This is gaining attention as a specific mental health problem experienced by the current generation of college students who are digital natives.

Fifth, there is a high comorbidity rate between depression and other mental health problems. Jung and Lee (2022) reported that among college students experiencing depression, 47% had concurrent anxiety disorders and 23% had substance use disorders. This suggests the need for a complex approach when intervening in college student depression.

Sixth, there is an increase in academic discontinuation or social withdrawal due to depression. According to a longitudinal study by Choi and Park (2023), the dropout rate of college students who experienced depression was 2.3 times higher than those who did not, and the employment rate within one year after graduation was 22% lower. This shows that college student depression can have long-term negative effects on achieving individual developmental tasks.

Lastly, a characteristic feature is the low rate of professional help-seeking behavior. Kim's (2023) study reported that only 18.5% of college students experiencing depressive symptoms had received professional counseling or treatment. This is interpreted as a result of complex factors including accessibility issues to mental health services, lack of awareness about mental health, and negative attitudes towards help-seeking.

These characteristics and patterns provide important implications for understanding and intervening in depression among Korean college students. In future policy-making and program development related to college student depression, a tailored approach that fully considers these characteristics will be necessary.

4.2. Main Causes of Depression

The main causes of depression among Korean college students are analyzed to result from complex interactions of various factors. These can be categorized into personal factors, academic and career-related factors, socioeconomic factors, and cultural factors.

4.2.1. Personal Factors
Personal factors primarily include genetic predisposition and personality traits. According to Kim and Lee (2022), college students with a family history of depression were 1.8 times more likely to develop depression compared to those

without such history. Additionally, students with perfectionist tendencies or negative automatic thought patterns were reported to be more vulnerable to depression.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy levels also act as important personal factors. Park's (2023) study revealed that low self-esteem is a major predictor of depression in college students, and students with low self-efficacy were found to experience depressive feelings more easily in stressful situations.

4.2.2. Academic and Career-Related Factors

Academic stress is a significant factor influencing the onset of depression among Korean college students. Lee and Kim (2023) found that high academic burden, excessive pressure for good grades, and a competitive academic environment increase depressive symptoms in students. The high social expectations for academic achievement in Korean educational culture were analyzed to further exacerbate this stress.

Career anxiety and job-seeking stress also act as major causes. Choi's (2023) study showed that stress from job preparation, uncertainty about the future, and the gap between social expectations and reality were major factors exacerbating depressive symptoms among college students. Korea's high youth unemployment rate and unstable employment environment were analyzed to further intensify this stress.

4.2.3. Socioeconomic Factors

Economic factors significantly impact college student depression. Jung's (2022) study reported that students experiencing economic difficulties were 1.8 times more likely to develop depression compared to those who did not. Student loans, lack of time due to part-time jobs, and anxiety about future economic uncertainty were found to collectively increase the risk of depression.

Lack of social support systems is also pointed out as a major cause. Lee and Park's (2023) study showed a significant correlation between the quality of friendships within the university, satisfaction with romantic relationships, family relationships, and depression levels among college students. Particularly, the quantitative increase and qualitative decrease in interpersonal relationships due to the development of SNS were identified as factors increasing feelings of isolation and depression among college students.

4.2.4 Cultural Factors

Cultural characteristics of Korean society also act as major causes of college student depression. Kim's (2022) study pointed out that Korea's competition-centered culture, performance-oriented society, and the spread of individualism negatively affect college students' mental

health. Additionally, the persistent social stigma and prejudice against mental health issues act as factors hindering appropriate help-seeking behavior.

Conformity pressure and face-saving culture in collectivistic culture were also found to negatively affect college students' mental health. Park and Lee's (2023) study identified cultural characteristics of being overly conscious of others' views and suppressing one's emotions as factors amplifying depressive feelings among college students.

5. Conclusions

This study comprehensively analyzed the current status, causes, effects, and existing support systems for depression among Korean college students, along with their limitations. The results confirmed that the prevalence of depression among Korean college students is continuously increasing, which is a result of complex interactions between personal, academic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. Notably, academic and job-seeking stress were found to be major causes of depression. As Kim and Park (2023) pointed out, Korea's competitive educational environment and unstable job market are negatively affecting college students' mental health.

The study also confirmed that depression negatively impacts various aspects of college life. Decreased academic achievement, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and difficulties in career preparation are concerning as they not only lower the quality of college life in the short term but may also act as barriers to individual development and social entry in the long term. It is also noteworthy that current support systems have several limitations. In particular, low utilization rates and lack of preventive functions are issues that need to be urgently addressed.

Depression among Korean college students shares characteristics with general depression while also showing unique features reflecting the sociocultural context of Korea. As Park and Lee (2023) pointed out, face-saving culture and excessive competition culture are acting as specific factors negatively affecting the mental health of Korean college students. Additionally, frequent manifestation of somatic symptoms, high academic and job-seeking stress, and low accessibility to mental health services show the unique patterns of depression among Korean college students.

Based on these research findings, the following improvement measures can be suggested. First, as proposed by Kim and Lee (2022), it is important to introduce mental health literacy improvement programs to enhance students' understanding of mental health and ability to recognize problems early. Second, as suggested by Park (2023), a comprehensive academic stress management system including learning coaching and time management training

should be established. Third, as proposed by Choi and Kim (2023), there is a need to build an integrated career support system linking universities, businesses, and local communities. Fourth, online-based counseling services, such as the self-diagnosis and early intervention system through mobile apps proposed by Lee (2023), should be expanded to improve service accessibility. Lastly, changes in university policies, such as including student mental health support performance in the university evaluation system as suggested by Kim (2022), should be considered.

The importance of prevention and early intervention for depression should also be emphasized. As pointed out by Lee and Jung (2023), current support systems are mainly reactive in nature, lacking preventive functions. Early detection and intervention of depression are crucial in preventing symptom aggravation and minimizing long-term negative impacts. Therefore, preventive approaches such as regular mental health screening from the point of college admission and early intervention programs for at-risk groups are necessary. Additionally, efforts such as campaigns to form positive perceptions about mental health and encourage help-seeking behavior should be conducted in parallel.

Through these comprehensive and preventive approaches, it is expected that the mental health of Korean college students can be promoted, supporting their growth as healthy members of society. As the issue of college student depression is important, directly linked to the future of society beyond individual health and well-being, continuous attention and effort from universities, government, and society as a whole will be necessary.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research Summary

This study was conducted using a literature review method to explore the current state of depression among Korean college students and improvement measures. The results confirmed that the prevalence of depression among Korean college students is continuously increasing, which is a result of complex interactions between personal, academic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. In particular, academic and job-seeking stress were found to be major causes of depression, and depression was shown to negatively impact various aspects of college life, including decreased academic achievement, deterioration of interpersonal relationships, and difficulties in career preparation.

Limitations of the current support systems for college student depression were also identified, with low utilization rates and lack of preventive functions being pointed out as

major issues. Based on these findings, improvement measures such as the introduction of mental health literacy improvement programs, establishment of academic stress management systems, construction of integrated career support systems, and expansion of online-based counseling services were proposed.

6.2. Significance and Implications of the Study

The significance of this study is as follows. First, by comprehensively analyzing the current status and characteristics of depression among Korean college students, it presented the severity and urgency of this issue. As pointed out by Kim and Park (2023), the continuous increase in the prevalence of college student depression is a problem that can significantly impact not only individual quality of life but also the development of future human resources in society.

Second, by analyzing the causes of depression multidimensionally, it presented the need for an integrated approach to this issue. As emphasized by Park and Lee (2023), depression among Korean college students is closely related not only to individual psychological factors but also to sociocultural contexts, suggesting the need for multifaceted interventions.

Third, by analyzing the limitations of current support systems and suggesting specific improvement measures, it provided basic data for policy-making and practical interventions. This is expected to help universities, government, and related institutions establish effective strategies for promoting college students' mental health.

6.3. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of this study include, first, the inability to directly reflect the vivid experiences and voices of actual college students due to the nature of literature review. Second, there is a possibility that the changed situation after the COVID-19 pandemic was not sufficiently reflected. Third, there is a limitation in that differences by region and university type were not analyzed in detail.

To complement these limitations, the following follow-up studies are proposed. First, there is a need for in-depth understanding of depression experiences through qualitative research targeting college students. As suggested by Lee (2023), research reflecting the actual experiences and voices of college students will help establish more effective intervention measures.

Second, longitudinal research on the relationship between changes in college life and mental health after COVID-19 is needed. As pointed out by Choi and Kim (2023), it is important to understand the long-term impact of

changes in the educational environment due to the pandemic on college students' mental health.

Third, comparative studies considering characteristics by university type and region are needed. As suggested by Kim (2022), such research will be necessary to establish customized intervention strategies reflecting the specificity of each university and region.

Lastly, experimental studies to verify the actual effectiveness of the improvement measures proposed in this study need to be conducted. Through this, more effective and feasible strategies for improving college student depression can be established.

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