

Comparison of Stress, Anxiety and Depression in Preclinical and Clinical Dental Students

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Submission date: 21-Oct-2025 08:39AM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 2579289265

File name: Yohana_Yusra_-_psychopharmacology_depresi.pdf (971.68K)

Word count: 5268

Character count: 28821

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ABSTRACT ~ Objective: To compare factors correlating with stress, anxiety, and depression between dental students (DS) in preclinical (PP) and clinical programs (CP). **Method:** This study involved 165 DS, utilizing the DASS-21, GAD-7, PSS-10, and PHQ-9 assessments. The data were analyzed using the Rasch model and Spearman test. **Result:** The study included 38.18% in PP and 61.81% in CP (M:F 1:3.7), and a mean age of 21.99 ± 2.36 years. Person map revealed perceptual differences in anxiety and depression between groups, but not in stress. In the PP group, family was the sole factor correlating with stress ($p = 0.032$). Stress was the primary mental health concern among dental students, particularly during both preclinical and clinical programs. Anxiety and depression, though less common in the preclinical stage, increased significantly in the clinical phase. In the CP group, both supervisor and family ($p < 0.05$) were correlated with anxiety, while age and self-health ($p < 0.05$) were linked to depression. **Conclusion:** Stress was the primary mental health concern among dental students, particularly during both preclinical and clinical programs. Anxiety and depression, though less common in the preclinical stage, increased significantly in the clinical phase. Identifying factors such as family, supervisors, age, self-health, and academic progression is essential for developing effective strategies to support dental students' mental health. *Psychopharmacology Bulletin.* 2025;55(4):55–67.

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INTRODUCTION

The mental well-being of dental students has received increasing attention due to the intense demands of their academic and clinical training. Dental students are frequently exposed to high levels of stress, with rigorous coursework, demanding clinical practice, and the expectation to achieve academic excellence. These pressures may lead to significant mental health challenges, specifically stress, anxiety, and depression, potentially impacting their personal lives, academic performance, and future professional practice,¹⁻³ academic performance,⁴ and future professional practice.⁵ According to epidemiological data, the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students have tended to increase in recent years. The prevalence among medical students is reported to be 59.3% for anxiety, 45.1% for stress, and 44% for depression.⁶ For dental students, the prevalence is 55.99% for depression, 66.8% for anxiety, and 54.7% for stress.⁷

According to De Gregorio et al. the mental health challenges often escalate as students transition from preclinical to clinical stages in dental education.⁸ While preclinical students primarily focus on theoretical learning and skill development, clinical students face additional stressors, including patient care responsibilities and close supervision by experienced practitioners. These added responsibilities could heighten feelings of inadequacy, performance anxiety, and academic pressure, which may amplify their risk of mental health issues.

The academic workload associated with dental education plays a significant role in the mental health of students. Extensive hours of study, frequent assessments, and the need for continuous academic excellence create a highly competitive environment. Students often experience sleep disturbances,⁹ burnout,¹⁰ and cognitive overload¹¹ as a result of trying to meet these demands. The cumulative nature of academic stress can impair students' coping abilities, leading to heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms, which may persist throughout their educational journey.

Effective coping strategies and access to support systems are essential to mitigate the psychological burden faced by dental students. Studies have shown that students who engage in mindfulness,¹² time management,¹³ and physical exercise¹⁴ experience lower levels of stress and anxiety. Moreover, institutional support, such as mental health counseling services, peer mentoring, and faculty guidance, can play a crucial role in fostering resilience. Universities that implement structured mental health programs have reported a significant reduction in students' anxiety and depression scores.¹⁵

The mental health challenges faced by dental students not only affect their academic journey but also have long-term implications for their professional practice. High levels of unresolved stress and anxiety during training have been linked to burnout and reduced job satisfaction among practicing dentists.¹⁶ Furthermore, prolonged exposure to stressors during education may diminish empathy and affect the quality of patient care. Early intervention and mental health support during dental training are therefore crucial to ensure a smooth transition into professional roles and to safeguard future practitioners' well-being.

Understanding the specific factors associated with stress, anxiety, and depression among dental students is crucial for developing targeted interventions. This study aims to evaluate these factors in correlation between preclinical (PP) and clinical (CP) dental students (DS) in terms of mental health (stress, anxiety, and depression). By identifying specific stressors and vulnerabilities, the study provides insights that may inform mental health support strategies tailored to the unique needs of dental students at various stages of their education.

METHOD

Subject Recruitment

This observational, cross-sectional study included 323 dental students (DS), who were assessed using the validated Indonesian Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21/DASS-21,¹⁷ General Anxiety Disorder-7/GAD-7,¹⁸ Perceived Stress Scale-10/PSS-10,¹⁹ and Patient Health Questionnaire-9/PHQ-9²⁰ assessments. The inclusion criteria included current dental students who had not taken any exams or tests in the four weeks prior to the study, in order to minimize bias related to mental health. DS who did not complete all the questionnaires were excluded from the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to the questionnaire being filled. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethical Committee Faculty of Dentistry Universitas Trisakti No.050/S3/KEPK/FKG/8/2024.

Questionnaire

The DASS-21 consists of 21 items divided into three domains: depression, anxiety, and stress, assessing psychological conditions over the past week. The depression domain includes items #3, #5, #10, #13,

#16, #17, and #21. The anxiety domain includes items #2, #4, #7, #9, #15, #19, and #20. The stress domain includes items #1, #6, #8, #11, #12, #14, and #18. Respondents select one of four answer choices: 0 = "Never", 1 = "Sometimes", 2 = "Often", and 3 = "Almost always". Scoring is categorized as follows: Normal (depression [0–4], anxiety [0–3], stress [0–7]), Mild (depression [5–6], anxiety [4–5], stress [8–9]), Moderate (depression [7–10], anxiety [6–7], Stress [10–12]), Severe (depression [11–13], anxiety [8–9], stress [13–16]), and Extremely severe (depression [14–17], anxiety [10–13], stress [17–21]).²¹

The GAD-7 comprises 7 items that assess generalized anxiety disorder symptoms over the past two weeks. Respondents choose from the following answer choices: 0 = "Not at all", 1 = "Several days", 2 = "More than half the days", and 3 = "Nearly every day". The total score is interpreted as follows: No to low risk anxiety (0–4), Mild anxiety (5–9), Moderate anxiety (10–14), and Severe anxiety (15–21).²²

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The PSS-10 is composed of 10 items that measure stress levels over the past month, divided into two domains: perceived helplessness and perceived self-efficacy. Items related to perceived helplessness include #1, #2, #3, #6, #9, and #10, while perceived self-efficacy includes items #4, #5, #7, and #8. The answer choices for perceived helplessness range from 0 = "Never" to 4 = "Very often", while the perceived self-efficacy domain is scored in reverse, from 4 = "Never" to 0 = "Very often". The total score is interpreted as follows: Very low stress (0–7), Low stress (8–11), Average stress (12–15), High stress (>21).²³

The PHQ-9 assesses depressive symptoms over the past two weeks, covering nine areas: anhedonia, depressed mood, sleep disturbances, fatigue, appetite changes, feelings of worthlessness, concentration difficulties, psychomotor disturbances, and thoughts of death or self-harm. Respondents choose from four answer choices: 0 = "Not at all", 1 = "Several days", 2 = "More than half the days", and 3 = "Nearly every day". Total scores are interpreted as follows: No – minimal depression (0–4), Mild depression (5–9), Moderate depression (10–14), Moderately severe depression (15–19), and Severe depression (20–27).²⁴

All of the questionnaires had a construct validity prior to the study. The Indonesian questionnaires were tested on 55 subjects. The Cronbach alpha for DASS-21 was 0.93, GAD-7 was 0.90, PSS-10 was 0.82, and PHQ-9 was 0.88. The item reliability for DASS-21 was

0.96 (separation 4.68), GAD-7 was 0.96 (separation 5.03), PSS-10 was 0.93 (separation 3.52), and PHQ-9 was 0.98 (separation 6.93). The eigenvalue score for unidimensionality of questionnaires was above 2. Google forms was used to distribute the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Rasch model and the Spearman test. The Rasch model was employed to assess the tendency of psychological mental issues, while the Spearman test was utilized to examine the correlation between variables. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was set for all statistical analyses.

RESULT

The study initially included 323 subjects. However, 158 were excluded due to incoherent data or the absence of psychological disturbances. Ultimately, the study included a total of 165 dental students, 38.18% in PP and 61.81% in CP, with 21.21% males and 78.78% females, and a mean age of 21.99 ± 2.36 years (Table 1).

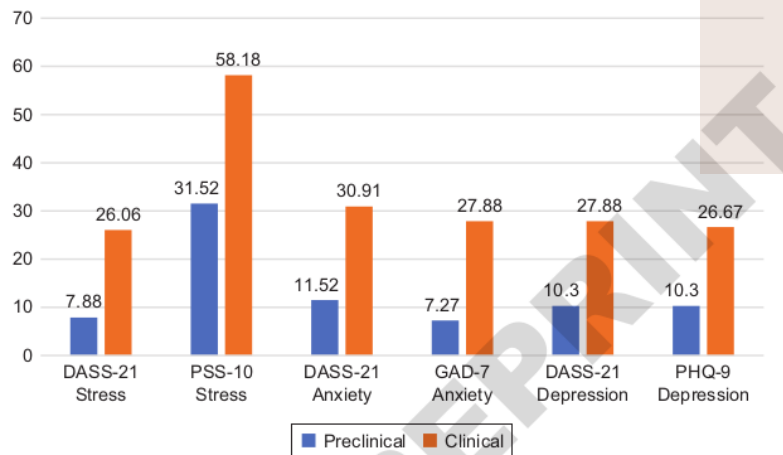
TABLE 1

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

VARIABLES	PRECLINICAL N = 63 N (%)	CLINICAL N = 102 N (%)
Gender		
Male	19 (30.2)	16 (15.7)
Female	44 (69.8)	86 (84.3)
Problems due to		
Academic	1 (1.6)	3 (2.9)
Clinical	–	11 (10.8)
Organization	10 (15.9)	7 (6.9)
Supervisor/lecturer	13 (20.6)	15 (14.7)
Friend/college	15 (23.8)	22 (21.6)
Family	23 (36.5)	19 (18.6)
Financial	32 (50.8)	12 (11.8)
Personal health	30 (47.6)	32 (31.4)
Other	2 (3.2)	0
Age [mean (SD)]	19.69 (1.06)	23.88 (1.55)
Semester [mean (SD)]	4.63 (1.70)	4 (1.06)
GPA [mean (SD)]	3.5 (0.32)	3.15 (0.75)

FIGURE 1

PERCENTAGE OF DENTAL STUDENTS CATEGORIZED AS HAVING MORE THAN MODERATE IMPAIRMENT BASED ON EACH QUESTIONNAIRE TOOL



The majority of dental students (31.52% and 58.18%) experienced stress in comparison to other mental health conditions (Figure 1). Person map analysis (Figure 2) revealed perceptual differences in anxiety and depression between groups, but not in stress. The PP group exhibited a higher tendency toward stress, whereas the CP group showed a greater inclination toward depression. Based on Figure 3, in the PP group, family was the sole factor correlating with stress ($r = 0.27$; $p = 0.032$). In the CP group, both supervisor ($p = 0.041$) and family ($p = 0.029$) were correlated with anxiety, while age ($r = 0.267$; $p = 0.009$) and self-health ($p = 0.016$) were linked to depression. Additionally, the number of semesters showed a significant correlation with both anxiety ($r = 0.244$; $p = 0.021$) and depression ($r = 0.276$; $p = 0.009$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight significant differences in mental health experiences between preclinical and clinical dental students. In Table 1, preclinical dental students were more likely to have problems due to financial (50.8%), personal health (47.6%), and family (36.5%), while clinical dental students had problems due to personal health (31.4%), friends/colleagues (21.6%) and family (18.6%). Stress was found to be a prominent concern among both groups (31.52% and 58.18%), though it

FIGURE 2

PERSON MAP BETWEEN GROUPS (A - PRECLINICAL PROGRAM VS B - CLINICAL PROGRAM). D DASS-21; Q PHQ-9; G GAD-7; P PSS-10; s STRESS; A ANXIETY; d DEPRESSION. RED BOX INDICATE THE TENDENCY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUE OCCURRENCE IN PRECLINICAL AND CLINICAL PROGRAMS

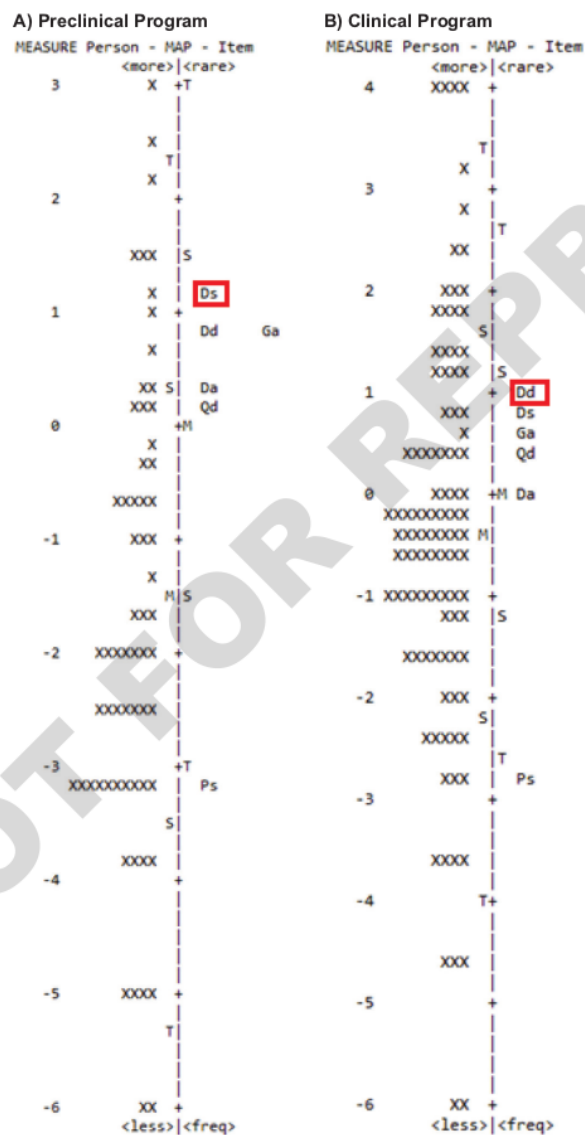
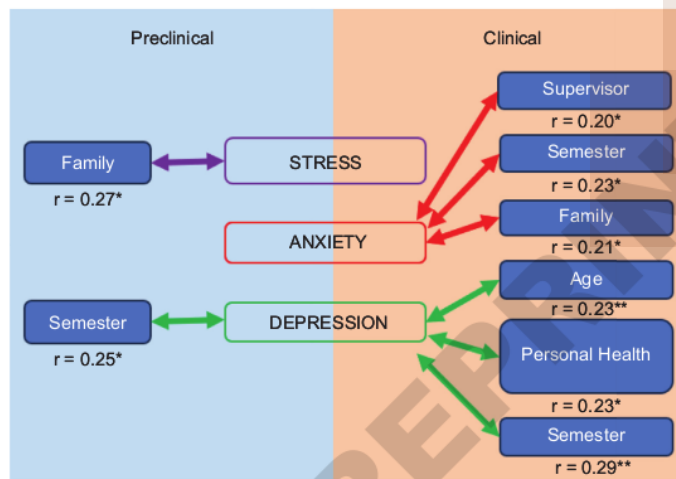


FIGURE 3

SPEARMAN CORRELATION BETWEEN VARIABLES IN BOTH GROUPS (* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$)



manifested differently (Figure 1). Based on previous publications, stress is a commonly observed mental health issue among medical and dental students, with a higher prevalence among those in clinical training.^{25,26} Based on Rasch model analysis (Figure 2), preclinical dental students were likely prone to having stress, but clinical dental students to have stress and depression. According to Santabábara et al., clinical dental students have a tendency to have depression with a prevalence of 37% (95% CI: 26–49%).²⁷

In the preclinical group (Figure 3), family support was the primary factor correlated with stress ($r = 0.27$; $p = 0.029$), suggesting that support networks outside the academic environment play a crucial role in managing stress during the early stages of dental education. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that familial support is a vital buffer against academic stress in young adults.^{28,29} Family support may mitigate stress by providing emotional reassurance, financial stability, and practical assistance, which are particularly essential for students navigating the transition into a demanding academic setting.³⁰ Preclinical students, who are primarily focused on theoretical learning and skill acquisition, often encounter feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt. Unlike clinical students, they have limited exposure to real-life patient interactions, which may intensify feelings of inadequacy. In this context, family support can foster a sense of security, helping students build resilience and confidence as they prepare for the clinical phase

of their education. Furthermore, family support has been linked to the development of adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving and emotional regulation, which are essential for managing stressors in dental education.^{30,31} When students perceive strong support from family members, they are more likely to engage in positive coping behaviors rather than maladaptive strategies like avoidance or withdrawal. As such, the presence of family support could reduce the physiological and psychological stress responses typically associated with academic pressures. However, it is also important to consider the variability of family support among students. Not all students have access to strong family support systems, which could lead to disparities in stress levels among the preclinical study participants.³² Therefore, universities and dental faculties should consider providing additional support mechanisms, such as mentorship programs, peer support groups, and access to mental health counseling, to bridge this gap.

In contrast, clinical students experienced anxiety influenced by both family ($r = -0.21$; $p = 0.029$) and academic supervisors ($r = 0.20$; $p = 0.041$), suggesting that the added responsibility of patient care and clinical oversight may introduce new stressors not experienced in the preclinical phase. Supervisors often play dual roles as evaluators and mentors, which can create a pressure-filled environment for students, heightening stress and anxiety. This duality aligns with literature suggesting that supervisory relationships in clinical settings contribute to increased mental health strain among students due to the fear of negative evaluations and the desire to meet clinical expectations.^{33,34} Anxiety in clinical settings has been well-documented, with studies suggesting that students often experience anticipatory anxiety regarding patient interactions and fear of making mistakes.³³ This study's findings are consistent with the notion that family support may act as a buffer against such anxieties, while the role of supervisors may inadvertently contribute to heightened anxiety due to evaluative pressures.

Depression among clinical students was also significantly associated with age ($r = 0.23$; $p = 0.009$) and personal health ($r = 0.23$; $p = 0.016$), indicating that older students and those with personal health concerns may be more susceptible to depressive symptoms. This correlation may reflect the cumulative effect of prolonged academic pressures and the physical demands of clinical work.³⁴ Clinical students are often required to balance patient care, academic performance, and personal obligations, all of which increase in intensity as students progress in their education. Older students may face additional responsibilities, such as family commitments or financial burdens, further exacerbating stress and depressive symptoms. Studies have suggested that students who have health concerns or who perceive themselves as physically unwell may

experience a higher vulnerability to depression,²⁹ further emphasizing the importance of holistic health support in academic settings. Health problems may disrupt students' daily routines, interfere with academic performance, and reduce the time available for self-care and relaxation. Chronic health conditions, in particular, may contribute to a sense of hopelessness, loss of control, and increased mental fatigue, all of which are risk factors for depression.³⁵ This relationship emphasizes the need for educational institutions to provide better access to health care and wellness programs tailored to students' unique needs. By addressing both physical and mental health, educational institutions may create a more supportive learning environment that promotes overall well-being. Age-related differences in depressive symptoms may also be linked to cognitive and emotional development.³⁶ Older students may demonstrate greater self-awareness and introspection, which can be beneficial for critical thinking.

Furthermore, the study found that the number of semesters correlated with anxiety ($p = 0.021$) and depression ($p = 0.009$), suggesting that as students progress through their dental education, the sustained pressures and increased responsibilities may contribute to cumulative mental health challenges. This finding supports the concept of academic burnout, where prolonged exposure to stressors without adequate coping mechanisms or support leads to mental exhaustion, a known risk factor for anxiety and depression.³⁷ The longer students remain in an academic program, the greater the cumulative effects of academic, clinical, and personal stressors, which may erode their psychological well-being over time. In dental education, each semester brings new challenges, such as more complex coursework, higher clinical demands, and growing expectations for academic performance. As these stressors accumulate, students may experience mental fatigue, which may impair cognitive function, increase emotional reactivity, and reduce the ability to manage stress.

The identified stressors and mental health outcomes among dental students underscore the need for tailored interventions at different stages of dental education. Early intervention programs focusing on stress management, resilience building, and coping strategies may be particularly beneficial for preclinical students, helping them develop skills to manage the rigors of clinical training.³⁸ Additionally, support systems that include accessible counseling, peer support groups, and structured mentorship programs could help mitigate the anxiety and depressive symptoms observed in clinical students.³⁹

Implementing training for supervisors on supportive and non-evaluative feedback methods may also help reduce the stress and anxiety associated with clinical evaluations.⁴⁰ By promoting a more nurturing

clinical environment, students may feel more comfortable seeking guidance and support without fear of judgment, potentially reducing mental health risks and enhancing their learning experiences.

This study also has several limitations. The sample was drawn from only one dental education institution, which aimed to minimize potential bias from other factors such as socioeconomic status and resilience to psychological issues. Additionally, the sample size was limited because a portion of the subjects did not experience any psychological disturbances. Finally, these findings highlight the importance of holistic support that addresses both academic and personal aspects of student well-being. Institutions could consider initiatives such as mental health awareness campaigns, workshops on managing academic stress, and resources focused on promoting self-care practices among students. Such comprehensive approaches are essential to equip dental students with the tools necessary to navigate the challenges of their education while safeguarding their mental health.

CONCLUSION

Stress was the primary mental health concern among dental students, particularly during both preclinical and clinical programs. Anxiety and depression, though less common in the preclinical stage, increased significantly in the clinical phase. Identifying factors such as family, supervisors, age, self-health, and academic progression is essential for developing effective strategies to support dental students' mental health. ❖

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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