



EATING HABITS, LIFESTYLE CHANGES, AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG HOSTEL STUDENTS

¹Hema Werna K, ²Rajaswathy R

¹III B. Sc Psychology, ²Assistant Professor

Department of psychology, Rathinam college of arts and Science, Coimbatore, India

ABSTRACT

The transition from home to hostel life is one of the most challenging phases for college students. This shift often occurs at the beginning of college life and significantly influences not only students' eating habits but also their overall lifestyle. Such changes can, in turn, have a profound impact on their mental health, which has become an increasing concern in the academic community. The present study explores the connection between altered eating and social habits and their influence on the mental health of hostel students. Major variables examined include diet, physical activity, sleep, screen time, and stress levels. The research employs a quantitative design supported by standardized psychological tools such as the Eating Attitude Scale (EAT-25), Lifestyle Profile II, and Mental Health Assessment Tool (MHA-25) to evaluate lifestyle factors and psychological well-being. Participants are hostel students from diverse disciplines, and data collection is currently ongoing. The collected data will later be analyzed using appropriate statistical methods to identify relationships between lifestyle changes and mental health indicators such as anxiety, depression, and emotional regulation. The anticipated findings are expected to provide valuable insights into how hostel living impacts students' psychological well-being. The study also emphasizes the importance of awareness and intervention programs that promote healthy living and the development of emotional resilience among young adults adjusting to independent living.

Index Terms - Lifestyle, health, eating habits, hostel students

1. INTRODUCTION

Moving from home to hostel life represents a major transition for students, exposing them to a unique set of challenges and experiences. Among these, changes in eating habits and daily routines are most prominent and can strongly influence both physical and mental health. Hostel life often allows limited personal time, introduces rigid routines, and fosters new social interactions. Consequently, diet and lifestyle changes during this phase can significantly impact mental well-being. Research consistently highlights nutrition, physical activity, sleep quality, and social environment as vital determinants of mental health. Hostel students frequently experience irregular eating habits, limited dietary options, and altered daily activities, which can collectively affect emotional and psychological functioning. Symptoms may range from irritability and fatigue to serious conditions such as anxiety and depression. Given the increasing stressors associated with academic, social, and environmental factors, understanding how lifestyle and dietary changes affect hostel students' mental health is an important and timely area of inquiry. Nutritional habits play a crucial role in mental well-being. In hostel settings, food options are often limited and may lack nutritional balance. Meals served in hostels tend to be repetitive and may include processed foods rich in fats, sugars, and preservatives, which are detrimental to mental clarity and emotional stability. Essential nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins, and minerals are required for optimal brain function. Deficiencies in these nutrients can impair cognition and mood regulation. Diets high in processed or fast food have been associated with brain inflammation, which increases the risk of mood disorders like depression and anxiety. Conversely, diets rich in whole foods, antioxidants, fibre, and healthy fats support brain health and emotional regulation. Hostel students often develop irregular eating patterns due to late-night studying, socializing, and inconsistent meal schedules. Skipping meals or consuming unhealthy snacks at night leads to fluctuations in blood glucose levels, causing irritability, tiredness, and difficulty concentrating. Lifestyle modifications associated with hostel life significantly influence mental health. Students in hostels face stress from academic pressure, social adaptation, and adjustment to a new environment. Poor sleep quality is one of the most visible consequences. Late-night study sessions, homesickness, and environmental disturbances such as noise contribute to irregular sleep patterns, which impair cognitive performance and emotional stability. Research indicates that inadequate sleep is a key contributor to depression, anxiety, and stress. Moreover, physical inactivity—a common issue among hostel students due to academic demands and limited facilities—further exacerbates mental distress. Regular physical activity has been shown to improve mood, reduce stress, and promote overall well-being, yet many students neglect it. Additionally, increased screen time and social

media use can lead to sedentary behavior, disrupted sleep, and higher stress levels, thereby contributing to poor mental health outcomes.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Over the past decade (2015–2025), considerable research has explored the relationships between diet, lifestyle, and mental health among adolescents and young adults. Evidence shows that students with irregular eating habits and higher consumption of processed foods experience elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to those consuming balanced diets. Hostel environments often promote poor dietary practices such as late-night eating, high caffeine consumption, and meal skipping. Similarly, reduced physical activity, excessive screen time, and irregular sleep worsen psychological well-being. Despite extensive literature on lifestyle and mental health, limited studies have focused specifically on hostel students—a group facing unique environmental and social pressures. Addressing this research gap is essential to understanding how hostel life affects students' mental health.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim

To conceptually examine the relationship between eating habits, lifestyle changes, and mental health among hostel students based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

3.2 Objectives

To review existing research on the eating patterns and lifestyle behaviors of hostel students.

To identify key lifestyle factors (diet, sleep, exercise, and screen time) linked to mental health outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

To develop a conceptual understanding of how these lifestyle changes interact to affect hostel students' psychological well-being.

To propose a conceptual framework that can guide future empirical studies and mental health interventions in hostel settings.

3.3 Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a narrative and conceptual review approach. Relevant scholarly works from psychology, nutrition, and public health were systematically analyzed to identify patterns and connections among eating habits, lifestyle transitions, and mental health outcomes in hostel students. Using a biopsychosocial framework, the review integrates biological (nutrition, sleep), psychological (stress, coping), and social (peer influence, environment) determinants of mental well-being. A conceptual model was developed to illustrate how hostel life and associated lifestyle behaviors can shape mental health outcomes. This model emphasizes the interplay between physical health behaviors, environmental factors, and psychological adaptation during early adulthood.

4. DISCUSSION

The present conceptual review highlights the interrelated nature of eating habits, lifestyle behaviors, and mental health among hostel students. The synthesis of literature suggests that the transition to hostel living introduces a series of biological, psychological, and social adjustments that may significantly influence overall well-being.

4.1 Dietary Transitions and Emotional Well-being

Hostel students frequently experience a shift from home-cooked, nutritionally balanced meals to institutional or convenience-based diets. Such transitions often lead to reduced intake of essential nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and omega-3 fatty acids, which are critical for maintaining neurotransmitter balance and mood stability (Jacka et al., 2010). Processed and high-fat foods, commonly available in hostels, have been linked to increased inflammation and oxidative stress, both of which are associated with depression and anxiety (O'Neil et al., 2014). Conversely, access to a balanced diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables has been shown to enhance cognitive function and reduce emotional distress. These findings underscore the importance of dietary awareness and institutional food quality in shaping students' mental health.

4.2 Lifestyle Behaviors and Mental Adjustment

Lifestyle modifications such as reduced physical activity, irregular sleep schedules, and prolonged screen exposure emerge as critical mediators between hostel living and mental well-being. Studies have shown that consistent physical activity promotes the release of endorphins, thereby reducing stress and improving mood regulation. However, academic workload and lack of access to recreational facilities often limit students' opportunities for exercise. Sleep disturbances are also common among hostel residents. Irregular sleep cycles caused by late-night studying, social activities, or environmental noise can impair memory, attention, and emotion regulation. Poor sleep has been directly associated with heightened levels of stress and anxiety among college populations. Together, these lifestyle factors form a feedback loop that can either sustain or deteriorate psychological health, depending on the coping mechanisms and support systems available.

4.3 Social and Environmental Influences

The hostel environment itself acts as both a stressor and a potential support system. On one hand, peer relationships, shared living spaces, and social comparisons may increase pressure, competition, and interpersonal tension. On the other hand, positive peer interactions can foster belongingness and emotional support, which are protective factors against loneliness and depression. Cultural and institutional contexts also play a vital role. Hostels with rigid schedules, poor sanitation, or limited food variety often contribute to stress and dissatisfaction. Economic constraints and lack of autonomy in food choices may further increase unhealthy eating patterns, while supportive environments that encourage autonomy and balance tend to promote better psychological adjustment.

4.4 Interconnection Between Factors

The reviewed studies collectively indicate that eating habits and lifestyle patterns do not operate in isolation but interact in a multidimensional manner to influence mental health. Nutritional deficiencies may heighten stress sensitivity, poor sleep may disrupt appetite regulation, and lack of exercise can intensify negative mood states. Therefore, hostel students' mental health should be understood through an integrative lens that considers the combined effects of diet, sleep, activity, and social factors. This aligns with the **biopsychosocial model**, which views mental health as the product of interdependent biological, psychological, and social influences.

5. CONCLUSION

The review highlights that hostel life directly influences students' eating habits, lifestyle choices, and psychological health. Irregular meals, poor sleep, and unhealthy routines contribute significantly to stress, anxiety, and depression. Promoting awareness, fostering healthy food environments, and encouraging structured routines are crucial for improving students' well-being.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- Hostel management should ensure access to nutritious and diverse meals.
- Mental health services should incorporate lifestyle education into counseling programs.
- Counselors should assess students' daily habits to address lifestyle-related psychological concerns.
- Building consistent routines can serve as preventive measures to enhance student wellness.

7. LIMITATIONS

- The study relies on self-reported data, which may involve response bias.
- The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation.
- The sample is limited to specific hostels, reducing generalizability.
- Factors such as family background and personality traits were not examined

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