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Title: Mental health of Italian university students: an overview of reviews

Introduction: University students' mental health is a global concern, with high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress. In Italy, no comprehensive synthesis is available. We conducted an overview of reviews to summarize prevalence rates, risk and protective factors for mental health outcomes, the characteristics and effectiveness of counseling services.

Objectives: To describe the state of mental health among Italian university students, identify risk/protective factors, and synthesize evidence on counseling services and interventions.

Methods: Following PRIOR guidelines, we systematically searched PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, and PsycINFO. From 96 records, 9 reviews met inclusion criteria (6 systematic, 2 with meta-analyses, 1 narrative, 1 rapid, 1 scoping). Reviews included Italian university students (2004–2023) and reported mental health outcomes or interventions.

Results: Prevalence rates were high: anxiety (11–65%), depression (9–73%), stress (40–89%), and sleep disturbances (9–65%); suicidal ideation affected ~7%. Risk factors included female gender, younger age, first-year status, minority sexual orientation, health and family vulnerabilities, financial strain, academic pressure, and low social support. Protective factors were resilience, supportive relationships and physical activity. Interventions were heterogeneous, from psychodynamic and CBT counseling to group approaches, innovative techniques, and prevention programs. Counseling services were mostly short-term and free. Reviews reported improvements in well-being, coping, distress, and academic functioning.

Conclusions: Italian university students showed a high burden of mental health problems. Risk and protective factors spanned individual, relational, and contextual domains. Counseling services appeared beneficial but lacked standardized and long-term evaluations. Strengthening evidence-based, accessible, and sustainable interventions in universities is a public health priority.

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INTRODUCTION

- University students are particularly vulnerable to psychological distress¹.
- Studies reported high levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, stress, and sleep problems among them².
- However, existing reviews examined prevalence, pandemic-related changes, or interventions separately, resulting in fragmented evidence.

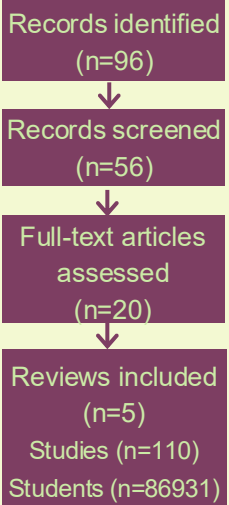
AIM: To synthesize review-level evidence on risk and protective factors, mental health prevalence, and psychological interventions among Italian university students.

METHODS

Design: Overview of reviews conducted according to Preferred Reporting Items for Overviews of Reviews (PRIOR) guidelines³

Search: PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, PsycINFO; period up to February 2026

Selection: Independent screening by two reviewers



RESULTS

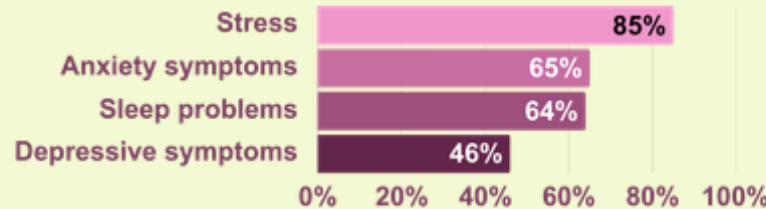
Risk Factors

- **Sociodemographic** (female gender, younger age)
- **Psychological** (loneliness, emotional dysregulation)
- **Academic** (pressure, career uncertainty)
- **Clinical** (chronic illness, family psychiatric history)
- **Pandemic-related** (remote learning, academic disruption)

Protective factors

- **Individual** (resilience, adaptive coping)
- **Social support** (peer and family)
- **Lifetsyle factors** (physical activity, healthy routines)

Mental health symptoms



Pandemic studies showed variability

- Stress: 40-89%
- Anxiety: 11-46%
- Depression: 9-73%

University counselling

- short-term therapy
- psychodynamic / CBT approaches

Psychological interventions

Digital & structured interventions

- digital mental health tools
- chatbot-based support
- virtual reality programs

Preventive programs

- peer mentoring
- psychoeducational
- anti-cyberbullying

↓ psychological distress

Outcomes

↑ academic functioning

↓ anxiety and depressive symptoms

↑ emotional regulation and wellbeing

CONCLUSIONS

Mental health vulnerability among Italian university students appeared to be **multifactorial**, involving sociodemographic, psychological, academic, and contextual determinants.

University counselling services and structured psychological interventions showed **promising benefits**, particularly in **reducing psychological distress** and improving functioning.

The current evidence base remains **methodologically heterogeneous**, with most studies relying on self-report screening instruments rather than standardized diagnostic assessments.

More standardized and longitudinal research is needed to guide the development of effective university mental health services.

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