

# Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of mental health problems and substance use among South African health and rehabilitation sciences students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Self-reported prevalence of common mental health problems and substance use among South African undergraduate health and rehabilitation sciences students was high during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alcohol use, prescription medication use to manage academic/social stress, COVID-19 diagnosis and being enrolled in the physiotherapy programme were identified as factors associated with a mental health diagnosis.

## BACKGROUND

- **Mental health** among university undergraduate students represents an important global public health concern.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a paucity of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health and rehabilitation sciences (HRS) students.<sup>2, 3</sup>

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

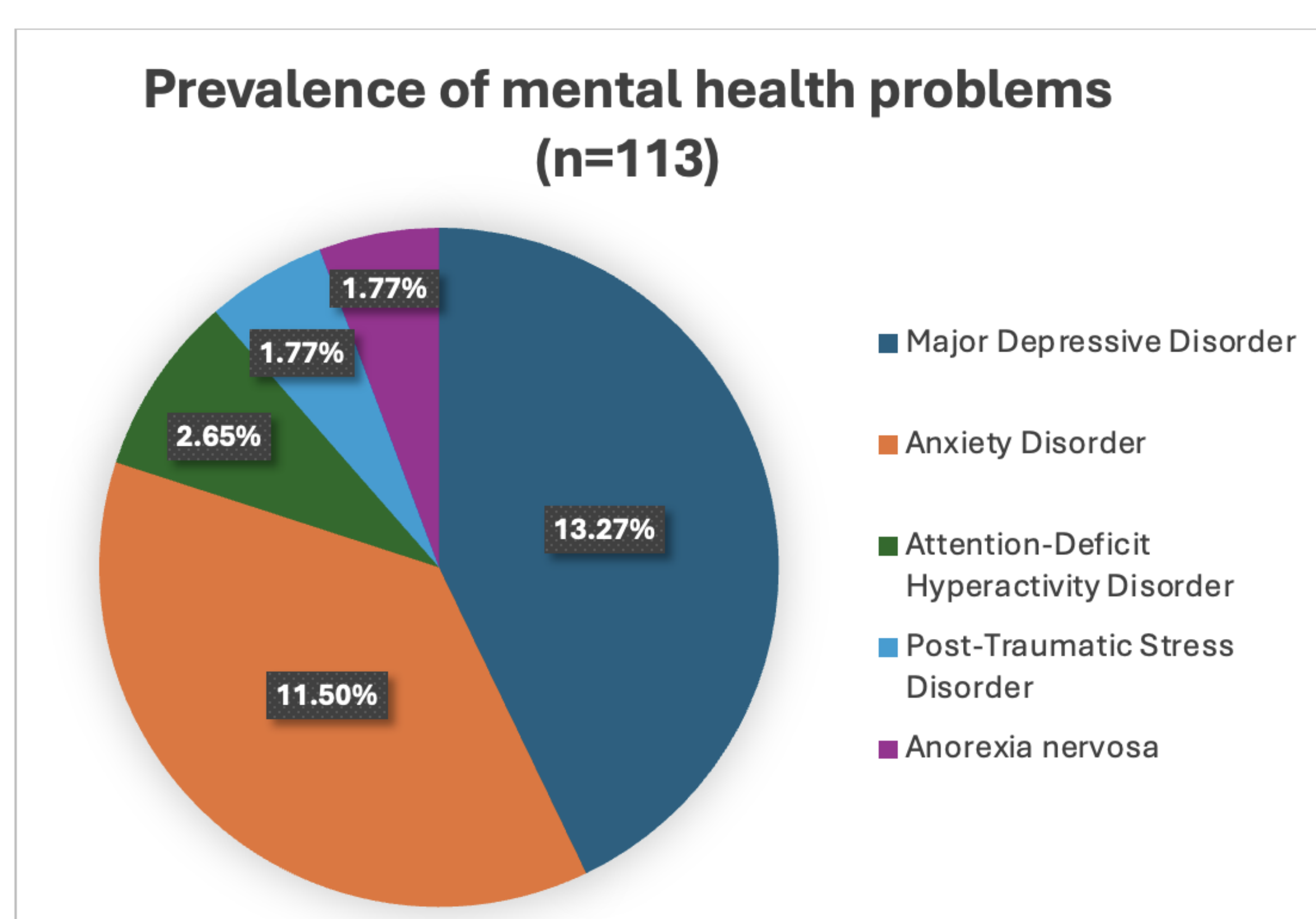
- To determine the **prevalence and correlates of mental health problems and substance use** among health and rehabilitation sciences students during the pandemic.

## METHODS

- A **cross-sectional study** of 113 speech-language pathology, audiology, occupational therapy and physiotherapy students at the University of Cape Town was conducted (23 June - 27 Sept 2022).
- Participants completed **self-administered questionnaires**: self-reported sociodemographic characteristics, mental health and substance use history, stress management, sources of support, and barriers for seeking support when stressed.
- **Multiple logistic regression analysis** was performed to determine factors associated with a mental health diagnosis.
- Stata 17.0 was used for statistical analysis.
- The study was approved by the UCT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 173/2022).

## RESULTS

- Participants were **young** (mean age; 20.77 years), **mostly female** (85.84%), unmarried (89.38%) and **had COVID-19** (43.12%).
- **Substance use was common**: alcohol (54.05%), cigarettes/tobacco (17.27%), illicit drugs (5.56%), prescription medication (33.03%).
- About a quarter (23.85%) **self-reported a mental health condition** in their lifetime and **14.81% in the past 12 months**, diagnosed with:



## RESULTS CONTINUED

**Mental health diagnosis** in the past 12 months was significantly associated with the following correlates (**Table 1**):

**Table 1. Adjusted multivariable logistic regression analysis for correlates of mental health diagnosis in the past 12 months (N=113)**

Correlates/predictor variables	AOR†	95% CI	P -value
<b>Programme of study</b>			
Audiology (Ref)	1.00	-	-
Speech-Language Pathology	3.587	0.40 - 31.81	0.251
Occupational Therapy	7.62	0.77 - 75.31	0.082
Physiotherapy	<b>12.35</b>	<b>1.21 - 126.44</b>	<b>0.034</b>
<b>Alcohol use</b>			
No (ref)	1.00	-	-
Yes	<b>4.02</b>	<b>1.06 - 15.23</b>	<b>0.041</b>
<b>Prescription medication use</b>			
No (ref)	1.00	-	-
Yes	<b>5.74</b>	<b>1.76 - 18.70</b>	<b>0.004</b>
<b>Feel need to use prescription medication to manage academic/social stress</b>			
No (ref)	1.00	-	-
Yes	<b>5.74</b>	<b>1.68 - 19.69</b>	<b>0.005</b>
<b>COVID-19 diagnosis</b>			
No (ref)	1.00	-	-
Yes	<b>5.51</b>	<b>1.60 - 18.92</b>	<b>0.007</b>

Note: Statistically significant results indicated in bold.

AOR, adjusted odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

†, Data adjusted for age and gender.

## Barriers to accessing mental health support:

- Academic commitments (61.90%).
- Lack of time to attend student wellness services (36.19%).

## Preferred sources of support when stressed:

- Family member or friend (92.39%).
- Fellow student or clinical partner (50.48%).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- HRS students faced **significant stressors** during the COVID-19 pandemic with increased mental health problems/substance use.
- **Institutional and public health measures** should address modifiable risk factors and barriers to accessing mental health support amongst students during a pandemic setting.

## REFERENCES

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