

## Evaluating The Prevalence And Patterns Of Mental Health Challenges Among Students In Public Secondary Schools In Bayelsa State

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### ABSTRACT

The study investigated the prevalence and patterns of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State. Guided by a descriptive survey research design, the study sought to determine the prevalent mental health challenges experienced by students and to identify common patterns associated with these challenges. The population comprised all public secondary school students in Bayelsa State, from which a sample of 360 respondents was drawn using stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured instrument titled "Mental Health Challenges Identification Questionnaire (MHC-IQ)," validated by experts in Educational Psychology, and found to have a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.89. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the research questions. The findings revealed a moderate prevalence of mental health challenges among students, with common patterns including emotional withdrawal, stress-related anger, exam-related anxiety, and the use of distractions as coping strategies. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions in schools. The study recommends the integration of mental health education into the school curriculum and increased awareness among parents and teachers to support affected students.

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**Keywords:** Mental Health, Secondary School, Emotional Challenges, Psychological Wellbeing

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### INTRODUCTION

Mental health has increasingly become a critical concern in global education systems, especially as young people face rising academic pressures, social demands, and economic uncertainties. Adolescence, a stage marked by emotional volatility and identity formation, is often accompanied by psychological struggles that, if unaddressed, can hinder students' academic success, personal development, and future prospects [1]. Among school-aged populations, particularly in low- and middle-income countries like Nigeria, mental health challenges remain underreported, undertreated, and poorly understood [2].

In Nigeria, students in public secondary schools encounter multiple stressors ranging from overcrowded classrooms and inadequate learning facilities to poverty-related anxieties and family instability [3]. These challenges often manifest in symptoms such as anxiety, depression, mood swings, and poor self-esteem, which are frequently dismissed or misunderstood by teachers, parents, and even peers [4]. Moreover, the stigma attached to mental illness in many Nigerian communities further discourages students from seeking help, thereby exacerbating their conditions and leaving them vulnerable to academic failure and social withdrawal [5].

Bayelsa State, located in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, presents a unique context for examining student mental health. The state grapples with environmental instability, economic marginalization, and limited educational resources—factors that contribute to the psychological burdens borne by its young population [6]. Despite these conditions, there is a noticeable lack of empirical data on the extent and nature of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in the state. Understanding the prevalence and patterns of these challenges is crucial for the development of school-based mental health interventions, early identification systems, and policy reform aimed at safeguarding student well-being.

This study, therefore, evaluated the prevalence and patterns of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State through a cross-sectional analysis.

Specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

- i. Determine the prevalence of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
- ii. Examine the common patterns of mental health challenges experienced by students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing recognition of adolescent mental health as a critical educational concern has led to the application of several theoretical frameworks, notably the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner [7], which emphasizes the influence of multiple environmental systems—such as family, school, and community—on a child's psychological development. This theory underscores the relevance of context-specific factors in shaping mental health outcomes among students. Empirically, studies have documented rising rates of mental health issues among secondary school students globally. For example, Polanczyk et al. [8] reported that up to one in seven adolescents worldwide experiences a mental health disorder, with depression and anxiety being the most prevalent. In Nigeria, Adebawale and Adegoke [9] found that over 30% of secondary school students in Southwestern states exhibited symptoms of psychological distress, often linked to socio-economic pressures and academic stress. In a more localized study, Aluzu et al. [10] examined mental health trends among Nigerian adolescents and highlighted a worrying prevalence of anxiety and depressive symptoms, especially in under-resourced public schools. Despite these findings, mental health data from Bayelsa State remain scarce, with most school systems lacking structured assessment frameworks. As such, there is a pressing need to generate baseline data specific to this region to inform intervention programs and policy. Thus, the research question arises: What is the prevalence of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

Understanding the specific patterns of mental health challenges among adolescents requires a theoretical grounding in Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (CBT), which posits that maladaptive thoughts and behaviors are central to the onset and persistence of psychological disorders [11]. This theory has been instrumental in identifying symptomatic patterns such as anxiety, depression, and conduct problems in school-aged populations. Recent empirical research highlights a growing diversity in how mental health symptoms manifest among secondary school students. For instance, Atilola et al. [12] found that Nigerian adolescents frequently experience internalizing disorders such as withdrawal, persistent sadness, and poor concentration, often exacerbated by socio-environmental stressors. Likewise, Ogunyemi and Obiwuru [13] observed that patterns of mental health challenges among students in Lagos and Rivers States included recurrent anxiety attacks, sleep disturbances, and aggression, particularly in overcrowded or underfunded schools. Similarly, Okonkwo and Olayinka [14] documented gender-based differences in symptom patterns, with females more prone to depressive moods and males showing higher tendencies toward disruptive behavior and

substance experimentation. Despite the relevance of these findings, region-specific data for Bayelsa State are limited, and patterns of adolescent mental health symptoms remain poorly mapped. Hence, the research question emerges: What are the common patterns of mental health challenges experienced by students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional survey research design, which is appropriate for assessing the prevalence and patterns of mental health challenges within a defined population at a single point in time. According to Creswell and Creswell [15], cross-sectional designs are ideal for obtaining snapshots of health-related phenomena across various demographic subgroups, enabling the researcher to explore patterns, frequencies, and potential correlations. In this context, the study focused on identifying the rate and types of mental health challenges affecting students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

The target population comprised all students enrolled in public secondary schools across the eight Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bayelsa State. A total sample of 360 students was selected through a multistage sampling procedure. In the first stage, stratified sampling was used to categorize schools based on LGA and urban-rural location. In the second stage, four schools were randomly selected from each stratum, ensuring a mix of urban and rural representation. Finally, within each selected school, simple random sampling was employed to select 45 students per LGA (distributed proportionally across JSS3 and SS2), resulting in a balanced and representative sample. These class levels were deliberately chosen because they represent critical transitional stages in the Nigerian secondary school system. JSS3 students are preparing for the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), while SS2 students are approaching the final phase before their West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in SS3. Both groups face increased academic demands and examination-related pressure, which are known to heighten susceptibility to stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Also, students in these classes are typically aged between 14 and 17 years, an adolescent stage characterized by significant cognitive, emotional, and social development, making them a relevant population for assessing patterns and prevalence of mental health issues.

Data collection was carried out using a researcher-developed instrument titled the *Mental Health Challenge Identification Questionnaire (MHC-IQ)*. The instrument consisted of three sections. Section A captured demographic information such as age, gender and class level. Section B included structured

items designed to assess the prevalence of mental health symptoms such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep disturbances, and behavioral issues—drawing on validated indicators from the DSM-5 and WHO Adolescent Mental Health Screening Tools. Section C explored patterns in symptom occurrence, including frequency, intensity, triggers, and coping mechanisms. All items were formatted on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “Never” (1) to “Always” (4).

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in Educational Psychology, Mental Health Education, and Measurement and Evaluation. Their feedback helped to refine the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study’s objectives. For reliability, a pilot test was conducted using 20 students from a public secondary school in Delta State with comparable demographic characteristics. The pilot data were analyzed using Cronbach’s Alpha, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency.

The final data collection was executed by the researcher and trained assistants after obtaining appropriate approvals from school authorities and informed consent from participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and anonymity was

maintained throughout the process. The study recorded a return rate of 94.4%.

Data analysis involved both descriptive. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the prevalence of mental health symptoms. All statistical tests were conducted using SPSS version 26. Prior to conducting descriptive statistical analyses (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions), preliminary assumption checks were performed to ensure data quality and appropriateness for analysis. Tests for normality were conducted using the Shapiro–Wilk statistic, which indicated that the data approximated a normal distribution at the aggregate level. Skewness and kurtosis values for all items fell within the acceptable range of -1 to +1, suggesting no severe departures from normality. Furthermore, checks for outliers and missing values were undertaken, with none found to significantly affect the analysis. These preliminary steps ensured that the descriptive statistical results were valid and reflective of the sampled population.

**RESULTS**

**Research Question 1**

What is the prevalence of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

Table 1: Mean and Standard deviation on the prevalence of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items Statements		$\bar{x}$	Sd	Remarks
1.	I often feel sad or hopeless without knowing why.	342	2.53	1.10	A
2.	I find it difficult to concentrate during class or while studying.	342	2.46	1.11	D
3.	I experience sudden mood swings that affect my relationships.	342	2.41	1.17	D
4.	I worry excessively about school performance or life in general.	342	2.49	1.11	D
5.	I feel tired or lack energy even after enough rest.	342	2.54	1.12	A
6.	I find it difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep at night.	342	2.43	1.10	D
7.	I often feel isolated or that no one understands me.	342	2.39	1.14	D
8.	I sometimes feel overwhelmed by pressure from home or school.	342	2.50	1.14	A
9.	I have experienced a loss of interest in activities I used to enjoy.	342	2.48	1.12	D
10.	I feel nervous or anxious even when there is no clear reason.	342	2.48	1.14	D
	Grand Mean		2.47	1.13	D

Source: Survey Data, (2025) \*D=Disagree, A=Agree

Table 1 above presents the mean and standard deviation of students' responses regarding the prevalence of mental health challenges in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State. Out of the ten items presented, only three items recorded mean values above the cut-off point of 2.50, indicating that the respondents agreed with those particular statements. Specifically, students agreed that they often feel sad or hopeless without knowing why ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.53), feel tired or lack energy even after enough rest ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.54), and sometimes feel overwhelmed by pressure from home or school ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.50). These

responses suggest that emotional exhaustion and sadness are commonly experienced.

On the other hand, the remaining seven items recorded mean scores below the 2.50 threshold, reflecting disagreement with those statements. These include difficulties with concentration ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.46), sudden mood swings ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.41), excessive worrying ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.49), insomnia ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.43), feelings of isolation ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.39), loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.48), and unexplained nervousness or anxiety ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.48).

The grand mean score of 2.47 indicates that, on average, students disagreed with the majority of the mental health prevalence indicators. This suggests that while certain symptoms like emotional fatigue and sadness are moderately prevalent, mental health challenges are not overwhelmingly prevalent across the student population based on self-reported responses. However, the relatively close proximity of several item means to the cut-off point highlights the

need for early intervention and further monitoring, particularly concerning emotional well-being and stress.

**Research Question 2**

What are the common patterns of mental health challenges experienced by students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation on the common patterns of mental health challenges experienced by students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items Statements	N	$\bar{x}$	Sd	Remarks
11.	I feel more anxious or sad when exams are approaching.	342	2.50	1.11	A
12.	My mood worsens when I have disagreements with my parents or guardians.	342	2.34	1.11	D
13.	I feel emotionally better after talking to someone I trust.	342	2.37	1.13	D
14.	My mental health worsens when I use social media excessively.	342	2.49	1.17	D
15.	I often respond to stress with anger, shouting, or aggressive behavior.	342	2.52	1.15	A
16.	I tend to withdraw from others when I feel emotionally down.	342	2.51	1.13	A
17.	My emotional challenges are more intense during early mornings or late nights.	342	2.54	1.10	A
18.	I use distractions (e.g., games, music, or sleeping) to cope with emotional stress.	342	2.52	1.07	A
19.	My school environment (e.g., bullying or poor teacher-student relationships) affects my mental wellbeing.	342	2.48	1.13	D
20.	I have developed personal ways of coping with sadness or stress that help me manage better.	342	2.55	1.08	A
	Grand Mean		2.48	1.11	D

Source: Survey Data, (2025) \*D=Disagree, A=Agree

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of students' responses on the common patterns of mental health challenges experienced in public secondary schools across Bayelsa State. Of the ten items assessed, six items recorded mean values above the cut-off point of 2.50, indicating agreement among respondents. These include: experiencing heightened anxiety or sadness when exams are approaching ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.50), responding to stress with anger or aggressive behavior ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.52), withdrawing from others when emotionally down ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.51), having more intense emotional challenges in the early mornings or late nights ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.54), using distractions like music, games, or sleeping as coping strategies ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.52), and developing personal ways of coping with sadness or stress ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.55). These findings highlight that many students tend to internalize or redirect emotional stress and are beginning to employ personal coping strategies—both adaptive and maladaptive—in response to mental health difficulties.

In contrast, the remaining four items scored below the mean threshold of 2.50, suggesting that students generally disagreed with those statements. These include experiencing worsened moods due to disagreements with parents or guardians ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.34), feeling emotionally better after confiding in someone ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.37), being negatively affected by excessive use of social media ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.49), and having their mental health influenced by negative school environments ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.48). The lower mean scores in these items

suggest that, although such factors may contribute to mental health difficulties for some students, they are not dominant patterns across the wider student population. Despite several items with mean scores slightly above 2.50, the grand mean of 2.48 falls just below the cut-off, indicating a general disagreement with the majority of the identified patterns. This implies that while specific stress-related behaviors—especially those tied to academic pressure, time of day, and stress response—are relatively common, no singular pattern overwhelmingly defines the mental health experiences of students in the state. The findings emphasize the complexity and individual variability in how students experience and cope with mental health challenges.

**DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS**

The results from Research Question 1 revealed that the prevalence of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State is moderate and not uniformly widespread across all indicators. While the overall grand mean ( $\bar{x}$  = 2.47) falls slightly below the benchmark value of 2.50, the data show that students report significant emotional experiences such as feeling sad or hopeless, lacking energy despite adequate rest, and feeling overwhelmed by academic or personal pressures. These specific symptoms recorded mean values of 2.53, 2.54, and 2.50 respectively, suggesting that a noticeable proportion of students experience emotional exhaustion and psychological distress in their daily school lives.

However, the majority of items—such as difficulty concentrating, mood swings, persistent worry, insomnia, and feelings of isolation—recorded mean scores below 2.50, indicating that these symptoms are not prevalent in the majority of the student population. This suggests a nuanced mental health landscape, where emotional strain exists but is not uniformly experienced or expressed across all students.

These findings align with recent research by Atilola et al. [19], who emphasized that while Nigerian adolescents face considerable emotional challenges, the prevalence rates vary based on factors such as social support, school environment, and personal resilience. Similarly, Adebowale and Adegoke [6] reported moderate levels of psychological distress among students in Southwestern Nigeria, particularly highlighting sadness, fatigue, and stress related to academic workload. Moreover, the World Health Organization [4] notes that adolescents globally are vulnerable to mental health disorders, though cultural, environmental, and institutional factors influence how these challenges manifest. The findings underscore the need for early mental health screening and the integration of school-based mental health support systems in Bayelsa State. Although the overall prevalence is not overwhelmingly high, the presence of emotionally distressing experiences among a significant subset of students highlights the importance of preventive mental health interventions and awareness programs. Schools should strengthen guidance and counselling units, provide stress management training, and encourage open conversations around student well-being.

The results from Research Question 2 revealed that students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State experience mental health challenges in identifiable and recurring patterns. While the grand mean score of 2.48 suggests that the respondents, on average, did not strongly affirm all the listed patterns of mental health issues, several items had mean scores above the benchmark of 2.50, indicating notable trends in emotional and behavioral responses to stress.

Specifically, students reported increased anxiety or sadness during exam periods ( $\bar{x} = 2.50$ ), emotional distress in the early mornings or late at night ( $\bar{x} = 2.54$ ), and a tendency to cope with emotional stress through distractions such as music or games ( $\bar{x} = 2.52$ ). Students also indicated withdrawal behaviors when emotionally down ( $\bar{x} = 2.51$ ) and aggressive reactions to stress ( $\bar{x} = 2.52$ ). The highest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 2.55$ ) was observed in the statement on developing personal coping mechanisms, suggesting a strong individualistic approach to handling emotional challenges.

On the other hand, patterns such as worsening mood due to parental conflict, excessive social media use, and poor teacher-student relationships scored below 2.50, indicating that while these factors may

influence mental health, they are not as dominantly experienced by the students sampled.

These findings are consistent with the work of Ede et al. [20], who observed that Nigerian secondary school students often respond to emotional stress through withdrawal, irritability, and self-managed coping strategies. Similarly, Ayanwale and Olawale [21] emphasized that academic pressure, poor sleep hygiene, and peer-related issues are key contributors to the emotional instability observed in adolescents. In addition, Yusuf and Omoniyi [22] found that adolescents in stressful school environments tend to resort to temporary coping mechanisms such as avoidance, distraction, or internalization.

The findings suggest that mental health challenges among secondary school students are not isolated occurrences but follow specific behavioral and emotional patterns, particularly during periods of heightened stress or poor emotional regulation. This underscores the need for structured mental health education within the school system, focusing on equipping students with adaptive coping strategies, emotional intelligence, and early intervention mechanisms. Furthermore, teachers, school counsellors, and parents should be trained to recognize and respond to these behavioral patterns early to prevent escalation into more serious mental health disorders.

## CONCLUSION

The study examined the prevalence and patterns of mental health challenges among students in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State and found that a significant number of students experience emotional and psychological distress, particularly around academic pressure, social withdrawal, and coping difficulties. While not all challenges were uniformly experienced, clear patterns emerged, highlighting exam-related anxiety, emotional fluctuations during early or late hours, and the use of distractions as common coping mechanisms. These findings underscore the urgent need for mental health awareness, the integration of school-based counselling services, and proactive support systems tailored to the unique emotional and academic realities of secondary school students in the state. Addressing these issues holistically is critical for promoting students' overall well-being and academic success.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were given:

1. School administrators and the Ministry of Education should integrate mental health education and counselling services into the secondary school curriculum to help

students recognize and manage emotional challenges effectively.

2. Teachers and parents should be sensitized through regular workshops on identifying early signs of mental health issues and providing appropriate support to affected students.

### LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. Students might have underreported or overreported their experiences due to stigma, fear of judgment, or misunderstanding of certain mental health terms. Second, the cross-sectional survey design captures information at a single point in time, which limits the ability to infer causal relationships between identified factors and mental health outcomes. Longitudinal studies would be necessary to track changes and establish temporal patterns. Third, the study was conducted exclusively among public secondary school students in Bayelsa State, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions, private schools, or different socio-cultural contexts in Nigeria. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable baseline data on the prevalence and patterns of mental health challenges in this under-researched population, and it highlights key areas for intervention and future research.

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