

The Mental Health Effects of Skin Conditions on College Students

Yousef Hakeem M*

Department of Psychology, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA

Opinion

In the spring of 2019, I helped administer a survey to college students at the University of Vermont. This survey included the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) Adult Self Report (ASR), a nationally normed 120 item self-report instrument which for many decades has been a widely used protocol for mental and behavioral health screening and has served clinical and research purposes in mental health, forensic, counselling, and medical settings. It has been shown to be reliable and valid. 1,957 students in total took this survey.

The ASR includes the survey item which asks if the participant if they have rashes or other skin problems, as well as if they pick their skin. The participant can answer "0" for "not true", "1" for "sometimes or somewhat true", "2" for "very true or often true", or "prefer not to answer". The ASR yields scores for 33 different subscales, and the scores for those who answered each of the possible answers were compared.

Higher scores on both items (i.e., "rashes or other skin problems" and "I pick my skin or other parts of my body") were associated with

elevated scores on higher-order Internalizing Problems, Externalizing Problems, and Total Problems as well as individual syndromes of Somatic Problems, Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, Aggressive Behavior, Rule Breaking Behavior, Avoidant Personality, Antisocial Personality, ADHD, Sluggish Tempo, OCD and Withdrawn (ranging from $p < 0.001$ to $p < 0.05$). Neither item was associated with adaptive functioning scales related to friends, spouse, or family. Those who picked skin had higher levels of mean substance use, but there was no association with rashes.

Conclusions

Those with skin ailments, whether primary (e.g., a rash) or secondary (e.g., skin picking) in nature, have poorer behavioural, emotional, and social functioning than those without. Common skin conditions may be a marker of concomitant mental illness symptoms.

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***Corresponding author:** Yousef, Hakeem M, Department of Psychology, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA; E-mail: hakeem.yousef@med.uvm.edu

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