

Academic Stress, Its Sources, Effects and Coping Mechanisms Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Aims: This article aims to review academic stress, its sources, effects and coping mechanisms among college students.

Background: Stress has become part of students' academic life due to the various internal and external expectations placed upon their shoulders. It therefore, becomes imperative to understand the sources and effects of academic stress. Academic stress refers to the emotional and physical strain experienced by students as a result of the demands and pressures of academic life. This stress can stem from various sources such as the pressure to perform well academically, the competition for grades and recognition, and the expectations set by peers, family, and society. Stress is always regarded as a psychological process that involves an individual's personal interpretation and response to any threatening event.

Coping is an important predictor of stress among college students. Individual used coping mechanisms to manage their stress and negative emotions. The way students cope with stress can have a significant impact on their stress levels and overall well-being.

Findings: Majority of the students considered academic related stressors to be the source of high stress which is followed by inter and intra-personal related stressors.

Gender, educational period, school type, family socioeconomic status, and father's education were associated with academic stress. Watching movies and comedies, prayer, sharing their problems with friends, with their parents and teachers were mostly adopted by the students for coping their stress.

Conclusion: The students are primarily stressed by the inadequacy of proper support. There are many personal and social factors that contribute to Students stress. Lack of clarification and unavailability of right career consultants contribute to unidirectional objectives, and even after they graduate, students become clueless and vulnerable in their jobs.

Keywords: Academic stress, College students, Source of stress, Effect of stress, Coping mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a mental or physical feeling of tension. A wide variety of accidents occur in the life of a person which cause negative emotions such as anger, frustration and nervousness. Stress is the body's response to demand or threat¹. It is also considered as negative, behavioral, physiological process that takes place when the person tries to adapt or compromise with stressors. Stressors are the circumstances that disrupt, or threaten to disrupt, individuals, "daily

functioning and cause people to make adjustments”².

Stress becomes part of human day to day life but all kind of stress is not considered to be bad because it guides people to perform well in their life task. In academics, stress is unavoidable among students, and it influences student performance in all academic activities. Many students reported their experience of high academic stress at predictable times which have resulted from preparing and taking exams, class ranking competition, and mastering huge amount of syllabus in a comparatively very small amount of time. Academic stress plays a major role in determining the mental health of students³.

A study by Kaur (2014) found that “significant differences exist in the mental health of adolescents due to their academic stress; girl students with high level of academic stress had poor mental health status than their counter part⁴.

There are number of incidents in a person’s life that leads to negative emotions like anger, frustration and nervousness that further develops stress in an individual. Stress is the body’s reaction to challenge or demand. It can be positive at times; however prolonged stress can lead to severe health conditions¹.

SOURCES OF STRESS

According to Bernstein et al. (2008) sources of stress are every circumstance or event that threatens to disrupt people’s daily functioning and causes them to make adjustments. These sources of stress are called “Stressors”.

Stressors are demands made by the internal or external environment that upset balance, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being and requiring action to restore balance (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). However, they differ from the degree of severity and duration of stress; what is stressful for an individual may not be a stressor for another⁵.

The level of academic stress prevalence has been increased from year to year, while

guidance and counseling service as an integral part of educational institution to provide ideal, high-quality learning has only gained little attention⁶.

The absence of a counselor in a university can leads to ignorance of students’ academic stress. Such condition can result in students’ poor competence and personal development and consequently make students vulnerable to stress disorders when students are encountering academic burden and challenge⁷.

Fear of failure in the exams is among one of the major causes of academic stress. The students felt anxious about falling short of attendance towards the end, it was also reported that students regretted having wasted time set apart for studies. The other non-academic sources of stress reported were lack of sufficient vacations staying away from family worrying about future low self-, having trouble with friends, facing financial difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, conflicts with roommates, issues with partners, sleeping disorders, transportation problems, problems in the family, searching a partner and lack of parental support⁸.

The academic stress is distinguished as a type of situational stress that arises in the educational context and is related to the demands and requirements of the academic environment, among others. Barbayannis et al. (2022) note that academic stress can manifest in the form of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, which can negatively affect students’ psychological well-being⁹. Academic stress increased during the pandemic due to the lockdown. The impact of student academic stress occurs due to increased academic procrastination, fear of virus transmission and up to academic tasks; the pressure is also exacerbated by symptoms of depression and loneliness¹⁰. In addition, the educational system also plays an enabling role subsequently leading to increased stress levels experienced by students. Some of the sources include overcrowded lecture halls, semester grading system, inadequate resources and facilities¹¹.

Academic stressors can be classified into six broad categories (Bashir et al., 2019). These are:

Academic Related Stressors: It entails any educational, institutional, instructive or understudy situations that affects students' performance and causes stress.

Group Social related stressors: These are identified as the type of gathering events and communications, group and social network connections that lead to stress. For example, participation in discussion, presentation with groups and the desire to do well, time spending with family and working interruption by others.

Learning and Teaching Related Stressors:

These include situations pertaining to teaching or learning that cause stress to students. For example, the teaching and learning methods, frustration with the quality of education, ineffective feedback systems and supervision, lack of recognition to work done, and obscurity of what is expected from the students.

Teacher Related Stressors: These are identified as competency and personality of the instructors such as discontent with instructors' supervision abilities, aptitudes, delay or not providing study materials, and assigning of improper and dull tasks to students; which the students find boring.

Interpersonal Related Stressors: These relate with relationship among people. These include physical, verbal, mental and emotional mistreat and troubles caused by instructors, staff, family members, peers, and associates. For example, conflict with peers and family members, too many assignments given by the instructors, unwilling to go to university, crowded classrooms, bullying, and interruption by others.

Intrapersonal Related Stressors: These refer to relationships of a person with him/herself, for instance self-conflict, feeling of inadequacy, low self-esteem and confidence, high self-desire to be better academically¹².

Peer Related Stressors: Exposure to peers and other students can also create pressure, as entering university involves a process of social adaptation. Students find themselves in an environment where they must establish new relationships and social networks, which can generate social anxiety due to the need to be accepted into a new group of peers and participate in extracurricular activities.

Other possible stressors are:

Financial stressors: In addition to academic and social factors, other aspects outside of university life can also contribute to stress. For example, many university students must deal with financial pressure, both their own and their parents', as well as the cost of studying, which can generate additional stress as they try to balance studying and finding income to cover tuition, housing, food, and other related expenses, especially among those who have migrated to study. McCloud and Bann (2019) examined the impact of financial stress on the mental health of university students and found that stress related to finances can have negative effects on the mental well-being of the students, increasing anxiety and depression⁹.

College students may also become frustrated when bills are overdue, threat of account going to collection and racking up debt through loans and credit card debt. Credit cards have become readily available and could be gotten by a single click and filling an application on the internet. A study says one out five students reduced the number of courses they enrolled in due to their finances.

Unhealthy Eating Habit:

According to the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (2015), unhealthy eating habits have the tendency to increase a student's level of stress. Diets that can induce stress include food high in fat, sugar, caffeine and refined starches. It is encouraged that a healthy diet with provision of fruits, vegetables and low-fat food will be efficient for a student (Kessler, 2016).

Parental pressure:

Parental pressures and teachers' expectations have been revealed to be associated with stress around the time of examinations or about choosing academic study or a future career¹³.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Students may be experiencing irritability because of lack of proper sleep at night.

- They may be unable to concentrate on academics and sports.
- Students may be having unexplained fears or increased anxiety.
- Students separate themselves from family activities or peer relationships.
- Students may be experimenting with drugs and alcohol.
- Students may complain about headaches or stomach aches.
- Students may have a poor appetite and low immunity.

According to Vlisides et al (1994), Symptoms of Stress can be categorized as emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and physical.

Physical symptoms: Physical symptoms of stress include fatigue, nausea, muscle tremors, twitches, and headaches. It also includes visual difficulties, grinding or clenching of one's teeth, and weakness. Physiological or psychological responses to stress, if chronic or frequently occurring, can result in illness or disease (Greenberg, 1992). Many students complain of headaches and exhaustion (Greenberg, 1996). Other students experience negative

cognitions which affect how rational they may act and feel (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993).

Cognitive symptom: It appears as placing the blame of errors on others, confusion, poor attention, and poor decision-making abilities. Heightened or lowered alertness, poor concentration, memory problems, poor problem-solving ability, poor abstract thinking, and nightmares are included as well.

Behavioral symptoms: It manifests as changes in activity, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, suspiciousness, change in usual communication abilities, and loss or increase of appetite. In addition, the beginning of an increase of alcohol consumption or other harmful substances, the inability to rest, nonspecific body complaints, pacing, and being hyper-alert to the environment.

Emotional symptoms: It includes anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, fear, a sense of uncertainty, a loss of emotional control, Depression, apprehension, a feeling of being overwhelmed, intense anger, irritability, and aggravation¹⁴.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression by 25% worldwide. Stress is a common part of daily life, and when dealt with responsibly, it may help us stay motivated and focused. However, when stress levels become excessive and are not appropriately handled, they can have a harmful influence on mental health, particularly among students.

Stress can trigger a range of mental health problems for students, with anxiety being one of the most common issues. Another prevalent mental health issue among students is depression, which can have a significant impact on academic achievement. Depression can cause

difficulties with sleep and focus, leading to problems with academic performance. It is essential for students to seek help when experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression and to learn effective coping strategies to manage their mental health¹⁵.

Major effects of stress include:

Emotional and psychological problems encountered by student

Anxieties about aspects of study including exams and presentations, general stress and anxiety, depression, relationship difficulties, eating problems, bereavements and parental separations, loneliness and homesickness, lack of self-confidence or low self-esteem, managing transitions, making difficult decisions, traumatic experiences including rape, assault and abuse, difficulties with alcohol or drugs, issues around sex and sexuality, self-injury, suicidal thoughts¹⁶.

Physical and psychological responses to stress

Generally, both occur together, principally when stressors become more intense. However, one category of stress responses can influence other responses. For instance, mild chest pain may lead to the psychological stress response of worrying about getting a heart attack. Physical responses can be when a person escapes from a terrible accident or some other frightening events, he or she will experience rapid breathing, increased heart beating, sweating, and even shaking little later. These reactions are part of a general pattern known as the fight-or-flight syndrome. The psychological responses to stress can appear as changes in emotions, thoughts and behaviors⁵.

Effect of stress socially:

When students get stressed, there is a visible sign of frustration, snap at friends and family, or feel annoyed by the minutest things. Stress can also affect emotional intelligence. Emotions serve as part of our regulatory system – when functioning appropriately they assist us to carefully

evaluate impacts on ourselves and others. When they're shut off, we make more dangerous choices. Emotions assist decision-making¹³.

COPING MECHANISMS:

Coping is defined as the thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations. It is a term used distinctively for conscious and voluntary mobilization of acts, different from 'defense mechanisms' that are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses, both of which aim to reduce or tolerate stress.

Coping is generally categorized into four major categories which are:

- **Problem-focused-** Which addresses the problem causing the distress: Examples of this style include active coping, planning, restraint coping, and suppression of competing activities.
- **Emotion-focused-** Which aims to reduce the negative emotions associated with the problem: Examples of this style include positive reframing, acceptance, turning to religion, and humor.
- **Meaning-focused-** In which an individual uses cognitive strategies to derive and manage the meaning of the situation
- **Social coping (support-seeking)-** In which an individual reduces stress by seeking emotional or instrumental support from their community¹⁷.

Several researches showed that Problem Focused Coping (PFC) basically aims to solve the problem completely and how to deal with stress anxiety effectively and is relatively associated with reduced levels of depression problem-focused strategies are expected to moderate the negative effects of the stressor¹⁸.

Seiffge-Krenke (1995) performed a factor analysis that revealed a three-factor structure: 'active coping', 'internal coping', and 'withdrawal'.

- Active coping involves seeking social support through various strategies, such as discussing the problem with others and finding information about the

problem or getting help from institutions.

- Internal coping involves using cognitive strategies, such as perceiving the situation and solutions, thinking about the problem and finding different solutions, making compromises, and accepting personal limits.
- withdrawal involves retreating from the stressor and using emotional outlets and distraction strategies, such as listening to loud music, doing sports, not thinking about the problem, trying to forget about the problem using alcohol or drugs, or letting anger out by shouting, crying, or slamming doors.

Active and internal coping strategies are considered to be adaptive, whereas withdrawal is regarded as maladaptive (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000)¹⁹.

One common classification of coping mechanisms focuses on approach and avoidance coping. Approach and avoidance coping styles may be adaptive or maladaptive depending on situational factors surrounding the source of stress.

- Approach coping: Approach coping is the engagement in appropriate action that matches the stressor and provides a resolution to it.
- Avoidance coping: Avoidance coping is the withdrawal from or denial of the existence of a stressor. Some students may engage in approach coping in an effort to either maintain their status quo in school or to identify remedies for stressful experiences that promote positivity. This type of coping may be necessary for long-term stressors, as it allows for individuals to experience the stress in doses rather than one large, overwhelming wave of extreme stress. Additionally, individuals tend to use avoidance coping when attempting to manage stress regarding uncertain or uncontrollable events, such as a global pandemic²⁰.

Many of the coping mechanisms have been proven to be useful in certain situations. Some studies suggest that a problem-

focused approach can be the most beneficial; while other studies have shown that some coping mechanisms are associated with worse outcomes. Maladaptive coping refers to coping mechanisms that are associated with poor mental health outcomes and higher levels of psychopathology symptoms. These include disengagement, avoidance, and emotional suppression¹⁶.

MATERIALS & METHODS

A review was performed by searching and exploring PubMed, google scholar, journals at full text for studies published in English using the key word “Academic stress, “Academic stress and its source” or “Stress among students”.

RESULTS

Related to sources of stress

In a study by Mansoor Ahmed et al, majority of the students (40.9%) considered academic related stressors to be the source of high stress which was followed by inter and intra-personal related stressors (33.3%)²¹, a contrasting result has been discovered with significant association between stress and gender, females being more stressed and students from rural background being significantly more stressed as opposed to our results²².

The other studies done by Chowdhury et al, Panchu et al, Melaku et al all showed a similar result with academic related stressor being the major contributor of stress. The vastness of the medical syllabus and lack of proper time management are the major stressor²³.

A study conducted by Z. Hosseinkhani et al showed mean academic stress score of 45.7%. The stress level was statistically higher among older 47.5% than younger 44.1% adolescents. The main academic stressors included: future uncertainty 69.7% academic competition 58.5 and interaction with teachers 56.1%. Gender, educational period, school type, family socioeconomic status, and father’s education were associated with academic stress²⁴.

Related to effects of academic stress

A study conducted by Casuso-Holgado MJ, Moreno-Morales N, Labajos-Manzanares MT, Montero-Bancalero FJ, revealed that Academic stress is moderately correlated to health symptoms. Specifically, academic stress reported by students is positively associated to physical exhaustion, sleeping disorders, irascibility, negative thoughts, and feeling nervous. The results from this study support the assumption that academic stress has a negative impact on college students' health²⁵.

Another study conducted by Yan YW, Lin RM, Su YK, Liu MY revealed that Academic stress was significantly associated with depression and school burnout and academic stress was negatively correlated with adolescent sleep quality the results also showed that the mediating effect of school burnout and depression on the relationship between adolescent academic stress and sleep quality accounted for 63.31% of the total effect. Of this, as the mediating effect of depression accounted for 44.34%, it was the major effect, and may, to some extent, show the intensity of the effect of academic stress on adolescent sleep quality²⁶.

Related to coping mechanisms:

A study on 'Stressors and stress-coping mechanisms of academic scholars in HEIs' Philippines showed that seeking help from friends seemed to be the most common approach in solving their problems²⁷. Dawit Yikaelo and Warede Tareke (2018) suggested that, watching movies and comedies, prayer, sharing their problems with friends, with their parents and teachers were mostly adopted by the students for coping their stress²⁸.

Another study which involved 32 medical students, and it found that the participants reported a total of 62 stressful incidents among the responses, 41% involved problem-focused coping strategies such as planning and problem-solving, while 17% involved seeking instrumental social support. (58%). Emotion-focused coping

included positive reappraisal (13%), acceptance (10%), avoidance or wishful thinking (10%), venting emotions (6%) and relaxation (3%), Planning and problem-solving (6.7 ± 0.86), seeking instrumental social support (7.8 ± 1.07), positive reappraisal (7.4 ± 0.82), acceptance (6.5 ± 0.84), venting emotions (6.8 ± 1.23) and relaxation (7.7 ± 0.75) were regarded as effective. Avoidance or wishful thinking was reported as ineffective (4.2 ± 1.03)²⁹.

CONCLUSION

The students are primarily stressed by the inadequacy of proper support. There are many personal and social factors that contribute to Students stress. Lack of clarification and unavailability of right career consultants contribute to unidirectional objectives, and even after they graduate, students become clueless and vulnerable in their jobs and help them achieve their goals. Research stresses for academics, extracurricular sports, duties etc. developed beyond compare. Parents expect their children to engage in the rat race and to raise the social standing of their own in society, outshine their rivals. In this age of cutting throat rivalry, the latest fad is running behind numbers, sad reality but true. There is a need to create a friendly and supportive environment in the university level, department level and classroom level. Also, each child is different therefore, it is important for parents to get their children to realize the value of recognizing their forces and motivating them to pursue a career in the field of their skill of their ability. It is important to do what you want or love. Coping mechanisms play an important role in dealing with stress either academic or outside the academic, effective and proper coping can help a person in confronting his/her day-to-day life which further helps them to grow personally and aid in achieving their goals. Coping can be positive and negative, when positive coping can lead a person/student towards achieving his desire goals, on the other hand negative

coping can also direct them to unwanted behaviour and destroy it.

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