



PERCEIVED STRESS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The life of a student in college has always been challenging. Their stress is not just restricted to academics, but could come from various sources such as family conflicts, independent living, financial, health, peer pressure and romantic relationships. In this study 479 undergraduate and postgraduate students were assessed for perceived stress. On the Perceived stress scale, the mean score was 19.36. Female students, students with siblings and those belonging to single parent families or orphans had marginally higher levels of perceived stress. Those students staying with their family and attending college had significantly lower stress scores compared to the other students either staying in the college hostel or outside the college premises on their own or with friends or staying with their relatives and attending college. The ways in which the students cope with stress can have significant short and long term consequences on their physical and emotional health.

KEYWORDS : Late adolescence and early adulthood, Perceived stress, Coping skills.**INTRODUCTION**

Situations, circumstances or any stimulus that is perceived by oneself to be a threat to his or her well-being is referred to as a stressor, that which causes or promotes stress. Stress is conceptualized as a perception of daily hassles and events. Daily hassles and events if appraised or perceived by an individual as threatening, they are considered to be stress factors. Perceived stress is the feeling or thought that an individual has about how much stress they are under at a given point in time or over a given period of time. Perception of the daily hassles or events as stressful by an individual are as a result of factors such as his or her personality traits, coping styles and social support.

Generally college going students are either late adolescents or young adults according to the developmental stages. Adolescence on the whole is a time of change and transition. In this phase there are rapid developmental changes in physical, emotional, social and cognitive domains.

Adolescents, especially in late adolescence face new situations as they enter and complete their high school experiences and enter college for their undergraduate studies, consider moving away from childhood homes for educational and other purposes and grow more independent from their families.

Dealing with new situations and responsibilities increase: commencing self-motivated study, learning to drive, travelling independently, living independently for the first time, facing difficulties with sharing accommodation with other students, some may begin their work careers as young adults and enter into adult relationships with others.

All these changes can increase the stress adolescents and young adults perceive. These changes also reduce the support of family, teachers and friends which they are used to as children. Researchers have shown that girls experience increased levels of perceived stress compared to boys. Socioeconomic status is an important factor with studies showing that youth from low income families experience feelings of hopelessness and display less optimism in general. Ethnicity can also play a role in the types of stress experienced and the way in which it is experienced by the youth. Academic pressure and parental stress due to demands for conformance is more in the Eastern or Asian societies compared to Western societies. Another important cause of stress in college students is peer pressure. Romantic relationships with their ups, lows and breakups can be a source of stress, so also adolescents in emotional distress get involved in such relationships as a way of increasing their status among peers. Conflict within family environment between parents or parents and adolescents can be another source of increased stress. Both extremes of parenting

styles, one being a lack of support from parents and the other being parents who are highly critical contribute to high stress levels in adolescents.

Significant life events and many of the common stressors of adolescence have been linked to mental health and behavior problems. These problems include depression and anxiety as well as externalizing behaviors such as aggression and involvement in risk taking and destructive behaviors.

Adolescence is a vulnerable period for the emergence of psychiatric disorders and nearly one third of the disorders seen in adults have their onset in adolescence. The disorders may range from depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, substance use disorders, to severe psychiatric disorders like bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia. Anxiety and depressive disorders are among the most common psychiatric conditions in adolescents.

Several studies document prevalence rates ranging from 8% to 20% for depression in adolescents. The most important outcome of concern would be suicide as it is the third leading cause of death among adolescents.

Adolescents require adequate space, privacy, confidentiality throughout the period of evaluation and management of problems. There is a huge gap between psychiatric morbidity in adolescents and facilities available for specific interventions for this age group.

AIM

To study perceived stress in college students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS**Study Design**

Cross-sectional descriptive study

Sampling

Purposive sampling

Study sites

Physiotherapy and Nursing Colleges of Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute.

Subjects

Undergraduate and postgraduate students of the above mentioned colleges consenting for the study were included. Strict confidentiality was maintained as it was not required of the students to mention their names while participating in the study.

Instruments

1. Proforma

To collect basic socio-demographic, course of study, living environment and family details.

2. Perceived stress scale

Developed by Sheldon Cohen, it measures the perception of stress, the degree to situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. Items were designed to tap how unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded respondents find their lives. The questions in the scale ask about feelings and thoughts during the last month

METHODS

The above mentioned scale is a self- report and was administered in a single sitting to each student, with the students seated in a separate classroom, in batches, in a quiet atmosphere. During the administration of the scale, each question was read out loudly and explained. The data so obtained was analyzed using the SPSS.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

A total of 479 students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Physiotherapy (318 students) and Nursing (161 students) were included in the study, of which 144 were males and 335 were female students. The mean age of the study subjects was 18.9 years (range 17-24 years).

296 students were staying with their parents and attending college while 106 students were put up in the college hostel. 37 students were staying outside the college premises on their own or with friends while 40 students were staying in a relative's place and attending college.

Regarding family, 53 students were single children, 250 had one

sibling while 176 students had 2 or more siblings. 62 students were from single parent families, 17 were orphans and 144 students had a parent with substance use.

On the Perceived stress scale, the mean score was 19.36 with a standard deviation of 4.22. Though not significant, female students (mean= 19.50) had higher stress scores than males (mean=19.03) (Table 1). Those students staying with their family (mean=19.06) and attending college had significantly lower stress scores compared to the rest (mean=19.85) either staying in the college hostel or outside the college premises on their own or with friends or staying with their relatives and attending college (Table 2a and 2b). Compared to students who were single children (mean=19.11) those students with one or more siblings had marginally higher stress scores (mean=19.39) (Table 3). Students hailing from single parent families or those who were orphans had slightly higher stress scores (mean=19.47) than the other students (mean=19.34) (Table 4).

Table 1

PSS scores in males and females				
Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Males	144	19.0347	4.22681	.35223
Females	335	19.5045	4.21778	.23044

Table 2a& 2b

PSS Scores				
Staying with family/away	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SWF	296	19.0642	3.81068	.22149
SAF	183	19.8470	4.78420	.35366

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Staying with/away from family	Equal variances assumed	6.709	.010	-1.978	477	.049	-.78281	.39578	-1.56049	-.00512
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.876	322.193	.062	-.78281	.41729	-1.60377	.03816

Table 3

PSS Scores				
Siblings	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Single child	53	19.1132	4.16330	.57187
With siblings	426	19.3944	4.23258	.20507

Table 4

PSS Scores				
Type of family	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Regular	256	19.4023	4.43496	.27718
Others	223	19.3184	3.97197	.26598

DISCUSSION

With regard to gender differences several studies have consistently shown that girls experience increased levels of perceived stress compared with boys. In addition to the usual challenges faced by adolescents girls have to deal with the added stress of biological and social challenges they face during early adolescence.

Studies have also shown that conflict within the family environment can be a source of increased stress leading to depressive symptoms in adolescents. In this study too students coming from single parent family and those having lost both the parents had higher levels of perceived stress compared to students coming from regular families. Adolescents with a supportive family tend to employ more functional coping strategies in times of stress such as positive appraisal.

Findings from this study show that single children had lower stress scores compared to those with siblings. Probable explanations could include adjustment issues between siblings leading to sibling

rivalry, comparison between siblings with regard to academic performance or in other ways by family or relatives contributing to the perceived stress.

Results of this study show that students staying by themselves either in the college premises or outside had significantly higher stress scores compared those students who were staying with their family and attending college as day scholars. This probably can be attributed to reduced parental support to which they have been used to as children and having to do everything independently and shouldering more responsibilities on their own.

Late adolescence and early adulthood, the time usually spent as a college student, is a time when youth face a variety of new potentially stressful experiences. Understanding how the students experience, perceive, react to, and cope with stressful events provides a foundation for preventive intervention services like helping them avoid stressful situations, change their appraisal of stress, adopt better coping strategies or enlisting social support.

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