



ACADEMIC STRESS : CONCEPT, SOURCES AND EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT Out of number of stresses faced by adolescents and young adults, academic stress emerges as significant mental health problem in recent years (Rangaswamy,1995). Many school students, disabled and non-disabled, undergo considerable academic stress that affects their academic performance, psychosocial adjustment along with their overall emotional and physical well-being. In an academic situation, such as school, a student reacts in the form of mental distress to an anticipated frustration associated with failure in annual examination or even to the awareness of the possibility of such failure (Gupta & Khan, 1987). Thus, academic stress has been reported as an important factor influencing individuals' various behaviours, activities and academic performance. This paper is an attempt to underline the basic concept, sources and effects of academic stress on the students.

KEYWORDS : Academic Performance, Academic Stress, Adolescents, Disabled, Frustration, Mental Health, Psychosocial Adjustment.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC STRESS?

Academic Stress is the one significant obstacle to school students' academic performance. It may adversely affect their physical, emotional and mental health and thus, can prove to be the ultimate career stopper. In the present age of competitions, where each person is facing challenges in one way or the other and each has high aspirations but lack of time to achieve these goals ultimately results in the occurrence of stress.

It is important to note that not all stress is negative or bad. For instance, in his work on the topic of stress, Hans Hugo Bruno Selye, more commonly known as Hans Selye (1974) conceptualised two categories, namely good or desirable stress (eustress) and bad or undesirable stress (distress). Eustress is pleasant, or at least challenging, and can produce positive effects such as the maximisation of output and creativity. Ironically, without this positive type of stimuli, life can become stressful. In contrast, distress is evident when a person perceives himself or herself as having no ability to control a stressful event. Distress is likely to result in a loss of productivity and a decline in overall levels of well-being or happiness. Although everyone manifests a response to stress, reactions vary widely across individuals. Even at a physiological level, when confronted with a major stressor, some people experience a rapid increase in heart rate while others feel a tightness or knotting in the stomach or tension headaches (Johansson, Cavalini & Pettersson, 1996).

Shirom (1982) defined stress as an individual's perception that environmental demands (stressors) exceed his or her capabilities and resources, thus leading to negative outcomes. Similarly, Humphrey, Yow and Bowden (2000), described stress as any factor, acting internally or externally, which makes adaptation to environment difficult and which induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between himself and the external environment. In short, stress is what we feel when we think we've lost control of events. Stress is an integral part of everyday life and simply cannot be avoided.

Hence, the academic stress can be defined as the anxiety and stress that comes from schooling and education. There is often a lot of pressure that comes along with school life. There is studying, homework, tests, labs, reading, quizzes and so on. There is the stress of doing all of work, balancing time and finding time for extra-curricular activities. Stress can be a positive aspect of learning if students experience stress as a challenge can exhibit an increased capacity to learn (Roberts & White, 1989).

Academic stress is an emotional tension of a student which is expressed or felt by him during his failure to cope with the academic demands and its consequences may be exhibited in the form of major health hazards and problems, both physical and mental. Moderate amount of stress can motivate students in their academics and increase their capacity to learn but too much academic stress may interfere with how a student prepares, concentrates and performs. Stressed children show signs of emotional disabilities, aggressive behaviour, shyness,

social phobia and often lack interest in otherwise enjoyable activities. Excessive stress affects students' academic performance. Academic stress may take many forms and can affect students in different ways. Procrastination is a common stumbling block for many personality types. Research shows that poor prioritization, time management and self-regulation often sabotage students mentally, physically and academically. Putting off reading, paper writing, and other studying until the last minute has a two-pronged effect. It increases chances of doing poorly and it can stir up feelings of stress and anxiety. When academic stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, students experience physical and psychological impairment. (Murphy & Archer 1996).

Thus, academic stress has been reported as an important factor influencing individuals' various behaviours, activities and academic performance. The key to avoid becoming a drop out, as a result of academic stress is to identify its sources or factors which lead to academic stress.

SOURCES OF ACADEMIC STRESS

Academic stress among students has long been researched on and researchers have identified different sources responsible for it. Information load, high expectations of students, parents and teachers, academic pressure, high competitiveness, limited time are some of the important sources which create tension, pressure, fear and anxiety among students.

Sources/stressors influencing students can be categorised as academic, financial, time or health related and self-imposed (Goodman, 1993). Research studies reveal that lack of parental help, congenial examination system, living up to parental expectation, and attitude of the teachers and fear of examination were the stress causing factors. One of the most common causes of academic stress is anxiety, reports Misra. Her study (2000) revealed that anxiety, ineffective time management and a lack of satisfying activities outside of academia were strong predictors of academic stress.

Despite disagreement about the predominant cause of academic stress, researchers agree that the most common form of anxiety causing academic stress is achievement anxiety. Achievement anxiety is a fear of failure in an academic setting that arises when parents, teachers or the student's own expectations exceed what the student believes he/she can realistically achieve. Sources of achievement anxiety include failure to satisfy ambitious or overly critical parents' expectations in early childhood as well as early exposure to overachieving siblings or peers. Seeing others receive praise and rewards for their achievements can give students a false impression of what teachers and parents expect of them. Other important sources of academic stress in school children are imposing excessively high self-expectations and the great expectation of parents for achieving good marks in their examination. Students now have more home work than ever before and if the child fails to do home work as per the expectations of their teachers, the result is the cumulative academic stress.

Kadapatti and Vijayaluxmi (2012) found that high aspiration, poor study habits, more study problems, change in medium of instruction and low socio-economic conditions are the factors responsible for academic stress. To fall short of their own or others' expectations in school, job, athletics, or any other activity one risks both external and internal costs: threat to academic or career prospects, disapproval, rejection, humiliation, guilt, and a blow to the self-esteem (Schafer, 1996).

Many of school life's demands cause stress especially academic burden, financial problems, adjustment to the school environment, high expectations, limited opportunities and fear of examinations and when a student feels academically stressed, it can affect everything he does. Stress can cause how he feels, how he thinks, how he behaves and how his body works.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

Students today face increasing amounts of school work, assignment deadlines, and exams. By having all this stress and thoughts in their heads they will probably not be able to focus on school work and studying for exams. All the school assignments will take most of their "free time" and being able to play sports, having hobbies and socializing with others will no longer exist because they won't have the time to enjoy life. This stress can be really hard to deal with and if the students are not careful they may end up making bad decisions that can affect their future such as dropping out of school or falling into drugs. It is "cultural truism" that stress is associated with impairment of health and the negative emotional experiences associated with stress are detrimental to "quality of life and sense of well-being" (Sinha, 2000).

Poor academic performance, diminished peer popularity, depression, attention difficulties, somatic complaints and substance abuse are commonly observed problems among the victims of academic stress without being aware of how to cope with them (Sinha, 2000).

A number of researchers have discovered that excessive amounts of stress are associated with many harmful correlates in the lives of school students.

I. Physiological Effects

The direct physiological effect of stress can be observed in biological damage that results from a prolonged stress response (McEwen, 2005). These functions include our working memory, self-regulation and cognitive flexibility. Executive functions are critical for reasoning, planning and problem solving, and for regulating emotions and attention. They are essential to academic success.

Academic stress may cause poor sleep. Many studies demonstrate that students consistently fail to get healthy amounts of sleep and the leading causes for this phenomenon are an excess of homework and stress. Several harmful consequences are associated with too little sleep, such as cognitive impairment, interpersonal difficulty, and, reciprocally, higher stress (Carskadon, Acebo, & Jenni, 2004).

II. Psychological Effects:

Stress is a significant risk factor for many mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Stress can also affect our emotional well-being and emotional intelligence. It negatively impacts our ability to intuit other people's feelings, convey our own feelings and communicate. Stress can prevent us from being aware of and controlling our emotions, getting along with others, adapting to change, and maintaining a positive mood. Stress is related to reduced self-concept, low self-esteem and low self-worth.

High levels stress can:

- Affect decision-making, creating impulsivity
- Increase likelihood of making mistake
- Cause us to ignore cues
- Interfere with personal relationships
- Lower productivity

How can a student having such psychological problems caused by academic stress be happy and lead a good and balanced life? Negative emotional experiences associated with stress are detrimental to happiness and overall well being.

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