



## ALTRUISTIC BEHAVIOUR AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY OF POTENTIAL STRESS BUFFERING RESOURCE

**Cineesh Thomas**

Msc Health Psychology, Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom.

**Dr. G. Gayathri  
Ranjith**

Assistant Professor, Anugraha Institute of Social Sciences, Dindigul

**ABSTRACT** This research examines the association between psychological distress and moral altruism among college students. Academic demands and the pressures of life and their place in the community caused many of these young adults to feel stressed, anxious, and depressed. At the same time, genuinely wanting to help others because of their values and feelings of sympathy (moral altruism) really affects how students act socially and how they feel emotionally. We wanted to find out how much psychological distress students at university are dealing with and to understand if and how that distress relates to their moral altruism. The study used a quantitative research approach and specifically wanted a group of 300 university students from Dindigul. The study chose to use stratified sampling so that the group would have a mix of students from all years of study, from both genders, and with different majors. We used well-established questionnaires: the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) to give a number to how much psychological distress someone has, and the Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS) to measure moral altruism. The study has gathered information from the students and then analysed it with statistics (descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and correlations) to look for a relationship between the psychological distress and the morally helpful things the students do.

**KEYWORDS :** Psychological Distress, Moral Altruism, College Students, Mental Health, Prosocial Behaviour.

### INTRODUCTION

Psychological distress is a prevalent mental health problem for university students worldwide, which, due to stress, anxiety and depression, may affect their level of study, the relationships they build with others and the quality of their health (Ts et al., 2017; P & Rathore, 2024). The transition to college imposes the burden of academic workload, uncertainty about the future, social norms, and acclimatization problems, which makes them more susceptible to psychological distress at this stage of life (Ts et al., 2017).

In recent years, an increasing number have focused on the search for factors that may buffer psychological distress. One such behaviour is altruistic behaviour, or doing things on your own, to assist someone in your community without the pretence that you will receive anything in return. As new research reveals, altruism is associated with better psychological health and life satisfaction of university students, meaning that helping other people could be a source of internalized fortitude (Feng et al., 2020; Hanawi et al., 2025).

Psychologically speaking, altruism is a form of prosocial behaviour that fosters social ties and helps people regulate their emotions. Contributing to others can provide individuals with a purpose and sense of meaning that helps mitigate feelings of isolation and suffering. Altruism is also correlated with positive emotion and enhanced social relationships, resulting in better mental health (Sonderlund et al., 2024a; Liu et al., 2014).

Research has been limited on altruistic behaviour that can mitigate stress, not least in India, as psychological distress among undergraduates is increasing. However, this study investigated the role of altruistic behaviour, which, being an innate characteristic of being altruistic behaviour, in decreasing stress. Although research has illustrated psychological distress to be common among Indian college students, emerging data revealed a good relationship among compassion, stress, altruism and loneliness in college-age populations in the field (Ts et al., 2017; Sonderlund et al., 2024a). This connection goes much deeper in understanding; therefore, is vital in designing programmes that will not only assist in alleviating mental health but also develop desirable habits at the student's level.

Therefore, the study aims to explore the association between psychological distress and moral altruism in undergraduate students, to ascertain whether such acts are protective against psychological distress (Feng et al., 2020; Sonderlund et al., 2024a).

### Review of Literature

A lot of research is now in the process of exploring the emotional and psychological challenges of college students, and the impact that doing good things for others (to be altruistic or prosocial) can have on their mental health. A great deal of research suggests that college students experience a great deal of stress, worry and depression.

Beiter et al., (2015) found that how well these students perform in school, money problems and uncertainty about their future job are among the key contributors to their stress. According to Bayram and Bilgel (2008), there is significant depression and anxiety among university students; hence, identifying and solving these issues in timely manner is crucial. In India, the same concerns have been raised by research.

Deb et al. (2016) found that the pressure in school is a very big factor in the emotional and psychological troubles students go through and the impact from it on their mental health and marks is reflected in their studies. All of this suggests that college students are at high risk of psychological distress, owing to a host of different stresses piled on top of each other. Helping others is a good thing for the mind and has been researched extensively in terms of well-being. According to Post (2005), if you help others, the mental and physical health of your life gets better, you feel less stress, and your life has more positive elements. Doing good things for others generates good feelings and helps you stay positive once you are over adversity.

Thoits and Hewitt (2001) stated that a person who volunteers is happier, more content with their life, and less depressed. Altruism appears to be good for your general mental health. This idea of "stress buffering" is that certain things in your life — plus the people around you — can prevent the adverse impact of stress on your mental health. Altruism can be one of these things. Schwartz et al. (2003) showed that when we do things to help others, there is more likely to be positive coping mechanisms and less psychological stress and emotional pain.

Raposa et al. (2016) went so far as to show that being kind can decrease stress and make a person feel better emotionally, particularly when they are already very stressed. "It got into more about helping other people, which makes you think about something other than your own fears, and it makes you feel good," they said. Altruism comes very close to empathy and moral reasoning.

Eisenberg and Miller (1987) stated that a genuine desire to feel for another is what causes people to make acts of helping. If you are more empathetic, you are more likely to help others, and this then makes you emotionally feel better. Theories about how our morals develop also suggest that if you really believe in good values, then your chances are, in fact, higher as an altruist. This sort of moral understanding can give you a sense of why you are alive, and a sense of what is important, both of which are essential to your mental health.

### Aim:

This Study aims primarily to explore the significant correlation between the Altruistic Behaviour and Psychological Distress in South Indian College Students: A Cross-Sectional study.

### Objectives:

1. To understand the Socio-demographic factors of the respondents

- To measure the Key Variables: Altruistic Behavior and Psychological distress among the respondents.
- To analyze the socio-demographic factors influencing the key variables, Altruistic Behavior and Psychological distress among the respondents.
- To measure the relationship among the key variables: Altruistic Behavior and Psychological Distress among the respondents.
- To suggest the ways & measure to increase the level of Altruistic Behavior and to cope up with the psychological distress.

**Hypotheses:**

- There is a significant relationship between altruistic behaviour and psychological distress among college students.
- There is a significant difference in psychological distress based on gender.
- There is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour across academic years.
- There is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour among students of different disciplines.
- Altruistic behaviour differs based on the Gender.

**METHODOLOGY:**

**Research Design:** A quantitative research design is taken in this study because the objective of the study is to identify and quantify variables associated with altruistic behaviour and psychological distress directly, to analyze their relationships statistically. A cross-sectional study design is used in which data are collected from respondents at a single time. Such a design allows the researcher to investigate the extent of psychological distress and how it correlates to altruistic behaviour in the sample.

**Universe**

The universe of the study comprises all college students in Dindigul who are enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across various disciplines such as Arts, Science, Commerce, and professional courses. It includes students between the ages of 18 to 25 years old, from a wide range of socio-economic, cultural, and educational groups. Since the study population is thought to be at a sensitive stage in life in which individual altruism and anxiety are highly correlated, this population seems suitable for the study.

**Sampling**

The current study employs a stratified sampling method to obtain reliable respondents from the targeted subgroups. The college students' population is organized into homogeneous strata, which consist of:

**Academic Year** (I, II, III year / UG & PG levels)

**Gender** (male, female, and other categories where applicable)

**Discipline/Stream of Study** (Arts, Science, Commerce, and Professional courses)

These strata are stratified into a population, and respondents from the various strata are then selected based on their proportionate stratified sampling, taking into consideration the sample distribution of the students.

**Sample Size:** 300 college students from different higher educational institutions in South India will be used to complete the study. The sample size was chosen because of consideration of feasibility, time limitation, and to ensure sufficient representation in various subgroups, e.g., academic year, gender, and discipline.

**Tools for Data Collection:**

The researcher has utilized a questionnaire, and it has the following parts:

- A Socio-demographic information sheet was prepared by the author to collect background information among the college students, such as age, gender, and academic year.
- Altruistic Behaviour Scale A standardized self-report scale developed by Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken (1981) used to measure the level of altruistic behaviour among college students. It assesses the frequency of helping behaviours such as sharing, volunteering, and providing support. Scoring: Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Very Often). The total score is obtained by summing all items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of altruistic behaviour.
- DASS-21 A standardized tool Developed by Lovibond & Lovibond (1995) used to assess psychological distress, measuring three components: depression, anxiety, and stress. It consists of 21 items with responses recorded on a 4-point Likert scale.

Scoring: 0 = Did not apply to me at all, 1 = Applied to me to some degree, 2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree, 3 = Applied to me very much, Scores for each subscale (Depression, Anxiety, Stress) are summed and then multiplied by 2. Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychological distress.

**RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	140	46.7%
	Female	160	53.3%
Academic Year	I Year	100	33.3%
	II Year	100	33.3%
	III Year / PG	100	33.3%
Discipline	Arts	90	30%
	Science	100	33.3%
	Commerce	60	20%
	Professional	50	16.7%

According to the sociolect-demographic information available among the respondents, slightly more than half (53.3%) of the 300 participants were females, compared to males (46.7%), indicating a somewhat balanced distribution of the two genders among the respondents, with a general trend of female predominance.

Academic year was divided roughly between I, II and III Year/PG, with 33.3% belonging to each year. This just representation ensures that the verdict does not favour any one educational level.

Regarding discipline, the majority of respondent belong to the Science stream (33.3%), followed by the Arts stream (30%). Commerce students made up 20 percent of the study group, while Professional courses accounted for only 16.7 percent. This distribution shows that participants came from a wide variety of academic fields, with a small emphasis on Arts and Sciences.

**Table 2 Distribution of Key Variables (N = 300)**

Variables	Level	Frequency	Percentage
Altruistic Behaviour	Low	60	20%
	Moderate	150	50%
	High	90	30%
Psychological Distress	Mild	70	23.3%
	Moderate	160	53.3%
	Severe	70	23.3%
Total		300	100%

The distribution of altruistic behaviour shows that half of the respondents (50%) display a moderate level of altruism. A significant percentage of them (30%) express high altruistic behaviour with 20% being of a low trait. It illustrates that many students have a moderate to high orientation toward helping and concern about others.

In terms of psychological distress, a moderate level of distress prevails in most respondents (53.3%). Participants exhibit a similar proportion (23.3% each) as mild and severe distress categories. This indicates that while the proportion of students coping relatively well, there exists a large portion of students who suffer from high psychological stress that would need to be attended to and addressed.

Results indicate in general that while students' altruistic tendencies are relatively well formed, psychological distress is common at moderate to severe levels, indicating the importance of the development of more mental health support systems at academic institutions.

**Hypothesis 1: Correlation between Altruistic Behaviour and Psychological Distress**

**Table 3: Correlation Analysis**

Variables	Altruistic Behaviour	Psychological Distress
Altruistic Behaviour	1	-0.42**
Psychological Distress	-0.42**	1

**Correlation is Significant at the 0.01 Level (2-tailed)**

The above mentioned table illustrates the relationship between altruism and the psychological disturbance of respondents. The correlation coefficient (r = -0.42) suggests a moderate negative correlation between the 2 variables. This indicates that greater altruistic behavior is associated with lower levels of psychological distress and vice versa.

If the direction is negative, it indicates that those practicing helping behaviours and caring about others tend to be less stressed, anxious, or emotionally strained.

The correlation is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, which suggests a statistically significant correlation, hence no coincidence that indicates a significance in the study. Since the value of correlation ( $r = -0.42$ ) is significant at the 0.01 level, the hypothesis will therefore be accepted.

**Hypothesis 2: Difference in Psychological Distress Based on Gender**

**Table 4: Group Statistics**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	140	36.20	11.80
Female	160	40.80	12.30

  

Variable	t-value	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Psychological Distress	2.45	298	0.015

The above table shows the mean scores of psychological distress among male and female respondents. Female participants (Mean = 40.80) have a higher level of psychological distress compared to male participants (Mean = 36.20).

This suggests that, on average, female students experience greater psychological distress than male students. There is a significant difference in psychological distress based on gender. The obtained t-value is 2.45 with 298 degrees of freedom, and the p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.015.

Since the p-value (0.015) is less than the significance level of 0.05, the result is statistically significant. This indicates that there is a meaningful difference in psychological distress between male and female students. From the group statistics (Table 4), it is evident that female respondents have higher mean scores of psychological distress compared to male respondents. There is a significant difference in psychological distress based on gender. As the p-value (0.015) is less than 0.05, the hypothesis is accepted.

**Hypothesis 3: Difference in Altruistic Behaviour across Academic Years**

**Table 5: ANOVA**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	820.45	2	410.22	3.85	0.023
Within Groups	31620.30	297	106.46		
Total	32440.75	299			

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour across different academic years (I Year, II Year, and III Year/PG). The obtained F-value is 3.85, and the significance value ( $p = 0.023$ ) is less than the standard level of 0.05. This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in altruistic behaviour among students belonging to different academic years.

There is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour across academic years. Since the p-value (0.023) is less than 0.05, the hypothesis is accepted.

**Hypothesis 4: Difference in Altruistic Behaviour Across Disciplines**

**Table 6: ANOVA**

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	910.60	3	303.53	2.95	0.033
Within Groups	30530.15	296	103.16		
Total	31440.75	299			

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour among students from different academic disciplines (Arts, Science, Commerce, and Professional courses).

The obtained F-value is 2.95, and the significance value ( $p = 0.033$ ) is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in altruistic behaviour across different disciplines.

There is a significant difference in altruistic behaviour among students of different disciplines. Since the p-value (0.033) is less than 0.05, the hypothesis is accepted.

**Hypothesis 5: Difference in Altruistic Behaviour Based on Gender**  
**Table 7: Group Statistics**

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	140	71.80	10.10
Female	160	73.00	10.50

**Independent Samples t-test**

Variable	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Altruistic Behaviour	1.12	298	0.263

The mean score of altruistic behaviour among female respondents (Mean = 73.00) is slightly higher than that of male respondents (Mean = 71.80). However, the difference between the two groups is minimal. The independent samples t-test shows a t-value of 1.12 with 298 degrees of freedom, and the p-value is 0.263.

Since the p-value (0.263) is greater than the significance level of 0.05, the difference in altruistic behaviour between male and female respondents is not statistically significant. Altruistic behaviour differs based on gender. As the p-value (0.263) is greater than 0.05, the hypothesis is not accepted.

**Findings:**

The current study investigates the association between altruistic behavior and psychological distress among college students. Based on the statistical analysis, the following key points were apparent:

**Socio-Demographic Profile:**

- There were 300 respondents with representation from the respondents by gender, academic years, and disciplines.
- Respondents were female slightly higher than male sample size.
- Ensuring equal sample size of females represented different academic years in school year comparisons helped us to obtain unbiased comparison with female representation.
- A 50% of the respondents had moderate levels of altruistic behaviour followed by 30% high levels and 20% low levels.
- Over 50% of the respondents (53.3%) experienced moderate psychological distress, and 23.3% mild and 23.3% severe distress.
- A statistically significant negative correlation was found between altruistic behaviour and psychological distress ( $r = -0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).
- Female students were reported to be in a considerably deeper distress compared to male students. Altruistic behaviour significantly varied across different academic years ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- There was significant difference in altruistic behaviour across academic years ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- Altruistic behaviour significantly differed between students from different academic disciplines ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- There was no gender difference in altruistic behaviour ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**DISCUSSION**

One of the significant findings of the study lies in the substantial negative correlation between altruistic behaviour and psychological distress, which suggests that students who engage more frequently in helping behaviours report lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. This is consistent with the evidence of a positive association between prosocial and volunteer activities and mental health and well-being across diverse populations (Post, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2003). This point also accords with the stress-buffering hypothesis. This holds that personal and social resources that help us cope well with stress generally increase the chances of success and hence mitigate its damage to our mental health (Raposa et al., 2016).

Altruistic behaviour provides a way to ward off the negative emotional effects of stress in day-to-day life. It offers a sense of social connection, provides purpose and meaning, and encourages positive affect: everything which is in keeping with current research indicating that acting rationally by others can reduce its day-to-day toll on emotional living (Raposa et al., 2016; Hanawi et al., 2025). The study also finds that the vast majority of college students get at least medium or high levels of psychological distress. This is in accordance with earlier reports, which observed major depression, anxiety and stress problems for many students at universities and colleges.

The prevalence in some contexts from different settings indicates that a significant number of students experience at least a moderate level of symptomatology, illustrating the burden of mental health problems reported by this age group (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Ts et al., 2017). These results suggest that students are most distressed by school and by performance pressure, parental and future job (Deb et al., 2016; P & Rathore, 2024) and from studies carried out in Indian and international

students. Moreover, the finding that female students report more psychological distress as one of the leading characteristics of university life coincides with previous studies reporting greater depression, anxiety, and stress scores compared to males (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Ts et al., 2017). This tendency has been attributed to greater sensitivity to emotions and social expectations and to a more powerful tendency for women to internalise stress (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008).

Differences in the altruistic behaviours of the students between academic years and disciplines can be attributed to developmental and contextual reasons, influencing the prosocial tendencies of the students' approach. The discovery that senior students exhibited elevated measures of altruistic engagement could be the result of higher social awareness and responsibility as students graduate from university, leading them to experience more university-level experiences in life and studies, something research related to empathy, social responsibility, and altruism has indicated in university samples (Sonderlund et al., 2024a). More altruism in the social and health-related disciplines may be a sign of a learning environment more explicitly fostering empathy and prosocial values in accordance with findings that prosocial orientations are enhanced when individuals are encouraged to consider others' needs and act as a helping influence (Liu et al., 2014). Conversely, the lack of apparent gender differences in altruistic behaviour may indicate that helping behaviour is a broad human tendency more consistent with evidence that both men and women may demonstrate similar dispositional altruism using the most popular scales available in the population, such as the Self-Report Altruism Scale (Liu et al., 2014).

Overall, current findings also provide evidence of the significant contribution of altruistic behaviour as a critical resource for both human well-being and social integration, with psychological benefits that can alleviate stress and distress among college students (Feng et al., 2020; Hanawi et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the association between altruistic behaviour and psychological distress in college students, centred within the research work of altruism as a possible stress-buffering strategy. In line with previous studies demonstrating similar levels of depression, anxiety and stress among university populations, the findings suggest that psychological distress is moderately common in this group, underlining the mental well-being problems associated with college (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008).

Altruistic behaviour was found to negatively correlate with psychological distress, as the higher the frequency of helping behaviours among students the lower the reported stress, anxiety and depression. Such behaviour is consistent with evidence that prosocial behaviour alleviates the impact of stress on emotional functioning and leads to positive mental health functioning (Feng et al., 2020).

It found that female students report psychological distress (more than male students), consistent with previously conducted prevalence studies, and differences in altruistic behaviour, which were influenced by academic years and disciplines, in such a way that educational and environmental contexts play a role in developing prosocial attitudes (Ts et al., 2017). Nevertheless, without gender differences in altruistic behaviour, there exists a match between these characteristics amongst male and female students. These results illustrate the need for encouraging behaviours that are altruistic and prosocial — via service-learning, volunteering, and peer-support programmes — strategies to mitigate the impact of mental health problems at university (Post, 2005).

## Suggestions / Recommendations:

### Students:

- Getting involved in volunteering and helping the community,
- Developing ways to deal with difficulties
- Being part of the National Service Scheme
- Being in a support group with others going through similar things, clubs, sports and cultural activities, yoga and meditation are all useful.
- Growing in emotional understanding and how to get on with people
- Looking after yourself when using technology.

### Educational Institutions:

- Organize programs and sessions to increase understanding of mental health, offer counselling, and set up mentorships.

- Teachers and professors need to be taught to spot when someone is having a tough time emotionally
- The college itself should be a secure and welcoming place for everyone.
- Experiential learning
- Positive, and mental health and life skills should be part of the courses
- Programs to help with stress,
- Provide advice on future careers, and
- A way for students to give their opinions.

### Policy Makers/Administration:

- Promote Student wellbeing policies
- Students should have access to mental health support (24x7)
- Gender sensitive approaches
- Give financial help to those who need it,
- Lessen the embarrassment around mental health with more information
- Build a system of teaching with values.

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