

# Academic Stress in Students

## A Review

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### Abstract

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*Everyone is focusing on performance, competition and perfection, which leads to menacing increase in stress. The signs of stress and its consequences are omnipresent. Every individual spends sufficient duration of their life in studying, therefore it is likely to have some kind of academic stress. This article examines what existing literature reveals about academic stress, particularly, attention paid to the sources of academic stress and its impact on students. Firstly, concept of stress is described and existing literature on students' stress is reviewed in light of two questions, which are the different sources of stress and how stress is affecting students. This article includes review of researches done in India and abroad with particular attention being directed to academic setting.*

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### CONCEPT OF STRESS

*Stringere* is the Latin word from where the term Stress has been derived and it refers to stretch tight. Cannon (1935) proposed the very first idea about the stress. According to him, passing a critical stress level, triggered by physical and emotional stimuli endanger the homeostatic control of organism. Dunbar (1947) defined stress as the quality of stimulus and individual's response to

it. Walf (1950) had explained stress as a state of human organism. Stress is most commonly defined according to the Transactional Model given by Lazarus and Launier (1978). According to them, it is a relational concept, in which a person needs to balance demands and their abilities to meet these demands. It can have damaging effects on pupil's mental health. According to Hans Selye (1983), stress is the non-specific

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response of the body to any demand for change. Stressors are defined as situations that disrupt, or threaten to disrupt, individual's daily functioning and cause people to make adjustments (Auerbach and Grambling, 1998). Stress is also viewed as a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological process that occurs as a person tries to adjust to or deal with stressors (Bernstein et al., 2008).

What is Academic Stress? Academic stress is a psychological torment related to exasperation caused by academic letdown or fear of failure (Gupta and Khan, 1987). According to Bisht (1989), academic stress is related to academics that tax or exceed the available resources (internal or external) as experienced by the student involved and it comprises of individual's perception of academic pressure, frustration, anxiety and conflict.

Academic stressors include the student's observation of the broad knowledge base required and the perception of an inadequate time to develop it (Carveth et al., 1996). Academic stress can be expressed by understanding the interaction between environmental stressors, the student's evaluation of academic related stressors and responses to the same (Lee and Larson, 2000). Stress often reaches its peak when there is a lack of resources to cope with the academic demands leading to physiological and psychological manifestations of it (Lou and Chi, 2000). However,

stress is not always harmful. A little amount of stress is necessary to push a person to achieve a goal (Rudland et al., 2019). Academic stress has been identified as a damaging issue across various countries, cultures and ethnic groups (Wong, Wong and Scott, 2006). It has, therefore, become a salient topic and cause for concern in academic circles. Various mental health problems are happening due to increase in stress level where students report increased anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideations on one hand whereas on the other hand it could be a "career stopper" (Kadapatti and Vijayalaxmi, 2012). There are a lot of academic burdens on students such as, facing regular examinations, responding to the questions of teachers in classroom, compulsion of academic progress, efforts to grasp the lessons of teachers, feeling of cut throat competition with peer group, pressure of academic expectations from family and teachers (Sagar and Singh, 2017). As a consequence, they can be under stress, since above demands are related to achievement of an academic goal. So, academic stress is also related to the achievement of an academic goal (Lal, 2013).

According to Prabhu (2015), academic stress is the anxiety and stress that comes from schooling and education. There are many changes and transitions in an individual's life with time where stress becomes an inseparable part of their journey. "Adolescents are particularly

vulnerable to the concept of academic stress as the transitions occur at an individual and social level". It, therefore, becomes necessary to understand the sources and impact of academic stress to derive adequate and efficient intervention strategies. This review aims to understand academic stress at a psychosocial level highlighting the sources and the impact of academic stress.

### **REVIEW PROCESS**

To conduct a comprehensive review of literature on academic stress in students, articles were collected from online databases such as Elsevier, Springer, Pub Med, Jstor and Google Scholar. Apart from this, review included perusal of books, dissertations, abstract and doctoral thesis. The review examines academic stress and its impact on students along with the sources of stress detailing Indian and Foreign findings. The review also considered the sources of academic stress for the students in the adolescent age group.

### **Review of Academic Stress Studies in Abroad**

**Sources of Stress—** Sources of stress are the situations or events which lead to threaten people if they lack the resources to overcome the demand of that situation and these sources or stressors disrupt the daily functioning of person causing them to make adjustments.

#### **a) At School Level**

Kyriacou and Butcher (1993) conducted a study on Class XI school children to examine sources of stress in the school environment as part of a case study with a 30 item questionnaire and found that examinations were the most commonly reported source of stress, followed by deadlines for assessed work and revision as second and third most commonly reported sources of stress. The finding that examinations stand out as a particular source of worry and stress for secondary school students has been replicated in different samples of students (Aherne, 2001; Kouzma and Kennedy, 2004). Hodge (1996) in his study found that students vulnerable to anxiety were most commonly under stress. Gallagher and Millar (1996) found that the six of the top ten ranked worries were related to school work among which passing examinations was ranked as the top worry and the consequences of failing examinations for future employment ranked third.

Mohammadi (2011) studied student's coping with stress at high school level particularly at 11th and 12th grade at government secondary schools located in Tehran. He found that total twenty six percent of secondary students were under stress with main stressors including examinations, lengthy syllabus to prepare, etc.

Not only the adolescent children faced stress, but there are findings which suggest that children at primary school and infants also perceive some sort of stress. Dickey and Henderson (1989) found the top four stressors reported by 141 children in kindergarten, first, and third grades to be school work, peer relationships, personal injury or loss, and loss of personal comfort, space, or time. Connor (2001) has extended the study of academic stress to infant and primary school children. The results showed signs of stress and/or anxiety beyond a typical level. Other stressors mentioned by researchers include overcrowded classrooms, violence, peer pressure, disruptive behaviour of other students, poor teachers, boring curricula, long days (day care after school), and competition for grades and social status, and stage fright (Kersey, 1986; Youngs, 1985).

#### **b) At College Level**

There are numerous studies which show that students perceive stress as they reach to higher education. The transition of going to college from school sometimes poses great difficulties and demands which students are unable to handle. According to Morris (1990) and Chiang (1995), the academic arena is many times a source of student stress. Abouserie (1994) and Shirom (1986) revealed that students perceive stress at particular moments in the semester, especially during

examination periods, studying for an exam, sitting for an exam, and also when writing final assignments and reports, the submission deadlines imposes great amount of stress among students. Carveth et al., (1996) added the time factor, stating that students perceive stress from not having enough time to finish their assignments. Fairbrother et al., (2003) encountered that the excessive amount of assignments or homework along with the grade competition, failures, and poor inter-relationships with peers and faculty represent sources of stress. According to Awino and Agolla (2008), stress also comes from overcrowded lecture halls, semester system, and inadequate resources to perform the academic work as well as from the pressure to perform well in the examinations (Erkutlu et al., 2006). Bataineh (2013) investigated the academic stressors experienced by the students at King Saud University. The result showed that academic overloads, course, inadequate time to study, workload of every semester, exam pressure, low motivation, and high family expectations were causing moderately stress among students. Misra et al., (2000) found that college women reported higher levels of stress than college men for some stressors such as frustration, self-imposed stress, and pressure in relation to academics. Similar observations have been found based on sex differences in reported for college students.

College women reported feeling more stress than college men (Abouserie 1994; Dusselier et al., 2005; Pierceall and Keim 2007). However, another study (Dyson and Renk, 2006) found no sex differences in college students' reported stress levels for college and family stressors. Ben-Zur H. et al, (2012) studied the appraisals, coping and affective and behavioral reactions to academic stressors by students from two cultural sectors—Jewish and Arab. The pattern of relationships between stress appraisals, coping and outcomes was similar for Jewish and Arab students, and in accord with the cognitive model of stress (Lazarus, 1999).

### **Review of Academic Stress Studies in India**

#### ***a) At School Level***

In India, there have been some researches done on academic stress at school level such as Latha et al. (2006) studied the “patterns of stress, coping styles and social support among adolescents”. The authors found that there were many sources of academic stress such as rising up early in the morning for study, burden of study, lengthy concentration periods and long school hours. Ganesh and Magdalin (2007) conducted a study on perceived problems and academic stress in children of disrupted and non-disrupted families. The authors found that Indian children from non-disrupted families had higher academic stress than children from

disrupted families. In a study by Bhasin et al. (2010) on students belonging to Classes IX to XII in Delhi, it was found that students appearing in board examinations were more stressed as compared to students of other classes. Chhabra and Sodhi (2011) worked on the factors that lead to psychosocial ill-health among adolescents in Amritsar and found that middle adolescents were more affected by psychological problems. These adolescents with psychological problems were having significantly more school related issues, disturbed families, domestic violence and lesser number of close friends. Tiwari and Balani (2013) studied the intervention program to stress education and reported that the working hours of school, workload, lack of resources to carry out their job, and the low level of reward were most frequently identified as stressors among students.

Academic stress has been studied, compared and correlated with different demographic variables such as gender, parental involvement, type of school (government.or private), academic achievement, year of study, locale and socioeconomic status of students in Indian studies. Hussain et al., (2008) studied on academic stress and adjustment among public and government high school students and found that the public school students were significantly stressed as compared to government school students. Aruna (2008) from a study concluded that stress of Class X

students had significant influence on their study habits. But, there was no significant difference between the study habits of boys and girls and their level of stress. Ranamanikham and Vasanthal (2008) conducted a study on the relationship between students' academic stress and adjustment in relation to their academic achievement and found that there was a significant positive correlation between academic stress and academic achievement.

Dhuria et al. (2009) studied the mental health status of senior secondary school students studying in Classes XI and XII of Delhi and found that boys were more prone to psychological issues than girls. Vamadevappa (2009) in a study revealed that the good parental involvement leads to higher academic stress and the stress of girls is less than the boys among the higher parental involvement group. Deb et al., (2014) studied academic stress among private secondary school students in India. The authors found that 35 and 37 percent students reported high or very high levels of academic stress and exam anxiety respectively. He also reported elevated stress level in general with low achieving students having high stress and vice versa in particular.

Joshi (2014) noted that second year students felt more stress in school factors than first year students. Rabbinic et al., (2014) observed that parental attachment is significantly and negatively related to

the stress. Prabhu (2015) conducted a study on academic stress among higher secondary students studying in Namakkal District of Tamil Nadu, India. The study revealed that the higher secondary students were having moderate level of academic stress. The science subject student's academic stress was higher than arts student. The students whose parents were illiterate, their academic stress was higher than their counter part.

Sibnath Deb et al. (2015) investigated academic stress, parental pressure, anxiety and mental health among Indian high school students between various psychosocial factors and academic stress in Kolkata India. The study revealed that 63.5 per cent of the higher secondary students in Kolkata experience academic stress. The data revealed that parents with low level of education, i.e., non-graduates, pressure their children more than the parents with graduation and post-graduation background do. The examination related anxiety had been reported by 81.6 per cent of the students, especially the female students who were coming from Bengali medium schools and were not proficient in English.

### **b) At College Level**

There have been researches done on academic stress at college level in India. In the perspective of age and gender differences between college students, Singh and Upadhyay (2008) explored academic stress. The results showed that the fresher students of first year felt more stressed than

the students of third year and it was prevalent in the female students. Tangade (2011) conducted a study which showed that elevated stress was present in final year students in which the level of stress was higher in male students compared to female students. According to the career choice decision, students forced by parents and those staying in hostels were found more stressed. Das and Sahoo (2012) studied the association between the levels of academic stress and depression and the impact of gender differences among post graduate students. Male students experienced elevated level of stress and depression as compared to female university students. Waghachavare et al., (2013) conducted cross-sectional study among students of medical, dental and engineering colleges from the urban area of Sangli district, Maharashtra, India, using a convenience sampling technique. The authors found that twenty four percent students out of total sample felt stressed and there was strong correlation between stress and stream of education.

Similarly, Reddy et al., (2018) conducted a study on final year university students to find out the level and the sources of academic stress perceived by gender and stream wise differences. The study revealed that high level of stress was observed in 48 per cent of students. There existed no significant difference in total academic stress experienced by males and females. There was a

significant difference in academic stress across the four streams with the commerce stream reporting the highest stress in comparison to the Management and Science stream. It was seen that the students of Humanities stream had reported the least academic stress in comparison to the others.

### **Impact of Academic Stress**

Various researches had examined the outcomes of academic stress in terms of performance outcomes; examination or course grades. Struthers et al., (2000) reported that higher level of academic stress is related to lower course grades, moderated by coping style in Canadian undergraduate students. Akgun and Ciarrochi (2003) reported a similar finding where the relationship between higher stress and lower grades was moderated by learned resourcefulness in Australian undergraduate students.

The other studies in India also implicate the negative consequences of academic stress as indicated in the research done by Rangaswamy (1982) and Verma et al., (2002). The relationship between high academic stress and suicidal ideations were also observed among students (Arun and Chavan, 2009). In another study, Khan and Kausar (2013) explored the effect of academic stress on students' performance and the impact of demographic variables like gender, age and educational level. The findings revealed a substantial

influence of academic stress on the student's achievement.

### **CONCLUSION**

An attempt was made in this paper to review the literature on academic stress among the secondary school students and tried to present the causes, sources and consequences of stress. The review of literature indicate that the reasons for stress during adolescence are examination fear, overloaded and packed schedule, peer pressure, inability to cope with studies, and lack of competence. Examination fear has stand out as a major source of stress in students whether at school level or college level. Passing the examination and getting admission to the next level and future employment are also found to be in minds of students. At school level, the lengthy timetable and assignment deadlines pose great stress to them. The research discussed above provides evidence that school children of all ages can find examinations as a source of stress and worry. In this review, it was found that at college level, along with all the above said factors, the race, gender and geographical differences also act as stressors. Adolescents' growing habit of instant fulfillment of desires has contributed to a great deal of stress in them and has also affected interactions with family parents and peers. In the review, studies, depicted that role of joint family versus separate family is also countable as students from

joint families have a marginally higher mean academic anxiety level than their peers from separate families, but statistically, this disparity is not significant. In India, academic stress has been studied in correlation with different variables such as public or government school type, study habits, academic adjustment, academic achievement, year of study, parental involvement, and socioeconomic status, type of family and education of parents. As far as impact of academic stress is concerned, from the above review it could be concluded that stress in academic life affect the academic performance and studies in India and abroad mention the existence of depression, phobia, anxiety and other behavioural problems in students due to high academic stress.

In order to overcome unusual behaviours, the parents, teachers and the school could play a constructive role in channelising energies of the adolescents. When in stress students need to be directed to a right path instead of letting them down and this care starts from family first. Parents must understand the current world scenario and should not compare it with their time. Also, putting their unfulfilled dreams on the shoulders of their children leading to over expectation could sometimes make the students feel helpless. Therefore, it is crucial to take proper caution in helping to make the best choices that should impact their future. Similarly, the role of teacher in reducing the



students' academic stress is really important because they could introduce the students with right ways to overcome their daily hassles. For example, if a student is unable to do the homework and feels burden in doing the homework because it could reduce their play time, the teacher could ask them to make a time table and divide their time for study and play. Also, student could be asked to break their work in small parts and utilise the free periods in school to complete some of the tasks. In such a way, students will learn time management in one hand and lesser stress in other hand. Also, teachers should do counseling of students and student must feel confident, secure and free to talk to teachers. While talking about the students' efforts, reducing anxiety and balancing time in combination with recreational activity can be an important method for college students to alleviate academic stress. Students should have the ambition or perception

for their education, not above their capacities and knowledge, although choosing their courses at intermediate level, students may also require appropriate counseling. The family atmosphere should be comfortable and the learning experience should be fun and parents should stop making it a difficult occurrence for adolescents. Teachers and school environment should be student friendly and there should be a curriculum which does not lay any burden on the shoulder of students rather it should be so wisely constructed that it helps student to achieve their goals with confidence they feel secured about their future. The authors conclude that students need a positive and motivating environment to succeed in their academic career and to accomplish their goals or objectives and in this achievement there might be some hurdles which could be overcome through the constant support of parents and teachers leading to stress free healthy environment.

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