

Determining the role of academic stress on the mental health of PUC students

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress born out of high parental expectations, enormous academic workload, competition, the pressure of getting good marks & getting admission to good colleges is a set of factors unique to Indian society. This wreaks havoc on the self-esteem, the confidence of adolescents & affects the physical & mental health of adolescents. The present study was conducted to understand the determinants of academic stress on mental health of PUC students among different streams and across gender. The study was conducted on a sample of 300 PUC students, 150 boys & 150 Girls studying in Bangalore. Data was collected with the help of Strength and difficulties questionnaire by Goodman (1997) and Academic stress scale by Rajendran and Kaliappan (1970) The scores obtained were analyzed using suitable Non Parametric statistical techniques. The findings of the study reveal that there is a relationship between academic stress and mental health on certain dimensions. There is a significant difference in academic stress and mental health among students in different streams of Study. There are no significant gender differences for both the variables of academic stress and in mental health. The findings of the study highlight the need for policy makers, educationists & parents to take note of the impact of academic stress & take corrective steps to minimize the adverse effects of the same.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Mental Health, Adolescence*

Adolescence is a period of major transitions & challenges. In the Indian context, amongst the many challenges of physiological & psychosocial changes of Adolescence, academic-related events are some of the most prominent stressors. Academic stress born out of high parental expectations, enormous academic workload, competition, the pressure of getting good marks & getting admission to good colleges is a set of factors unique to Indian society. This wreaks havoc on the self-esteem, the confidence of adolescents & affects the physical & mental health of adolescents. The mental distress regarding academic challenges or failures or even the fear of the possibility of facing academic failure shows themselves in various aspects around the students' environment: at school, at home, in their peer relationships, and even in their neighborhood.

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The mental health of students, especially academic stress and its impact and effect has become a serious issue among institutions and policymakers because of the increasing incidence of suicides among students around the globe. India being home to the largest Adolescent population in the world needs to address this issue urgently to enable a stronger & more productive present & future. This study seeks to identify the nature of problems that are caused by high Academic stress with the aim of creating a change in the mindset of all the stakeholders- Adolescents, Parents, Educationists & policymakers there is an urgent need to develop suitable interventions/ scales and solutions to reduce this high level of stress and psychiatric morbidity.

Adolescence is an important time point for assessment, and possible early intervention as many mental health problems commonly begin during this age period. Adolescent mental health problems are commonly unnoticed, and the use of screening instruments can aid early detection of these problems and may facilitate early intervention and access to effective treatments.

Academic Stress is defined as the body's response to academic-related demands and challenges that exceed the adaptive capabilities and abilities of students. It is estimated that 10–30% of students experience some degree of academic stress while choosing their academic careers. In this highly competitive world, students face various academic issues including exam stress, disinterest to attend classes, and the inability to understand a subject.

“Academic stress is a mental distress with respect to some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure or even awareness of the possibility of such failure”. (Gupta and Khan, 1987).

Academic performance and exam stress are found to be positively interrelated with parental pressure and psychiatric problems. It is important to remember that the mental constitution or coping capacities differ from one child to another child. Therefore, children with very poor coping capacities become more likely to anxiety, depression, and fear of academic failure and this shows us that one should not judge one student with another. Chauhan (1987) defined “mental health as a condition which permits the maximum development of physical, intellectual and emotional status of the individual so that he can contribute maximum to the welfare of his ideas and aims in life”.

Academic stress takes on a unique dimension in India due to certain socio-cultural patterns & parenting practices. Some of these are-

- 1. Indian Education System:** The Indian education system is highly textbook-oriented and it focuses on Rote memorization of lessons and demands on long hours of systematic study every day. The long study hour routines that are expected by higher secondary school students span from the morning till late evening hours, thus leaving less time for extra activities and socialization which is said to be an essential part of the development of a child.
- 2. Pressure from parents and school:** Fear of failure & the pressure to do well in academics is causing a higher rate of anxiety among students which has substantial negative effects on their academic performance and social success. The self-worth and self-identity of a student are determined by academic success and grades, and not on the basis of individual qualities and talents they already do possess. Parents try to disconnect cable connection, internet, computer, only so that their children could

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concentrate, perform well in school, and get better grades. The parenting practice of Negative reinforcement & punishment further compounds the problem.

The emphasis is so much that the students try getting better grades; forget the fun element in learning. Any concept in learning can be made interesting if taught well. So, it's not only blaming the students, who underperform, teachers underperform too. Sadly, there are no criteria to judge the quality teaching of a teacher.

Transaction Based Models of Stress: All theoretical models that interpret stress as transaction have its base from the theory of Lazarus, the person who focused on the fact that there are differences among people in interpreting stress as a stimulus or as a response. He stated that there is a lack of theories into the interpretation of the factors that help some people to adjust for a longer period than others to a stressful stimulus.

Despite the fact that Lazarus acknowledges certain environmental conditions as causes of stress for many individuals, he also points out that people and groups of people differ in sensitivity and vulnerability to certain types of events, as well as in the interpretation and in the response to those events. For the interpretation of the diversity among the persons that are experiencing similar stressful events, Lazarus model has taken into account the cognitive processes that mediate between stimulus and response, as well as the factors affecting these processes.

Lazarus's **cognitive evaluation theory** has focused on the individual, the environment and on the simultaneous cognitive evaluation of environmental demands and stimulus response options.

According to this theory, a number of external and internal information keep arriving daily in the neuro cognitive level of the body which is being interpreted by the process of cognitive evaluation. Cognitive evaluation is the process of judgment by which, the stages of adjustment methods available or that each person has, is recognized. It includes identifying available resources and options, which will be helpful for the individuals to negotiate with potential or actual demands. Upon the initial requirements of evaluation, some can be assessed as irrelevant, and others as very stressful or as positive signs. Stress according to this theory is a process by which requirements outweigh the adaptive capacities of each individual. The requirements can be either external or internal depending upon the person.

In the second stage, the evaluation is about the identification of sources and options that the individual has at his/ her disposal. The reassessment is necessary and it is also the process of continuous redefinition of cognitive evaluation. Factors that influence the evaluation of the identification can be divided into intrinsic and directly related with the individual. Intrinsic factors also include the intensity of external sources, the directness of conflict and doubt. Factors that are closely related with the individuals are motivations, characteristics, beliefs, cognitive resources and skills.

McKean et al. (2000) believed that the stressors are not the only reason for anxiety, tension or depression, rather synergy between stressors and the person's approach and attitude to these stressors can create stress. Though stress is often said to be bad, there is always the other side of the coin. The right kind of stress helps in sharpening the mind and reflexes, thus helping in having a good memory. Mild stress is always necessary for effective and

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efficient working. It can help one to meet daily challenges and can motivate students to reach their goals.

The Lancet Report (2012) says that, India has found to be having the world's highest suicide rates among the youth. Thus, the present study attempts to understand the role of academic stress on the mental health of adolescents against the framework of this Lazarus's theory, with a view to bringing about a change in the attitude of all the stakeholders that includes parents, Teachers & the Adolescents themselves paving the way for a healthier society.

This study by identifying the nature & outcome of Academic stress will help teachers and parents to understand the various academic stressors and mental health problems that the PUC students face. The results can improve the teaching methods of the teachers and develop interventions that will make the task of the students simple and easy. It will also help in identifying the challenges in the curriculum. Most often parents and teachers do not know the reason behind the low performance of the students. This study focuses only on the PUC students since this stage is a very defining academic phase in the Indian context, fraught with difficulties that lead to different mental health issues.

Some of the reviewed Indian studies suggest that the academic stress increases due to parental expectations, competitive environment and lack of study facility. Most Indian studies related to mental health seem to suggest that mental health issues rise due to the tough syllabus and the students are not being able to cope with it (Bhavin, Revati and Anushree -2012). Stress made the students predisposed to mental disorders. Studies that focused on Gender Differences suggest that females are found to have higher academic stress (Singh and Upadhyay-(2008) and males have higher mental health issues (Sharma R.D-2004). Some studies focus on coping with stress such as paying extra attention to the students, changing the teaching patterns, making the syllabus easier and involving the students in extracurricular activities that would help them release the stress. (Misra, McKean, West, and Russo-2000), (Qadir, Abid and Muzammil-2011), (Khan and Kausar -2013)

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a purposive sampling method to gather data from PUC students, studying in Bengaluru city. Sample consisted of 300 PUC students, 150 Boys & 150 Girls in the age range of 16-17 years. The study attempted to determine the role of academic stress on the mental health of PUC students across different dimensions.

Ethical Consideration

The study complies with the ethical standard with respect to research on human subjects. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Post-Graduate Department of Psychology, Bishop Cotton Women's Christian College, Bangalore. The study participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study and a formal consent of participation was taken from the students. The confidentiality of the responses was assured to the respondents. As no identifiers were used, it ensured the anonymity of the data.

Measures

Academic stress scale developed by Kim (1970). The scale was adapted to Indian conditions by Rajendran and Kaliappan (1990) the items are classified into five areas: Personal Inadequacy, Fear of Failure, Interpersonal difficulties with teachers, Teacher-pupil relationship / Teaching methods, Inadequate study facilities. The academic stress scale

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comprises of 40 items. Each item had five alternatives varying from the response 'No Stress' to 'Extreme Stress'. Each response carries a score of '0', '1', '2', '3' and '4' respectively. The items are classified into five areas containing 8 items each viz., 99. The total items were 40. Therefore 160 (4 x 40) is the maximum possible score and the highest score on each factor would be 32 (4 x 8). Each factor has equal number of items. The higher the value of the score, higher is the academic stress and vice-versa.

The strengths and difficulties Questionnaire: The SDQ are a brief behavioral screener for 4-17-year-old created by Goodman in 1997. This measure can be used as a screener for risk for psychiatric disorders. The SDQ focuses on positive attributes as well as risk symptoms regarding the child or Adolescent's behavior in the past six months. There are multiple versions of the Measure & In this study we have used 11-17 years self-report questionnaire. Each questionnaire includes 25 items. An overall Total Difficulties Score is produced, along with five subscale scores: Emotional Symptoms, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity/Inattention, Relationship Problems, and Pro-social Behavior. The first 25 items in the SDQ comprise 5 scales of 5 items each. Scoring: Somewhat true is always scored as 1, but the scoring of Not True and certainly true varies with each item. For each of the 5 scales the score can range from 0-10 if all 5 items were completed. Scale scores can be prorated if at least 3 items were completed.

Procedure

After approval of the research proposal by the research ethics committee an appointment was fixed with the principals of various pre-university colleges in Bangalore city. The objective and rationale of the study was explained to the principals of the institutes from where the sample was selected. Colleges from which the researcher could get formal consent of the principal were then selected for final data collection. Prior permission was taken by the researcher from the class teachers of respective classes before fixing the date for administration of the tests. The researcher did data collection only on the dates agreed by the class teachers. The questionnaires were administered on the group. The respondents were instructed that there was no right or wrong answer to any of the questions. Doubts and queries of the participants were clarified by the investigator. On an average the respondents took nearly half an hour to complete the questionnaires.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyze the data gathered. As the data was not normally distributed, the non-parametric technique of analysis was used. Under the non-parametric test Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to determine if there are statistically significant differences between two or more groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable. Mann-Whitney U test to assess the difference between two independent sample means and Spearman's correlation to assess the degree of association or relationship between the variables was used. 300 was the total sample size for the current study out of which 150 (50%) were girls and 150 (50%) were boys. Results of Kruskal-Wallis H test shows that there is a significant difference between academic stress and mental health among students in different streams.

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Table: 01 Shows the mean value of Academic stress among different streams

	SECTION	N	Mean Rank
AS	Science	100	232.68
	Commerce	100	116.04
	Arts	100	102.78
	Total	300	

Table: 02 Shows the KWH value of Academic stress

	AS
Chi-Square	135.898
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000*
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Science, commerce & Arts	

In Table 01 and Table 02 it is seen that statistically there is a significant difference on academic stress among the different streams, the students studying in Science stream are found to have higher stress because comparably these students have more pressure than the other streams. The subjects that they study are complex and it requires above average Intelligence, critical thinking, numerical & quantitative aptitude, capacity for hard work and dedication to perform well in exams. Most of the science students do not find free time for themselves, are not allowed to engage in any other leisure activity as the pressure is higher on them to concentrate on studies and the parents focus only on the students 'performance and their percentage in exams. The burden of parental expectations, pressure of high expenditure on them by parents with high aspirations & low means weighs highly on these adolescents. Their daily routine of life changes as they join tuitions for each subject and also, they are forced to prepare for competitive exams so that they get a better percentile score and can be placed in a best college in the city for further studies. Many parents feel that Science stream is the only way that can help the students achieve great success and thus the personal interest or choice of students is not given attention.

These findings are similar to that reported by Prabu (2015) that Students from Science stream are more stressed than the students from Arts stream.

Table 03: Shows the mean value of Mental health scores among different streams

	SECTION	N	Mean Rank
MH	Science	100	158.00
	Commerce	100	180.31
	Arts	100	113.19
	Total	300	

Table 04: Shows the KWH value of Mental Health

	MH
Chi-Square	31.164
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000*
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Science, Commerce & Arts	

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In Table 03 and Table 04 it is seen that statistically there is a significant difference on mental health issues among the different streams. The students from the Commerce stream report higher mental health issues, followed by Science stream & then the Arts stream. The restless efforts and hard work of the students sometimes do not pay-off as their work or assignments can be rejected by the teachers or the tutors. The students fail to perform well even after long study hours and several revisions as the questions or patterns of the question papers gets more difficult and complicated each time. This brings the fear of unworthiness and self-doubt on themselves. On the other side low performance of the students brings great shame to the parents and the various reports given to parents in the parent- teachers meeting bring a barrier between parents and children. The behavior of parents like being stricter with students, ignoring them and pressure from teachers and peers makes the students feel isolated, lonely and depressed. All these kinds of behaviors and expectations can have a greater impact on the mental health of the students. The above results show that science stream students have higher academic stress and commerce students have higher mental health issues. These findings are similar to those reported by Mostafaei (2012) who reported that students in science field had greater mental health problems compared with students in the humanities.

Lazarus's **Theory of Cognitive Appraisal (1984)** has focused on the individual, the environment and on the simultaneous cognitive evaluation of environmental demands and stimulus response options. According to this theory when an individual encounters stressor there are two levels of cognitive appraisal -primary & secondary that occurs simultaneously. Primary appraisal occurs when one asks what does this stressor mean & how can it influence me -helping the individual classify the stressor as a threat (cause harm) challenge (positive stress response) or a harm-loss (damage already experienced) & then decide on the response.

At the secondary appraisal the feelings associated with the stressor dictates a response. If one takes it as a challenge & says 'I can do it', 'I will try' often leads to a positive response. On the other hand, if it is perceived as a threat, & the feeling is – 'I can't do it', 'I will surely fail or nobody believes I can', 'I give up' leads to a negative response. This cognitive appraisal is an outcome of one's personality, belief system imbibed, motivation, cognitive resources & skills.

This theory supports our findings that academic stressors play a different role on different individuals depending on how they evaluate it – as a threat, challenge or damage. This consequently affects the degree to which it affects mental health. It maybe that the Students in the Science stream consider it a challenge & demonstrate a more positive response to the stressors.

Mann- Whitney U test showed that there is no significant gender difference on academic stress and mental health of PUC students.

Table: 05 Shows the mean rank between genders in Academic stress

	GENDER	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Female	150	152.66	22898.50
	Male	150	152.66	
	Total	300		

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Table: 06 Shows the MWU value of Academic stress

	AS
Mann-Whitney U	10926.500
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.667
a. Grouping Variable: GENDER	

In Table 06 It is seen that statistically there is no significant gender differences on academic stress.

These studies reviewed are in line with the results reported by Mostafaei (2012) who found that there was no correlation observed between the variables i.e., gender and stress. Khan and Kausar (2013) concluded that there was no significant difference found as per the gender.

Table: 07 Shows the mean scores between genders in Mental Health

	GENDER	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
MH	Male	150	158.08	23712.50
	Female	150	142.92	21437.50
	Total	300		

Table: 08 Test Shows the MWU value of Mental Health

	MH
Mann-Whitney U	10112.500
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.129
a. Grouping Variable: GENDER	

In Table 07 and Table 08 it is seen that statistically there is no significant difference on gender in mental health.

These studies reviewed support the above results, Mostafaei (2012) found that there was no correlation observed between the variables i.e., gender and mental health

Nonparametric Correlations

Table: 09 Shows the correlation between Academic Stress and Mental Health

		AS	MH
Spearman's rho	AS	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	300
	MH	Correlation Coefficient	.078
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.175
		N	300

From the above Table 9 it is seen that there is no significant relationship between Academic stress and mental health. Further we explored the correlation between the subscales of Academic stress [F1- Personal Inadequacy, F2-Fear of failure, F3-Interpersonal difficulties with teachers, F4-Teacher pupil relationship and F5-Inadequate study facility] and mental health [ES-Emotional symptoms, CP-Conduct Problems, HY- Hyper activity/ Inattention, PP- Peer Problems and PS-Pro social behaviors] respectively. The results showed that Fear of failure F2*Hyperactivity-inattention has positive correlation 0.157 and significance is 0.006.

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It also shows negative correlation -0.134 between Teacher pupil relationship*Peer problems and significance is 0.020.

1.Fear of failure F2*Hyperactivity-inattention has positive correlation 0.157 and significance is 0.006.

One of the reasons for the academic stress among PUC students is found to be '**Fear of failure**'. Fear of failure is a common stress among the students. The students of the present generation are stressed right from their childhood to be the topper in academics and co-curricular activities. But not all the students are gifted with equal ability. The concentration and understanding capability differ from one individual to another, but most of the parents and teachers are not mature to understand this fact, some also go to the extent of punishing students badly for not performing up to their expectations. This has become a burden for the students and causes the fear of failure.

Lack of ability or real problems of ADHD get ignored or even if detected during screening. Parents are often in denial of this & continue to push such students to do well at academics & do not focus on remedial or appropriate techniques to address these real issues. Adolescents with ADHD show difficulties with inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsive actions beyond what would be expected for their age. Inattention includes difficulty focusing, being easily distracted, disorganization, and forgetfulness. Hyperactive students also have trouble in paying attention.

Also, majority of the students lose interest in studies since nobody adopts a strength-based approach to education. In Indian culture it's always ones defects that are highlighted & other strengths the child may have is never discovered because of the long-ingrained belief in society that excellence is science & math is the only metric of success. This leads to loss of interest in academics, inattentiveness & conduct problems in adolescents.

Due to this inability these students tend to become more dependent on others for help, blindly copy & submit academic work with no real understanding of concepts. This inadequacy in learning builds up, they are distracted & stress & anxiety before exams increase. The fear of failure becomes a major issue& though they may be aware of it they have no clue how to overcome it.

1.There was a negative correlation -0.134 between **Teacher pupil relationship*Peer problems** and significance is 0.020.

In earlier times the norm for Teacher Student relationships was unquestioned obedience & respect for authority. But the modern student-teacher relationship is evolving & is not defined by obedience or acceptance, but by questioning and freewill. The relationship is more of understanding each other's requirements and coming to terms with each other's expectations. The modern student has all the information, even if they do not have much knowledge, at one click of a button; they test, verify and often question what a teacher says in the classroom from information available on the internet.

There is a generation gap between Teachers & students. In large classes any questioning especially by children who are not very bright is considered rebellious & defiant behavior & attracts punishment. This leads to further breakdown in this relationship. The spillover effects of this is that these children are branded as disobedient & ostracized by the teachers & other students alike. When the relationship between a student and teacher becomes

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stronger, that student faces peer pressure, as most of the time 'teacher's favorite' is avoided and always left out of the group. And also, when peer relationships become stronger it leads to negative behavior of the students in the class trying to misbehave and disobey teachers listening to peers.

Some of the studies that are in line with these results are Carol L., and Sharp - Alex, (2007) in a study of early and mid-adolescence found four factors such as parental stress, peer stress, type of school and fear of failure contributing to academic stress. Hattie and John (2009) examined 550 high school students and reported four significant factors, peer pressure, parental pressure, importance of school and fear of failure contributing to academic stress. Bataineh (2013) in his study measured that fear of failure is also the prime reason for stress.

CONCLUSION

Our study set out to find the role of academic stressors on mental health of PUC students in Bangalore City. The findings of our study are:

1. There is a significant difference in Academic stress among PUC students studying in different Streams with the Science students demonstrating higher Academic stress than the other two streams.
2. There is a significant difference in Mental Health among PUC students studying in different Streams with the Commerce students demonstrating higher Mental Health issues than the other two streams
3. There are no significant gender differences seen on both the variables of academic stress or for mental health.

There is no significant correlation observed between the two variables of Academic stress & Mental health. However, there were correlations observed on a few component subscales of these two dimensions.

The findings will help the teachers in understanding the different reasons for stress and mental health problems, so that the parents or teachers would not over burden the students with work and should not have expectations beyond the student's capabilities.

The curriculum can be planned and organized in such a way that it provides equal opportunities for participation to all students, which will help the students to perform well both in academic and extracurricular activities.

The study will help the teacher in comprehending the strengths and difficulties of adolescents, & thereby help them nurture responsiveness and reciprocity in children in order to develop positive and sound mental health.

By understanding the strengths and difficulties of the children, parents must encourage them to choose courses and professions that match their strength rather than being pushed to choose the 'elite & lucrative' engineering and medical courses for which they may have neither the interest nor aptitude.

Emphasis should be given to different vocations instead of choosing some specific vocation and pushing the child toward it.

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Training programs could be organized for students and parents to sensitize them on academic stress and ways to handle it in an efficient way. Teachers can provide different teaching methods to reduce stress among students.

Relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga, practical examples and interventions can be integrated into the academic programs for students to reduce the stress and promote mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

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