

## Perceived Stress and Assertiveness among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

From a psychological perspective, there are a large number of challenges faced, and they are violence, chronic illness, health care access which are milestones and often distinct from both adolescents and adults. The common behaviour of these individuals is influenced by the context of the larger world that is rapidly evolving with all the stressors that they encounter in day-to-day life. Assertiveness is often considered as the balance point between passive and aggressive behaviour, and being assertive also means one should respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people. In the present study, the researcher had attempted to assess the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness among young adults belonging to colleges in India and to study the gender difference in their perceived stress and assertive levels. The data was collected using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and Rathus Assertiveness Schedule for adults (RAS) from a sample of 104 college students of age group ranging from 18-23 years. The study found that there was no significant relationship between their perceived stress and assertiveness. The study also found that there was no significant gender difference in perceived stress among college students, although females had higher perceived stress levels than males, whereas in case of assertiveness, no significant gender difference was found with respect to gender, although the males showed higher assertive behaviour.

**Keywords:** *Perceived Stress, Assertiveness, Young Adults*

The study comprises young adults, who are unique in their own way and this age is considered as a critical period of development where the certain unmet health needs and disparities are given appropriate care and usually this age group has a critical health status and mortality rates are high. The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine provides leadership, advocacy and supports health policies which are developed specifically to ensure the overall health and well – being of the young adults. According to many researchers and psychologists, there are no clear guidelines for determining what ages should be included in the young adult group. According to WHO, the young people are categorized as adolescents and young people from age group of 10 through 24 years and the UN defines youth as 15 to 24 years, and there is no consensus regarding specific age designation for young adults. A report by the Institute of Medicine suggested that there exist many challenges which are faced by young adults. In a young adult, the common challenges faced are violence, health care access, chronic illness.

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From a psychological perspective, those challenges faced are milestones and are distinct from both adolescents and adults. The common behaviour of these individuals is influenced by the context of the larger world that is rapidly evolving with all the stressors that they encounter in day-to-day life. There is a varied range of biological changes that happen in an individual belonging to that group, this change is not restricted to only biological, also psychological changes which then alters the behaviour as they grow older. These changes are also accompanied by a certain amount of stress in college-going adults and those around them, affecting and influencing the individual's relationship with others. Individuals at this age are usually impulsive, vulnerable and are usually influenced by peer groups and media that play a major role. According to many researchers, 20% of the young adult population has some form of mental illness that could be depression, substance abuse and suicidal behaviour or could be any kind of eating disorder.

### *Assertiveness*

It is a communication style, which plays an important behavioural aspect for many professionals today. Also considered as a key to successful and healthy relationships with their clients in their professional fields. It is an ability to express one's feelings, opinions, beliefs and needs, directly and openly, while not violating the personal rights of others (Ellis and Harley 2005; Hopkins 2007). Many researchers have suggested that assertiveness buffers or moderate reactions to stressful events. Rathus (1975), had suggested that an assertive individual is more likely to engage in adaptive coping behaviours such as making appropriate requests for social support and declining inappropriate offers of support and are better at handling or defending themselves during interpersonal conflicts compared non-assertive individuals. Elliott and Gramling (1990), found that many assertive individuals used different types of social support and benefited more from the types of support they chose than non – assertive did. And such social support often led to fewer stress – related symptoms.

Often considered as the balance point between passive and aggressive behaviour, being assertive also means one should respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people. This kind of behaviour enables individuals to react in their best way possible, which also includes standing up for themselves without letting their anxiety or nervousness come in way, also without denying the rights of others. This kind of behaviour involves encouraging others to be open and honest about their views, thoughts and feelings. It has been observed and studied that many young adults seldom find it difficult to bring balance in their assertive behaviour for many reasons and sometimes they either behave passively or aggressively. Many researchers also suggested that most young adults do not consider themselves as equals to their peer group or colleagues and often weigh down their feelings and thoughts in front of others, which results in others taking decisions for them. This mainly occurs due to communication problems between the individuals.

### *Perceived Stress*

College students face a great amount of stress, which in turn lead to poor academic performance, mental illness like anxiety, depression and sometimes serious health issues. There are two types of stress, noted by psychologists – situational stress and perceived stress. Situational stress occurs in response to a specific event or circumstances or stressors. An individual then uses various strategies to cope with the stress. Perceived stress is considered as a global evaluation of life as being unpredictable, uncontrollable or overloaded. It is basically the feelings any individual has that tells us how much stress they are under a given point.

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A dynamic multidimensional concept with a wide spectrum of causative and conductive factor, the perceptions comprise physical, psychological and psychosocial aspects, perceived stress does not typically measure the frequency of stressful events that happened in an individual's life, rather how an individual feels about that particular event or situation, appraising the severity of these events. As we know, perceived stress is considered as a personality style rather than a response to event stressor (Cohen et.al., 1983, Cohen, Tyrell., Smith., 1993; Philips., 2012), there are subtle individual differences. Because an individual may tend to rate the same type of event either less stressful or more stressful.

The college years are the era of emerging adulthood (18-25 years old). These years are years of transition and discovery, a critical moment in the development of identity (Arnett, 2000). There are different stresses involved in such transition and discovery, such as leaving one's family, making new friends, adapting to a new academic life, dating, deciding on one's major, and coping with financial pressures. Thus, in an entirely new social setting marked by greater independence and less adult control than in their previous years, these students experience a number of stresses (Lefkowitz, 2005), an increased interpersonal conflict, homesickness, a sense of alienation (Buote et al., 2007).

Growing research indicates that various types of circumstances stress women and men. Men were more likely to list financial and work-related behaviours as causes of their stress, while women were more likely to list incidents related to family and health. Studies have found, however, that college students encounter stress related to financial issues, examination distress, rejection, relationship breakdown, depression, and low self-esteem feelings.

Stress-causing incidents are referred to as stressors; they may come from an external source or from within a person and range from relatively mild to severe. Students at college now report being more stressed-out than ever. Among the top stressors faced by college students are worries about classes, relationships and money (Landow, 2006). College stressors vary widely, from difficulties in interpersonal relationships to dating problems, from academic work to uncertainty about the future, from family issues to self-doubt, and the list goes on and on. Many recent studies on adolescents and young adults show that college student's stresses have increased in severity (Benton et al., 2003). For students to manage their perceived stress, positive social support is very important. Although students usually live under stress, some seem to be better at handling stress than their peers do. Naturally, they seek support from family and friends in the face of stress and implement their coping in order to preserve well-being.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

A study conducted on undergraduate students by Eldeeb et al (2014), at Nursing College, Meofiya University. The study consisted of 176 students from second year and fourth year. The aim of the study conducted was to study the levels of assertiveness and stress among 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year nursing students. A descriptive comparative research design was conducted and the findings indicated that 2<sup>nd</sup> year students showed more assertiveness than 4<sup>th</sup> year students, as 2<sup>nd</sup> year students showed a higher mean score than the 4<sup>th</sup> year students. The highest percentage of both the groups of this study exhibited high levels of stress, although there was a significant correlation between assertiveness and stress levels. This particular study revealed there is a high amount of stress among college students. Also, this study has its own limitations with respect to the population, as this study was conducted with a small population and larger population is needed to conduct further studies in different fields.

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A study conducted on nurses again, comprised 220 of them who have been working in selected hospitals of Punjab. The results of the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent t-test, ANOVA and Pearson's correlation. The study revealed that assertive behaviour has a large negative correlation with stress at 0.01 level of significance. The study also indicated that older nurses who had regular jobs studied from the government. nursing institutions and working in Govt. hospitals were more assertive. And the nurses who joined by their own will, working in Govt. The hospital had low stress when compared to others. This also revealed that the nurses who exhibited non-assertive behaviour experienced a considerable amount of stress. The study also suggested that nurses behave assertively as their behaviour directly affects the stress they face and the policy makers can plan and organize many alternative or assertive training for all the non-assertive nurses in order to give them the required assertive behaviour and communication. (Maheshwari. S. K & Gill. K. K., 2015).

To assess the level of assertiveness among undergraduate nursing students in Greece a study was conducted and the population consisted of nursing students in different semesters at one school in Central Greece (n = 298). The study employed ANOVA and Pearson's chi square test to comprise the results. The main finding of the study was that the assertiveness level displayed by the students increased slightly in advance semester by comparison to those displayed by first semester. (Deltsidou. A., 2009).

Another study was conducted on nurses in Taiwan, Republic of China, to evaluate the effectiveness of assertiveness training on levels of stress and assertiveness experienced by them. A two-group experimental design was conducted in a 2000 bed veteran general hospital. The study consisted of 60 Chinese speaking nurses who were volunteers for the study and were randomly assigned in one of the two treatments: assertiveness training or alternate treatment control. All the subjects were tested before and after for stress and assertiveness using perceived stress scale and Rathus assertiveness schedule. The results indicated clear support for effectiveness of assertiveness training for treating sub-assertive behaviours and stress in a population of nurses in Taiwan. (Lee. S., & Crockett. M.S., 2009). It has been shown that stress and assertiveness play a major role in not only an individual who chose a professional course, also in an adolescent's life. The main aim of the study was to find the association between assertiveness, self-esteem, academic achievement and stress among students. This study consisted of 120 students belonging to Kashmir, with equal numbers of males and females, their age ranging from 10-19 years. The correlational study, employed regression analysis that indicated assertiveness showed 00.30 % of change in self-esteem. In another finding, it showed gender and residence predicted 19.60 % of total change in stress. In step two, assertiveness predicted 00.30 % change in stress. The study indicated that gender and self-esteem showed a positive correlation. The study also indicated a negative correlation between gender and stress. (Parray. W. M. & Kumar. S., 2017).

Keeping all these facts into consideration, the present study aims to explore the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness among young adults and study how gender plays a role in their perceived stress level and assertive behaviour.

### **METHODOLOGY**

**Statement of the problem:** The purpose of this study was to assess the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness among young adults in India. It also aims to study the gender differences in perceived stress and assertiveness among them.

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### **Research Design**

The researcher employed correlational non- experimental research using quantitative approach to assess the relationship between assertiveness and perceived stress among college students.

### **Research Questions**

- Is there a significant relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness?
- Is there a significant gender difference in perceived stress among young adults?
- Is there a significant gender difference in assertiveness among young adults?

### **Objectives**

- To examine the relationship between assertiveness and perceived stress among young adults.
- To find out the gender differences in perceived stress among young adults.
- To find out the gender differences in assertiveness among young adults.

### **Hypotheses**

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There will be no significant relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness among young adults.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There will be no significant gender difference in perceived stress among young adults.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There will be no significant gender difference in assertiveness among young adults.

### **Design of the Study**

A descriptive non experimental research design was employed using quantitative approach to assess the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness and to find out the gender difference with respect to perceived stress and assertiveness among young adults in this present study.

### **Sample**

The sample of the study comprised 104 students of age group 18-23 years, of which there were 45 males and 59 females studying in the colleges in India, selected using non probability purposive sampling technique.

### **Tools**

**Perceived Stress:** To measure the stress level, a 10-item version of Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983), it uses a 5-point Likert scale i.e., Never (0), Almost Never (1), Sometimes (2), Fairly Often (3), Very Often (4) to score each item. A self-report instrument which is used to evaluate the degree of perceived stress in daily life within the past month. Developed by Cohen et al. in 1983, reported good reliability and validity. In previous studies, the PSS-10 was found to have good reliability, and showed Cronbach's coefficient as above 0.70, even up to 0.91. The PSS-10 measures general stress level, and hence not limited to particular situations or settings. The total score is the sum of all scores and items 4, 5, 7 and 8 are reverse scored. A higher score indicates a greater perceived stress (maximum score=40). For scoring, the scoring ranges from 0-13 which would be considered low stress, scores ranging from 14-26 would be considered moderate stress and scores ranging from 27-40 would be considered high perceived stress.

**Assertiveness:** To measure the assertiveness level, Rathus Assertiveness Scale, 1973 was used in this study, which is a 30 -item questionnaire. It is a standardised, self-administered

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scale, taking one approximately 10 minutes to complete. Of the 30 items, 17 are described as negative and 13 of them are positive. A six-point scoring range from -3 to +3. The high scores indicate the exhibit high assertive behaviour in their relationship and lower scores indicate low assertive behaviour in their relationship. The scale has been found to have relatively high internal consistency and stability. The 19-item scale is generally called Simple Rathus Assertiveness Scale - Short Form (SRAS-SF) with an acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .81$ ) and construct validity was found to correlate with the SRAS ( $r = .98, p = .01$ ).

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 104 participants and out of those, there were 43.26% male (N=45) participants and 56.73% female (N=59) participants. After the collection of the data, the descriptive statistics was calculated. Furthermore, inferential statistics was done to check the hypotheses. The results of the hypotheses are mentioned below.

*Table 1 Mean and Standard deviation of the variables perceived stress and assertiveness*

	N	M	SD
PS	104	19.8462	5.54902
Assertiveness	104	-1.7788	17.87495

Table 1 showed the mean and SD of variables perceived stress and assertiveness. The mean value was found to be 19.8462 and - 1.7788 and the standard deviation value was found to be 5.54902 and 17.87495 for the variables perceived stress and assertiveness respectively.

**H<sub>01</sub>: There will be no significant relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness in young adults.**

The Mean and Standard Deviation was computed in order to test this hypothesis. Also, since there was use of parametric tests made for inferential statistics, the researcher used Pearson Correlation Coefficient to find the significance of the relationship between the two variables -perceived stress and assertiveness. Table 2 describes the correlation between the two variables.

*Table 2 Significance of the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness*

	N	M	SD	R	p
PS	104	19.8462	5.54902	0.054	0.0586
Assertiveness	104	-1.7788	17.87495		

After referring to table 1, the mean for perceived stress was (M= 19.8462) and that of assertiveness was (M=- 1.7788). With respect to the standard deviation, perceived stress has a standard deviation of (SD=5.54902) and assertiveness showed standard deviation of (SD= 17.87495). It indicates that the scores deviate more from the mean for assertiveness as compared to the scores of perceived stress. After performing the Pearson correlation test, the r value was found out to be ( $r = -0.054$ ), which was found to be statistically insignificant, meaning that there was no relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness. Hence, the null hypothesis was accepted.

**H<sub>02</sub>: There will be no significant gender difference in perceived stress among college students.**

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**Table 3 Independent Sample t test for the gender difference in perceived stress among college students.**

	N	M	SD	SE	df	t	p
<b>Females</b>	59	20.1864	5.55063	.72263	102	.714	.477
<b>Males</b>	45	19.4000	5.57755	.83145			

An analysis of the above table indicated that there were 104 college students among which 59 were females and 45 were boys. The mean score of the females on perceived stress was found to be 20.1864, while that for males was 19.4000. Although both the groups have moderate levels of perceived stress, apparently, the females have a higher level of perceived stress when compared to males. While in terms of standard deviation, the females had 5.55063 and males scored 5.57755. It means the spread of scores away from the mean was apparently more for males suggesting that the variation was more for males rather than females. In order to test the obtained mean difference for their statistical significance, the scores were subjected to an independent sample t test and it was found to be .7142, which was statistically insignificant at 0.05 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. It means that there was no significant gender difference in perceived stress among young adults.

### **H<sub>0</sub>3: There will be no significant gender difference in assertiveness among college students**

In order to test the above hypothesis, the mean scores obtained by the boys and girls on perceived stress was computed apart from the computation of SD and SE. Further, the significance of the difference between mean scores of the two groups was computed using the “t” test which yielded the following.

**Table 4 Independent Sample t test for the gender difference in assertiveness among college students.**

	N	M	SD	SE	df	t	p
<b>Females</b>	59	-4.2712	16.10079	2.09614	102	1.642	.104
<b>Males</b>	45	1.4889	19.67188	2.93251			

An analysis of the above table indicates that there were 104 college students among which 59 were females and 45 were males. The mean score of the females on assertiveness -4.2712, while that for males was 1.48889. In terms of standard deviation, the females scored 16.100779 and males scored 19.67188, suggesting that the scores of males were spread more away from the mean scores than that of the females. The table shows that males are more assertive than females. In order to test the obtained mean difference for their statistical significance, the scores were subjected to an independent sample t test and it was found to be 1.642, which was not significant at both the levels. So, the null hypothesis was accepted. It means that there was no significant gender difference in assertiveness among college students. So, it can be said that the gender has nothing to do with assertiveness among the college students.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study aimed at understanding the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness behaviour among young adults belonging to India, also to find out the gender

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differences in the levels of perceived stress and assertiveness among college students. Results showed there is no significant relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness. This finding was found to be inconsistent with the previous studies which showed that there was a significant relationship between these two variables (Maheshwari. K. S and Gill. K. K.,2015; Parray. W. M & Kumar. S.,2017). In a study conducted by Parray. W. M & Kumar. S., 2017, on adolescents, it showed that stress and assertiveness had a huge impact on an individual's life, and the researchers also added that these findings were accompanied by many other factors like self-esteem, academic achievement. Many studies conducted on assertiveness and perceived stress have been employed on medical students depicting how important assertiveness training is and the effectiveness of the programme that helps in building an individual's interpersonal relationships, academic life as well.

Findings regarding gender differences in perceived stress among college students revealed that there was no significant gender difference in perceived stress among college students and that females reported higher levels of perceived stress than males. These findings were supported by the results obtained in the previous studies in which females were reported to have higher perceived stress levels (Xu et.al.,2015). This finding was consistent with previous studies that showed females experienced a higher level of perceived stress than males. (Parray. W. M. & Kumar. S., 2017). These findings could perhaps be explained by the fact that females play different roles in family and life as compared with men. Although the present study did not show a predominant evidence of gender difference with respect to perceived stress, the study conducted by C. et al. reported females experienced a higher level of perceived stress, but the study did not show any significant relationship.

Findings regarding gender differences with respect to assertiveness among college students showed that there was no significant gender difference in assertiveness among college students found. This finding was found to be consistent with previous study, in which the study did not show any significant gender difference with respect to assertiveness. The present study revealed males were more assertive than females. It is generally assumed that girls are less assertive than boys, due to the cultural taboos and restrictions that most girls encounter in their day-to-day life (Parray. W. M & Kumar. S.,2017). Many studies conducted among college students supported the same finding, like Kimble et al.,1984, Chandler et al.,1978.

The present study is not without any limitations. The research design does not demonstrate the causality of the variables. Taking a broad look into the study, the size of the sample limits to college students, an extent to which the results can be generalized. The gender of the study was only done on two genders of youth population. Hence, it can be suggested to choose a random sampling technique and a larger sample for future studies on these variables and population to be able to generalise the findings as well as provide a better understanding on it to facilitate interventions accordingly. In future studies, other measurements and variables can be used to determine the different aspects of it and how it relates with each other. Further studies can also focus on the influencing factors of the variable and opt for unstructured questionnaires to collect data to derive a better conclusion on the status of these variables in the population. Further studies can also use a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative methods, that can increase the possibilities for further exploration of the present study.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to assess the relationship between perceived stress and assertiveness among college students. It also aimed to find the gender difference in their perceived stress level and assertiveness. The tools used were the Perceived Stress Scale for (PSS-10), which is a 10-item scale was used to measure their perceived stress levels and Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (RAS) for adults, which is a 30-item scale to measure the assertiveness of an individual.

A total of 104 college students participated in this study in which there were 45 males and 59 females. Based on the responses that were gathered from these 104 participants, all of which aged between 18 to 23 years of age, it was found that there is no significant relationship between their perceived stress and assertiveness and neither was there any significant difference that existed with respect to the gender and the two variables. Although, the study showed that females exhibited higher perceived stress and males showed higher assertiveness when compared to the opposite gender.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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