

Research Paper

Understanding Stress among Adolescents: An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

Chronic stress interferes with academic performance as well as mental and physical health. Sensitivity to chronic stress without the necessary coping skills acts as a barrier to success and happiness. The main objective of the study was to assess the sensitivity of stress among adolescents of secondary schools in Bihar. A randomly selected group of 200 adolescents were equally divided into two groups. Further, the ratio of boys and girls was 60:40. The SCAT (2014) was applied to capture responses related to stress from the sample. It is clear from the result that boys were more sensitive to stress than girls. At the same time urban adolescents were more sensitive to stress than rural adolescents. Further, all the groups of adolescent falls under the category of severe stress. Therefore, building more emotional support, recognize feelings and good relationship should be suggested. Extra care from teachers, parents may also need.

Keywords: *Adolescents, Stress, Gender, Area*

The term stress refers to a psychological, physiological and behavioural response by an individual when they perceive a lack of equilibrium between the demands placed upon them and their ability to meet those demands, which, over a period of time, leads to ill health (Palmer, 1989). A simple definition of stress that can be used is: Stress results from an imbalance between demands and resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood, where various psychosocial and physiological changes making them more prone to stresses. Studies revealed that adolescent girl are found to perceive negative interpersonal events as more stressful than boys (Washington, 2009).

During the past five decades, a number of researches have been conducted to measure the sensitivity of stress among adolescents. It is generally believed that factors in the family, student and school environment may influence stress (Sun et al., 2013). Studies carried out after the year 2000 revealed that the prevalence of stress among Indian adolescents varied between 13 to 45 per cent (Talwar, 2014). Similarly, Sapna (2010) studied stress among school students of 93 to 100 per cent adolescents exhibit moderate stress while 1.9 per cent experienced severe stress. Deb et al. (2015) reported 63.5 per cent Indian students experience stress due to academic pressure. Similarly, on the basis of his study, Manikandan

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and Nirmala (2015) found that the level of stress among adolescents learner are moderate in nature. Most importantly, Meyers (2018) survey on adolescents stress reported worse mental health and higher levels of anxiety and depression than all other groups.

Policymakers should be worried about rising adolescent stress, not only for the sake of adolescent's psychological health, but for the health for the country. According to developmental scientists Bronfenbrenner (1996) there is no more critical indicator of the future of society than the character, competence and integrity of its youth. The adverse effects of stress underscore the need to heighten public awareness. Chronic stress interferes with academic performance as well as mental and physical health. Exposure to chronic stress without the necessary coping skills acts as a barrier to success and happiness.

While exposed to many developmental and social changes, adolescents lack experience and resources for dealing with stress. Their lack of refined coping skills (Chandler, 1982) and their difficulty in intellectually understanding stress (Medeiros, et al., 1983), further exacerbate its effects. Poor coping responses can contribute to distress. Truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, conflict with adults and pregnancy are symptomatic of stress (Grannis, 1985; Hash & Vernon, 1987; Novy & Donohue, 1985; Van Houten & Golembiewski, 1978). Adolescents are particularly susceptible to employing these responses. Runaways reported that in response to pressures, they started drinking between the ages of thirteen and fifteen (VanHouten & Golembiewski, 1978). Students in grades six through nine are at greatest risk for alcohol and marijuana use (Gullotta, 1983). These counterproductive responses increase vulnerability to stress.

Stress can also impede academic and social functioning along with one's sense of well-being. Anxiety impairs attention, concentration (Chandler, 1982; Schultz & Heuchert, 1983), problem-solving (Mullins, Siegel, & Hodges, 1982), and general academic achievement (Cook, 1982; Krohne & Laux, 1982). Greater life stress is associated with depressive symptoms (Mullins et al., 1982) and suicide risk (Gispert et al., 1985). As one experiences more stress, an individual's ability to adapt to new stress is reduced (Chandler, 1982). Although the response to stress is individual (Chandler, 1981), its effects are cumulative and increase geometrically with additional stressors (Medeiros, et al., 1983). These effects may be long term if not addressed (Cook, 1982). Prior research suggested a relationship between susceptibility to stress and sex. Studies investigating sex differences reported conflicting results. Some found that early adolescent girls experienced more stressors (Henderson & Dickey, 1988) and perceived these more intensely than boys (Basch & Kersch, 1986). Other research suggested that boys were at greater risk (Medeiros et al., 1983). Internal factors contributing to this vulnerability included the exhibition of more Type A behaviours (Hawkins, 1982) and perceptions of low self-esteem by underachieving males (Purkey, 1970). The nature of the stressor also contributed to sex differences: Boys found moving (Medeiros et al., 1983) and parents fighting more stressful (Hawkins, 1982) while girls reported more peer relationship stressors (Henderson & Dickey, 1988). These findings warrant further investigation into the complex, multivariate nature of stress. Thus, there is a need to conduct a study to measure the sensitivity to stress among adolescents.

Objectives of the study

- To measure the level of stress among adolescents gender-wise.
- To measure the level of stress among adolescents area-wise.

Hypothesis of the study

- There will be no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of sensitivity of stress.
- There will be significant differences between urban and rural adolescents in terms of sensitivity of stress.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consists of 200 adolescents drawn randomly from government secondary schools in a district of Bihar. The ratio of urban and rural was 50:50 and the ratio of boys and girls was 60:40. All the respondents were enrolled in class ninth and they were belonged from middle socio-economic families.

Tools used

A Standard Comprehensive Anxiety Test (SCAT) developed by Prof. A. K. P. Sinha and Prof. L. N. K. Sinha was used for measuring the sensitivity of stress. The scale consists of 90 items. Each item of the test is scored as either +1 or 0(zero). The maximum possible score of this test is 90(ninety). The higher score is indicative of the greater level of stress. The reliability of the test is 0.85 and the validity is 0.65.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results were analyzed by SPSS version 16.0. The following results were obtained:

Table 1: Difference in level of stress among adolescents by gender

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Percentile | Description | t-ratio | F Value |
|-------|-----|-------|------|------------|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| Boys | 120 | 56.48 | 8.06 | 99 | Extreme stress | 2.88* df=198 | .25 (NS) |
| Girls | 80 | 53.13 | 8.02 | 95 | Stress | | |

Note: NS= not significant, *= significant at .05 level, **= significant at .01 level

It was hypothesized that there will be no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of sensitivity of stress. Table 1 presents the comparative stress scores of boys and girls. The boys scored significantly higher average stress score as compared to girls (t=2.88/p<.05). Therefore, the hypothesis has been rejected and it is concluded that boys and girls differed significantly between themselves in terms of level of stress.

Table 2: Difference in level of stress among adolescents by area

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Percentile | Description | t-ratio | F Value |
|-------|-----|-------|------|------------|----------------|------------------|---------|
| Urban | 100 | 58.84 | 8.66 | 99 | Extreme stress | 7.16** df=198 | 15.07** |
| Rural | 100 | 51.43 | 5.68 | 95 | Stress | | |

Note: NS= not significant, *= significant at .05 level, **= significant at .01 level

It was hypothesized that there will be significant differences between urban and rural adolescents in terms of sensitivity of stress. From inspection of table 2 it is evident that the average stress score of urban adolescents are significantly higher than rural adolescents (t=7.16/p<.01) indicating the fact that urban adolescents were more stressed than rural adolescents. Thus, the hypothesis has been accepted.

CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the result that boys were more sensitive to stress than girls. At the same time urban adolescents were more sensitive to stress than rural adolescents. Overall, all the groups of adolescent fall under the category of severe stress. These findings are in line with

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the previous studies which revealed that the adolescents were more stressed than any other group (Sapna, 2010; Talwar, 2014; Sun et al, 2013). Therefore, building more emotional support, recognize feelings and good relationship should be suggested. Extra care from teachers, parents may also needed.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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