

Research Paper

A Peek in the Mind of Young Aspirants of Entrance Examinations

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ABSTRACT

The cutthroat competition to get into top colleges and secure rank often leads to students joining coaching centres to prepare for entrance examinations which sometimes also include leaving the comfort of home and going to a different city. The students face numerous challenges, including academic pressure, homesickness, and adjusting to a new environment, which are perceived as stressors by many students and have adverse effects on their health and psychological well-being. To address this, a correlational study with cross-sectional data collection was conducted on students from various parts of the country residing in Kota, aiming to assess their stress levels and well-being using the Student Stress Inventory and the PERMA profiler measure of well-being. The data was collected from 505 students residing in different hostels, and the data of 477 students was analysed. The results suggested a significant negative correlation between stress and well-being. Specific relationships between stress levels and many areas of well-being were also discovered, indicating the need for stress management among the students. These findings emphasize the need for interventions and support services to enhance the well-being and mental health of the students preparing for entrance examinations.

Keywords: *Stress, Well-Being, Parental Pressure, Expectations*

The shift from childhood to adolescence represents a significant phase characterized by academic challenges and important life decisions. As students enter the tenth grade, they are faced with the daunting task of choosing a career path and shaping their future trajectory. Amid the swirl of academic demands and physiological changes, adolescents carry the additional burden of navigating the expectations of peers and parents when choosing career aspirations. Their impact can either motivate children to explore a wide range of possible careers or encourage them to follow a path they believe their parents would endorse. (Nawabi & Javed, 2019)

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Received: January 24, 2024; Revision Received: February 06, 2024; Accepted: February 10, 2024

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To pass the various entrance exams like JEE, NEET, CA, and CS, the students end up joining coaching centres to excel in their respective fields. According to the National Sample Survey Organisation Report (2016) 7.1 crore students were enrolled in coaching centres all over India (Varma, 2016). According to the 75th National Statistical Organisation's (NSO) report 30% of students preparing for boards and entrance examinations of grades 9 and 10 were enrolled in coaching (The Hindu,2020). During an interview with a leading newspaper, the parent said "We want our son to have a better life than we have, but there is high-level competition these days. If he starts tuition now, by the time he reaches 9th or 10th standard, he would have adapted to this way of life. He would know that to excel in the competition, he has to go through this rigorous process each day." (Yadav, 2022)

An evaluation based on news articles published from January 2018 to September 2020 divulged a total of 32 documented instances of suicides among NEET aspirants, with a greater representation of female individuals (65%) among these occurrences. The states of Tamil Nadu and Bihar accounted for a significant proportion of these events. The period leading up to the examination witnessed numerous cases of suicides among students who perceived an imminent failure, as evidenced in different regions throughout the country. This phenomenon indicates a concentration of suicides, which could be attributed to specific locales such as Kota, Thrissur, and Chennai. These areas are widely recognized as focal points for competitive coaching examinations, attracting students who aspire to prepare for the NEET examination. (Kar et al.,2021)

In a report it was found, 3 students living in the same hostel committed suicide on 12 December 2022; one was preparing for engineering and the other two were medical students in Kota, Rajasthan. (*Kota: Kota Coaching Students Case: 3 Die by Suicide in Same Hostel in a Single Day | TOI Original - Times of India Videos*, 2022).

"Sometimes, students who come from outside find it difficult to cope with peer pressure and parental expectations" (India Today,2022) "I didn't have any dreams of IITs, but it was the dream of my parents and when you are too young to understand the real world, you think your parents are always right. I got diagnosed with severe obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression which had grown uncontrolled." Shivam Gupta wrote while sharing his experience, he was living in Kota and preparing for IIT. (Oreya, 2023)

The transition from a nurturing home to a single hostel room is not easy, where they face ample challenges: the pressure to secure a rank, adjusting to the new environment, surviving in the cutthroat competitive environment, being burdened with homework leading to sleepless nights, living up to the expectations of parents and teachers, forging new friendships, and feeling homesickness. (*Kota's Student Suicides: A Mismatch between Rising Aspirations, Shrinking Opportunities*, 2022). Prolonged stress, aggravated by all these factors, significantly affects the well-being of the individual (Ogwuche et al., 2020; Manita et al., 2019).

The American Psychological Association defines stress as "the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave." Psychological well-being can be described as the combination of experiencing positive emotions like happiness and contentment and effectively operating in various aspects of life. This encompasses not only cultivating one's abilities and potential but also maintaining control

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over one's circumstances, nurturing a sense of purpose, and enjoying fulfilling relationships with others. (Ruggeri et al., 2020; Huppert, 2009)

The study's primary objective is to gain insight into the thought processes of students who are preparing for various entrance exams and coping with intense competition. It aims to investigate the relationship between different stress-inducing factors experienced by these students and their psychological well-being. To achieve this, extensive research was conducted on students hailing from different regions of the country who had chosen Kota, Rajasthan, as their study destination. Kota was chosen as the research location due to its prominence as a major coaching centre with a diverse student population. Kota, Rajasthan has emerged as a magnet for a multitude of students aspiring to conquer formidable entrance exams. In 2021, Kota's coaching institutes had an enrolment of over 1 lakh students, and this figure surged to exceed 205000 by 2023. (Wadhwan et al., 2023) Additionally, the numerous news articles highlighting the challenges faced by students underscore the urgent need to delve into the students' mental states and experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress symptoms can be categorized into four categories: physical, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive (Vlisides et al.,1994 as cited in Rana et al., 2019).

- Physical: Physical symptoms may include nausea, muscle tremors, twitches, fatigue, headaches, visual difficulties, weakness, grinding one's teeth, and exhaustion (Rana et al., 2019; Greenberg, 1996).
- Cognitive: Attributing errors to others, experiencing confusion, reduced attention span, and impaired decision-making abilities can be a few Cognitive symptoms of stress. They also include heightened or reduced alertness, diminished concentration, memory challenges, difficulty in problem-solving, abstract thinking impairment, and the occurrence of distressing nightmares. (Rana et al.,2019).
- Behavioural: The stress-related behavioural symptoms include- shifts in activity levels, social withdrawal, sudden emotional outbursts, heightened suspiciousness, alterations in usual communication patterns, and fluctuations in appetite. Furthermore, initial inclinations towards increased alcohol intake or engagement with harmful substances, persistent restlessness, vague physical discomfort, restlessness such as pacing, and heightened alertness to surroundings are also observed.
- Emotional: Rana et al. (2019) also stated that emotional manifestations of stress encompass feelings of anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, fear, uncertainty, loss of emotional regulation, depression, apprehension, a sense of being overwhelmed, intense anger, irritability, and heightened aggravation.

Mishra & Singh, (2017) in their research titled “Clash of Competitions: A Study on Coaching Classes of Kota”, in which they took responses from 400 students. One of the findings was that high pressure for success was reported by the students from their parents. The students also reported being less satisfied with coaching as compared to their studies. According to the research, 62% of the students were found to be under stress and tension mainly due to the difficulty level of tests and a limited number of seats, parental pressure, and no friends. Students also reported that they were unable to relieve stress by doing leisure activities or going out to the movies as they had no time for the same. The researchers also researched hostel owners, and they found that the owners were just into the business and

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were not connected to the students. The owners reported that the students were under great stress and felt lonely. A similar thing was observed by the author while going to different hostels to collect data and talking to the wardens and students. The researchers also found that there was a lack of well-equipped and qualified counsellors in the coaching centres; those who were present were not equipped to take serious cases. The same thing was reported to the author by a student while collecting the data, where the student further added that the counsellors first ask about the grades of the students before talking to them and are mostly concerned about the grades, neglecting the problems faced by the student, for example, security issues or personal problems.

Pascoe et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review to explore the impact of academic stress on the mental and physical health of secondary and tertiary students. He discovered that students are often seen being concerned about academic stress and it has impacted them negatively by affecting their capacity to learn, their academic performance, quality and quantity of sleep, physical health, and mental health. It further impacts the student's education and employment achievement and leads to students turning to substance abuse.

Rana et al. (2019) conducted a literature review focusing on student stress, highlighting its sources, symptoms, and negative impacts. Stress is an inherent facet of human existence, encompassing both physiological and psychological imbalances. It emerges from the disconnect between an individual's demands and their capacity to fulfil them. Whether stress has a positive or negative effect depends on factors like the intensity and duration of stress, individual character, their cognitive evaluation of stress, and the support they receive.

Hypothesis

- H1- There will be a significant difference in the scores of both males and females in stress and well-being scores.
- H2- There will be a significant correlation between the factors of stress and overall stress score.
- H3- There will be a significant correlation between the factors of well-being and overall well-being score.
- H4- There will be a significant correlation between Stress and Well-being among the coaching students.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Design

This study employed a correlational research design, utilizing a cross-sectional data collection approach. A total of 505 coaching students falling within the age range of 14 to 21 years were included in the study. The participants belong to different streams- PCM, PCB(Medical), and Commerce. The data collection process spanned various hostels within the city, encompassing both online and offline modes ensuring participant confidentiality. Before analysis, data from 28 participants was excluded due to reported mental health concerns or negative responses in the consent form.

Inclusion Criteria

- The students who live in hostels and go to any coaching institute in Kota city are aged between 14-21 years.

Exclusion Criteria

- Students were diagnosed with any mental illness in the past 6 months.
- Students who do not go to any coaching institute.

Instruments

1. **Student Stress Inventory-** The stress levels of the students were assessed using the Student Stress Inventory developed by Mohammed Aziz Shah Mohammed Arip (2015). This 40-item scale encompasses four subscales: Physical stressors (10 items), Interpersonal Relationships stressors (10 items), Academic stressors (10 items), and Environmental stressors (10 items). Participants indicated their responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, reflecting their frequency of experience from "never" to "always." Score interpretation states that the score between 40-80= mild stress; 81-120=moderate stress and 121-160=severe stress. The scale demonstrated strong content validity, with an overall rating of 80.5%, and a commendable reliability coefficient of 0.85.
2. **The PERMA profiler measure** developed by Julie Butler & Margaret L. Kern (2011) was used to measure the perceived state of well-being by the participants. The scale measures five key dimensions of well-being: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning, and Accomplishment. The participants used a Likert scale from 0-10 to indicate their responses.

The participants were provided with both questionnaires, along with a section to share their demographic details. Once the data was gathered in an Excel Sheet, it was coded and then SPSS was used to analyse the data.

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Physical	18.42	5.319	10	40
Academic	20.90	7.118	10	40
Interpersonal Relationship	18.05	5.109	10	40
Environmental	19.32	6.923	10	40
Stress Score	76.70	20.245	40	160
Positive Emotions	6.487	2.123	0	10
Engagement	6.704	2	0	10
Relationships	6.886	2.066	0	10
Meaning	6.963	2.019	0	10
Accomplishment	6.648	1.814	0	10
Wellbeing Score	33.689	8.208	0	50

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for both the scales and their subscales. On the stress scale, the mean of the overall stress score of the coaching students is 76.70, suggesting mild stress, whereas a standard deviation of 20.245, which suggests that the score varies and can be seen on all the spectrums from mild, moderate, to severe. This also implies that the students' experiences and stress levels are not uniform. The wellbeing score has a mean of 33.689 and a standard deviation of 8.208. The range is from 0-50, and the scores, similar to stress scores, suggest that wellbeing scores vary in individuals, showing diversity in wellbeing levels.

Table 2 Pairwise Comparison of Gender on Stress Score and Wellbeing Score Using Bonferroni

Dependent Variable	Gender (I)	Gender (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	P-Value
Stress Total	Male	Female	-4.164*	0.035
Stress Total	Female	Male	4.164*	0.035
Well-being Total	Male	Female	-0.004	0.996
Well-being Total	Female	Male	0.004	0.996

*Significant at 0.05.

Table 2 shows the results of pairwise comparisons between gender groups for stress and well-being scores. Significant differences are denoted by * ($p < 0.05$). The mean difference between males and females in the "Stress Total" score is -4.164, with a standard error of 1.969. This difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.035$). This means that, on average, females scored higher by 4.164 points on the "Stress Total" compared to males. The mean difference between males and females in the "Well-being Total" is -0.004 with a standard error of 0.802. This difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0.996$). This indicates that there is no significant difference in the "Well-being Total" between males and females.

Table 3 ANOVA, Tests of Between-Subject Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	Stress Total	0.936
	Well-being Total	0.944

Table 3 represents the results of ANOVA tests examining the effect of gender on stress and well-being scores. The partial eta squared values suggest a substantial effect of gender on both variables.

Table 4 Correlation Table for Stress subscales (factors) and Stress Scores

Variables		Physical	Interpersonal Relationship	Academic	Environmental	Stress Total
Physical	Spearman	-	.554**	.618**	.553**	.796**
	Rho					
Interpersonal Relationship	Spearman	-	-	.658**	.507**	.800**
	Rho					
Academic	Spearman	-	-	-	.583**	.874**
	Rho					
Environmental	Spearman	-	-	-	-	.813**
	Rho					
Stress Total	Spearman	-	-	-	-	-
	Rho					

**significant at the 0.01 level

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Table 5 Correlation Table for Wellbeing subscales (factors) and Well-being Scores

Variables		Positive Emotions	Accomplishment	Engagement	Meaning	Relationship	Well-being Score
Positive Emotions	Spearman	-	.506**	.663**	.594**	.649**	.846**
	Rho						
Accomplishment	Spearman	-	-	.430**	.440**	.448**	.679**
	Rho						
Engagement	Spearman	-	-	-	.583**	.647**	.824**
	Rho						
Meaning	Spearman	-	-	-	-	.658**	.805**
	Rho						
Relationship	Spearman	-	-	-	-	-	.850**
	Rho						
Well-being Score	Spearman	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Rho						

**significant at 0.01 level

Table 6 Correlation Table for Stress Score and Well-Being Score

Variables		Stress Score	Well-being Score
Stress Score	Spearman Rho	-	-3.61**
Well-being Score	Spearman Rho	-3.61**	-

**significant at 0.01 level

Correlation Analysis was conducted to find a relationship between the scores of different subscales and overall scores. Table 4 represents the correlations among different stress subscales and the overall stress score. There is a positive correlation between each subscale and its relation to the overall stress score. Table 5 illustrates the interrelationships between well-being subscales and the overall well-being score. A positive correlation is found between them all. Table 6 highlights the negative correlation between stress scores and well-being scores.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between stress and well-being among students preparing for entrance examinations. The study reveals that the majority of students were experiencing mild stress. However, the standard deviation of 20.245 also suggests that students also reported moderate and severe levels of stress, which needs to be addressed. The findings related to the hypotheses have been thoroughly discussed and examined concerning their alignment with or contradiction to the formulated hypotheses. Furthermore, the limitations and implications are also discussed below.

Examining the scores of males and females in both stress and well-being shows that there is a significant difference between the stress scores of females and males, whereas there is no significant difference between the well-being scores of both genders. Although we can see from Table 3 that gender has a strong effect on the stress and well-being scores. Hence, we can partially accept the first hypothesis, as there is a significant difference in the stress scores. Thus, we can conclude that females have higher levels of stress than males. (Graves et al., 2021; Khadem, 2019; Akande et al., 2014).

Table 4 represents the correlation score of each subscale or factor of stress among each other and the overall stress score. There is a significantly positive correlation between all the subscales, which suggests that those who report higher stress levels in academics might also have higher levels of stress in other aspects like interpersonal relationships and Physical and environmental factors. Each factor on the scale also has a positive correlation with the overall stress score. Hence, we accept the second hypothesis. This finding is supported by

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many previous research findings. Yikealo et al., (2018), in their research, found that students often undergo academic and environmental stress. Family and teacher expectations play a major role in academic stress.

Table 5 represents the correlation scores of each subscale among each other and the overall well-being score. A significantly positive correlation was found between each subscale and overall well-being. Hence, we accept our third hypothesis. Similar findings were found in several studies. Thomas et al. (2017) found that family relationships play a significant role in the well-being of an individual. If the relationships are poor, then it might take a toll on well-being, and if the individual maintains a strong relationship with their family members, it might lead to an increase in self-esteem and well-being.

Table 6 illustrates the correlation between stress and well-being among coaching students. There is a significant negative correlation between stress and well-being. The score of -3.61^{**} (0.01 level of significance) suggests that there is a weak negative correlation between the two. This suggests that if there is an increase in stress levels, then there is a decrease in the well-being of the individual. Hence, we accept the fourth hypothesis. Similar findings were seen in research conducted by Malik et al. (2020) to investigate the relationship between psychological well-being and stress among students at UiTM. They found a moderately negative correlation between stress and well-being. (Manita et al., 2019)

Limitations

The study has some limitations that could be kept in mind while conducting a similar study in the future. The data was collected using a self-reported questionnaire; hence, the responses might be influenced by social desirability bias. The cross-sectional method of collecting data limits our ability to study the cause-and-effect relationship between the variables.

Implications or Suggestions

Thousands of students are admitted every year to the coaching institutes to prepare for entrance exams. Looking at the above data, we can see that it is important to take some measures to ensure that the students are not overburdened and under a lot of pressure. Some of the measures that could be taken are mentioned below:

- Coaching should have qualified psychologists who are also equipped with tools and crisis intervention.
- Transportation services should be provided by the Coaching institutes so that students can avail themselves of them easily.
- There should be an in-house counsellor in each hostel, and regular assessments of the students should be done.
- A holistic approach should be adopted by coaching institutes where they conduct various events for students to ensure they are engaging in other activities too.
- Coaching should introduce different programs like stress management, mindfulness techniques, time management techniques, and emotional resilience.
- The importance of proper sleep, a healthy diet, social involvement, and prioritizing should be taught to the students.

CONCLUSION

This study uncovers the intricate relationship between stress, well-being, and gender differences among coaching students. The findings highlight the importance of managing

stress effectively to enhance overall well-being and ensure a productive stay of the students. The institute's management also needs to come up with gender-specific interventions to address the stressors that might be affecting female students. Most of the students had shown disappointment with the management and teachers of the coaching which should also be looked into. This can be achieved by doing qualitative research, students can be asked to give suggestions and talk about the problems that can be implied.

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Acknowledgment

The author (s) appreciate and acknowledge the support of Yogveer Sehgal, Puru Sharma, and the team (data collection), and all those who helped us. The authors also appreciate the participants for their help in making the research possible.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Sharma, H., Karmarkar, R. & Khan, S. (2024). A Peek in the Mind of Young Aspirants of Entrance Examinations. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *12*(1), 551-560. DIP:18.01.051.20241201, DOI:10.25215/1201.051