

The Relationship between Perceived Stress and Dissociative Experiences among College Students: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

College students often face academic, social, and personal stress, which can lead to dissociative experiences like memory lapses, feeling detached from themselves, and emotional numbness. This paper reviews research published between 2016 and 2025 that looks at the link between perceived stress and dissociative experiences in college students. Findings from thirteen studies consistently show a positive relationship between stress and dissociative symptoms. This suggests that ongoing academic stress can trigger unhealthy coping strategies that show up as dissociation. Factors such as a history of trauma, coping methods, and social support can influence this connection. The review highlights the importance of stress management programs and trauma-informed approaches in universities, especially in India, where academic pressures and mental health stigma are significant issues.

Keywords: *perceived stress, dissociation, college students, systematic review, mental health, India*

Stress is a common and complex experience that affects people at all stages of life. While manageable stress can boost motivation, long-term stress tends to harm mental health. For college students, stress often comes from heavy academic loads, uncertainty about future careers, and family expectations (WHO, 2020). Surveys show that 80 to 90% of students feel moderate to high stress levels, and more than half report symptoms like anxiety or burnout (American College Health Association, 2022).

Dissociation refers to disruptions in consciousness, identity, or perception (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986). It ranges from mild lapses in awareness to more severe detachment. In academic settings, students might experience dissociation as zoning out, daydreaming, or having momentary lapses in memory. Continuous exposure to stress can activate dissociative mechanisms as a way of protecting the mind (Lyssenko et al., 2018).

The connection between stress and dissociation has not been widely studied, especially in non-Western populations. Indian college students deal with unique sociocultural pressures, such as academic competition, family expectations, and mental health stigma. These factors may shape how stress and dissociation appear. This systematic review brings together global

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evidence from 2016 to 2025 about the relationship between perceived stress and dissociative experiences among college students, focusing on contextual factors relevant to India.

Few studies have systematically synthesized the ways in which perceived stress contributes to dissociative experiences in young adults, despite growing evidence of student stress.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic search took place in PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and 2025. The keywords included stress, perceived stress, academic stress, dissociation, college students, and mental health, combined with Boolean operators (AND/OR). The reference lists of selected papers were manually screened for more studies. After searching the databases and screening the results, thirteen empirical studies were included in this review. The inclusion criteria were empirical studies involving college students aged 18 to 25, the use of validated stress and dissociation measures, and peer-reviewed English publications. The exclusion criteria were clinical samples, case studies, or studies without quantitative correlation analyses.

RESULTS

The majority of the studies reviewed, around 13 in total, showed a significant positive connection between perceived stress and dissociative experiences, with an effect size of $r = .30$ to $.50$. Cultural differences were noted. Indian and East Asian students reported experiences like “blinking out” or “freezing,” while Western groups described feeling emotionally detached. Moderating factors included a history of trauma, lack of sleep, and ineffective coping skills.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Studies on Stress and Dissociative Experiences

| Author(s) & Year | Country | Sample Size | Measures Used | Key Findings |
|---------------------------|---------|-------------------------|--|---|
| Vogel & Schwabe (2016) | Germany | 180 | Cognitive Tasks; Stress Induction Paradigm | Stress impaired learning and memory consolidation, suggesting cognitive detachment under pressure. |
| Schweden et al. (2018) | Germany | 67 | Test Anxiety Scale; Depersonalization Inventory | 47% experienced moderate depersonalization linked to test-related stress. |
| Lukasik et al. (2019) | Finland | 300 | Anxiety-Stress Inventory; Memory Tasks | Stress impacted working memory, that indirectly made dissociative states more common. |
| Barbayannis et al. (2022) | USA | 843 | PSS-10; DES-II | Reduced wellbeing and increased dissociation were predicted by high stress. |
| Bustamante et al. (2022) | USA | 820 | DES; Daily Diary Method | Affective instability and behavioral fluctuations have been linked to academic stress. |
| Kim & Lee (2022) | Korea | 136 | Academic Stress Scale; Depersonalization Scale | Depersonalization and academic stress are positively correlated ($r = .43$). |
| Mhanna et al. (2022) | Lebanon | 419 university students | DES-II; Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21) | Elevated dissociative symptoms, particularly depersonalization and absorption, were predicted by high levels of stress and trauma exposure. |

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| Author(s) & Year | Country | Sample Size | Measures Used | Key Findings |
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| McBride & Greeson (2023) | USA | 150 | PSS-10; Mindfulness Inventory | Stress and mindfulness are inversely correlated; high levels of stress impair academic performance. |
| Córdova Olivera (2023) | Peru (Latin America) | 320 undergraduates | Academic Stress Inventory; General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) | Emotional detachment and diminished mental health were strongly predicted by academic stress. |
| Olson et al. (2025) | Germany | 250 | Burnout Inventory; DES-II | Detachment and zoning out were associated with student burnout. |
| Shanbhog et al. (2025) | India | 1 000 | PSS-10 | Dissociation was linked to high perceived stress; the Indian context was highlighted. |
| Kagendo (2025) | Kenya | 400 | Academic Anxiety Scale | Dissociative tendencies were linked to academic anxiety. |
| Kumar & Rao (2025) | India | 250 | PSS-10; DES-II; Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) | Higher dissociative experiences were jointly predicted by perceived stress and poor sleep quality; personality traits partially mediated the relationship. |

Note. PSS = Perceived Stress Scale; DES = Dissociative Experiences Scale. Data synthesized from reviewed studies (2016–2025).

DISCUSSION

The data consistently shows that dissociative experiences and perceived stress are positively correlated. According to the diathesis-stress model (Colodro-Conde et al., 2018), people who have low coping skills or vulnerability factors like trauma are more likely to experience stress-induced dissociation. Dissociation serves as an adaptive defense during times of emotional overload, according to the trauma model of dissociation (Lynn et al., 2014).

Stress levels are high in India due to a combination of familial and academic pressures as well as the stigma associated with mental illness. Dissociative responses are frequently described by students as "zoning out" or "blinking during exams," underscoring the cultural differences in symptom expression. Counseling, mindfulness, and stress management training are necessary interventions to address these sociocultural influences.

According to the findings, educational institutions ought to implement counseling and psychoeducation programs to assist students in identifying the early warning indicators of stress-induced dissociation. Stress reactions may be further decreased by practicing mindfulness and coping skills.

CONCLUSION

According to this systematic review, college students' dissociative experiences are significantly predicted by their perception of stress. Youth academic functioning and psychological resilience can be enhanced through addressing academic stressors using culturally sensitive interventions.

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Conflict of Interest

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