

## Psychological Distress among School-Going Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the psychological distress among school-going adolescents, in particular, the gender difference in psychological distress and the relationship between age and psychological distress by using the General Health Questionnaire-12 among a sample of 60 school-going adolescents. This study revealed that major psychological distress among school-going adolescence were lack of concentration, sleeplessness, experience of stress and strain, lack of confidence and feeling of unworthiness, depression, and inability to take decisions. The study showed no significant difference in psychological distress among genders, but it was found that females were more psychologically distressed than males and there was a negative correlation with age which indicated that as a person grew in age, psychological distress declined.

**Keywords:** *Psychological distress, Adolescents.*

Adolescence is a time of tremendous reorganization and transformations of the body and the mind and they are very powerfully affected by what they see and hear continuously (Wolfe & Mash, (eds), 2006). It is a fact that there is a sizeable proportion of troubled and troublesome children in the schools and the kinds of needs they have are different. Incidents such as the murder of a toddler by two primary school children in Liverpool and the spate of shootings of school children by adolescents in the US have further emphasized the importance of the school's role in promoting healthy social and emotional development and this demands the help of people who can provide methods and techniques of tension reduction and balancing of life. Adolescents can be helped through meaningful relationships and therapeutic interventions. This can be done in the schools by facilitating students' self knowledge and emotional acceptance and thus help to live satisfyingly and resourcefully (Hornby, Hall, C & Hall, E.(eds), 2003). In this study an effort is made to identify the general mental health of the school going adolescents and to assess the psychological distress among them. Thus it can bring certain realization among the teachers in order to assist their students in a better way. This study attempted to answer the following questions: 1. Is there psychological distress among school-going adolescents? 2. Is there gender difference in psychological distress

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among school-going adolescents? 3. What is the relationship between age and psychological distress among school-going adolescents?

### *Psychological distress*

Psychological distress is a general term used to describe unpleasant feelings or emotions; it is psychological discomfort that interferes with our activities of daily living. Psychological distress can result in negative views of the environment, others, and the self. Sadness, anxiety, distraction, sleeplessness, lack of concentration, inability to take decisions, unhappiness and symptoms of mental illness are manifestations of psychological distress. Mclean, Strongman, & Neha, (2007), define psychological distress as a negative emotional condition that is an adjunct to the appraisal of threat, harm or loss. According to Talala, (2013) & Korkeila (2000) defined psychological distress as ‘a non-specific syndrome that covers constructs such as anxiety, depression, cognitive problems, irritability, anger and obsession-compulsion.’ Psychological distress is highly prevalent in the general population, estimates being between 5–48%. Psychological distress has been proposed as one probable explanation in mediating the socio-economic gradient in health and mortality. Psychological distress is often experienced as a part of normal life, a consequence of persistent or temporary adversities, such as distress due to normal life transitions, challenges and losses, in education and work, family life, relationships, ageing and so on, and is associated with social deprivation, exclusion or persecution (Bolton, 2010). According to McDowell and Newell (1996), measures of psychological distress have been used as a strategy to evaluate psychological well-being. Psychological distress can be thought of as a maladaptive response to a stressful situation. Psychological distress occurs when external events or stressors place demands upon us that we are unable to cope with.

### *Adolescents*

Adolescence represents a period of intensive growth and change in nearly all the aspects of child’s physical, mental, social, emotional, religious and moral life (Vishala, 2006). Growth changes and physical phenomena are accompanied by thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that are new to his/her experience. Adolescence is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. It is a period of biological, social, emotional and cognitive development. It is customarily defined as beginning at approximately 10 to 13 years of age and ending between 18 and 22 years of age. It is usually subdivided into early and late adolescence. Particular psychological and psychiatric problems can have their onset in adolescence or become more prevalent or noticeable during adolescence, e.g. phobias, anxiety, depression, suicide and attempted suicide, attention-deficit disorders, anorexia and bulimia, conduct disorders, schizophrenia and substance abuse. Adolescence is also a time when adolescents strive to create their own personal identities and sense of autonomy which may at times lead to major or minor, temporary or permanent disagreements with their parents, carers or teachers (Nicolson, & Ayers, 1997). Adolescence is a time of much disturbance, change and potential for growth. The adolescence is confronted with a body that stretches changes and grows in all directions, as does her or his mind. Psychological survival is dependent on many different

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factors, such as self-esteem, safety, biological needs and good enough relationships and is threatened when any of these components are at risk (Wise, 2000).

### *Objectives of the study*

1. To examine the psychological distress among school going adolescents
2. To assess the gender difference in psychological distress among school going adolescents
3. To assess the relationship between age and psychological distress among school going adolescents

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Sample*

A cross-sectional research design was adopted for the study. Participants were students of class VIII and IX, from one of the English medium schools in Tezpur municipal area. This was an English medium school with two thousand students who accommodated students from different walk of life and it was a co-educational institution. All the students of class VIII and IX brought together and selection was done through lottery mode, who had given consent and who also had parental consent for the study. A total number of 60 students, 30 males and 30 females were selected for the study. To measure the psychological distress, general health questionnaire were given to them.

### *Instrumentation*

The researcher used the following tools for the data collection

#### 1. **Semi-Structured Socio-Demographic Data Sheet**

The demographic data sheet was used to get primary information about the samples selected for the study. It included name, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and their socio-economic status.

#### 2. **GHQ-12 General Health Questionnaire (David Goldberg)**

The General Health Questionnaire is a screening device for identifying psychological problems. It is used for all ages from adolescent. It can be used with the general population or with patients in any sort of non-psychiatric clinical or primary care settings. It is used by researchers and clinicians. The General Health Questionnaire contains three factors, namely Anxiety and Depression, Social Dysfunction, and Loss of Confidence. It consists of 12 statements related to the psychological disturbances of a person. The items are answered on a four-point scale ranging from zero to three. Higher score reflects higher problems. It has been translated into 38 different languages, testament to the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

### *Data Analysis*

The SPSS programme was used to analyse the quantitative data collected. Descriptive statistics were conducted for demographic variables, psychological distress and gender difference. Pearson  $r$  correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between age and psychological distress.

**FINDINGS**

*Table 1, Socio-Demographic characteristics of the participants N= 60*

Variables	Categories	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>50</b>
	<b>Female</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>Class VIII</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>56.7</b>
	<b>Class IX</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>43.3</b>
<b>Religion</b>	<b>Hindu</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>81.7</b>
	<b>Muslim</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1.7</b>
	<b>Christian</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16.7</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Tribal</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>
	<b>Non-tribal</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Staying with Parents</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>66.7</b>
	<b>No</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>33.3</b>
<b>Socio-economic status</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>----</b>	
	<b>Middle</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>High</b>	<b>-----</b>	

As can be seen in the table given above, 50% of the respondents were boys and 50% of them were girls. Over half of the respondents (56.7%) were class VIII students, and fewer than half (43.3%) were class IX students. A large proportion of respondents belonged to Hindu religion (81.7%) and a fewer belonged to Christian religion (16.7%). Among the 60 participants 45 (75%) were non-tribal and 15 (25%) of them were tribal. 40 (66.7%) of them were staying with their parents and 20 (33.3%) of them were staying with relatives or in the hostels. The socio-economic status of the participants revealed that all of them were from an average socio-economic background.

*Table 2, The percentages of responses to the various items in the general health questionnaire*

S. No.	Items	0 %	1 %	2 %	3 %
1.	<b>Concentration</b>	Better than usual <b>25</b>	Same as usual <b>38.33</b>	Less than usual <b>33.33</b>	Much less than usual <b>3.33</b>
2.	<b>Lost sleep</b>	Not at all <b>53.33</b>	Not more than usual <b>30</b>	More than usual <b>11.67</b>	Much more than usual <b>5</b>
3.	<b>Playing a useful part</b>	More than usual <b>15</b>	Same as usual <b>60</b>	Less than usual <b>20</b>	Much less than usual <b>5</b>
4.	<b>Making decision</b>	More than usual <b>23.33</b>	Same as usual <b>51.67</b>	Less than usual <b>18.33</b>	Much less than usual <b>6.67</b>

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S. No.	Items	0 %	1 %	2 %	3 %
5.	<b>Felt under strain</b>	Not at all <b>28.33</b>	Not more than usual <b>38.33</b>	More than usual <b>20</b>	Much more than usual <b>13.33</b>
6.	<b>Could not overcome difficulties</b>	Not at all <b>30</b>	Not more than usual <b>35</b>	More than usual <b>21.67</b>	Much more than usual <b>13.33</b>
7.	<b>Enjoy day -to-day activities</b>	More than usual <b>26.67</b>	Same as usual <b>53.33</b>	Less than usual <b>15</b>	Much less than usual <b>5</b>
8.	<b>Face the problems</b>	More than usual <b>15</b>	Same as usual <b>41.67</b>	Less than usual <b>36.67</b>	Much less than usual <b>6.67</b>
9.	<b>Unhappy and depressed</b>	Not at all <b>33.33</b>	Not more than usual <b>26.67</b>	More than usual <b>25</b>	Much more than usual <b>15</b>
10.	<b>Lost confidence</b>	Not at all <b>38.33</b>	Not more than usual <b>33.33</b>	More than usual <b>18.34</b>	Much more than usual <b>10</b>
11.	<b>Felt worthless</b>	Not at all <b>45</b>	Not more than usual <b>35</b>	More than usual <b>11.67</b>	Much more than usual <b>8.33</b>
12.	<b>Feeling happy</b>	More than usual <b>18.33</b>	Same as usual <b>63.33</b>	Less than usual <b>15</b>	Much less than usual <b>3.33</b>

The table above shows the percentages of responses to the various items in the general health questionnaire. 33.33% of the participants revealed that their level of concentration is less than usual and 3.33% of them found it as, much less than usual. Regarding their sleep 11.67% of them lost their sleep more than usual and for 5% of them it is much more than usual. 20% of them found that their ability to play useful part in their life is less than usual and 5% of them found that it is much less than usual. In making decision, 18.33% reported that their capacity to make decision is less than usual and 6.67% it is much less than usual. The prevalence of stress and strain is more than usual for 20% of them and much more than usual is for 13.33%. For 21.67% of them find it difficult to overcome difficulties more than usual and 13.33% of them it is much more than usual. With regard to enjoying day-to-day activities, for 15% of them enjoyed less than usual and 5% of them enjoyed much less than usual. For 36.67% of them the ability to face problem is found to be less than usual and 6.67% it is much less than usual. 25% of them found to be unhappy and depressed more than usual and 15% of them it is much more than usual. For 18.34%, their level of confidence is much less than usual and for 10% it is much more less than usual. Feeling of worthlessness is prevalent in 11.67% and

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it is much more than usual is found in 8.33% of them. With regard to happiness, for 15% of them feeling of happiness are less than usual and 3.33 % of them it is much less than usual.

**Table 3 Gender difference in psychological distress**

		Gender		Psychological distress	
Gender	N	Mean	Sd	Mean	Sd
Male	30	13.97	.669	12.0000	5.25882
Female	30	14.20	.847	13.7000	7.25472

From the data seen in the table given above shows no significant difference is found in the gender difference in psychological distress. Result discloses that psychological distress is more prevalent in females than males.

**Table 4 Correlation between Age and psychological distress**

		Age	GHQ total
Age	Pearson correlation	1	-.155
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.239
	N	60	60
GHQ Total	Pearson correlation	-.155	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.239	
	N	60	60

The correlation between age and psychological distress is noted above. There is a negative correlation between age and psychological distress. It means as person grows in age there is a reduction in psychological distress

## **DISCUSSION**

This study was designed to measure the psychological distress among school-going adolescents in particular gender difference in psychological distress and the relationship between age and psychological distress. The 12-item GHQ was used in this study to examine the psychological distress among school-going adolescents. The results showed that participants under study experienced issues like lack of concentration, loss of sleep, inability to make decisions, feelings of unworthiness, unhappiness and depression, stress and strain, inability to face difficulties and lack of confidence during this period of their life. The study showed no significant difference in psychological distress among genders, but it is found that females are more psychologically distressed than males and there is a negative correlation with age which indicates that as a person grown in age, psychological distress declines.

Findings were consistent with different studies conducted with the emotional problems of adolescents. Studies showed that between 10 and 20 percent of school-age children exhibited emotional and behavioural problems (Hornby, Hall, C &Hall, E.(eds) 2003.) The hormonal changes of puberty affect the emotions of adolescents (Zgourides, 2000). A study conducted by Knopf, Park, & Mulye, (2008) on the mental health of adolescents highlighted that one in

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five adolescents experience significant symptoms of emotional distress and nearly one in ten were emotionally impaired. The study found that the most common disorders among adolescents include depression, anxiety disorders and attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder and substance use disorder. Emotional difficulties are best seen as internalizing problems where the adolescent experiences and suffers emotional upsets. They may not be detected by others if, for example, emotional difficulties do not result in overt behavioural difficulties. For this reason withdrawn, depressed and anxious adolescents may not receive support from teachers or parents (Nicolson & Ayers, 1997). Findings indicated that young adolescents' stressful life experiences as well as their parents' stressful events and psychological symptoms are factors associated with increases in adolescent emotional/behavioral problems (Compas, et al.,1989).

Anxiety is an emotional state that arises during adolescence. It manifests forms of helplessness, uncertainty about self, lack of sufficient strength in the face of external factors and exaggeration of their potency and strength (Rasquinha, 2012). It leads to many psychological issues like decrease of concentration levels and sense of hopelessness and being worthless. Fear of being abandoned by friends, relatives and parents constantly hounds these teens and at times results in panic attacks. The present study too showed the signs of anxiety and depression.

Though this study revealed no significant difference in psychological distress among genders, it showed that females are more psychologically distressed than males. The finding is consistent with the study conducted by Mclean, Strongman, & Neha, (2007) on psychological distress, causal attributions, and coping, reported that women anticipated significantly more psychological distress than men did. A study conducted by Rickwood & D'Espaignet, (1996) on Psychological distress among older adolescents and young adults in Australia stated that high levels of psychological distress were evident with girls being more distressed than boys at all ages. Matud, (2004) in his study on gender differences in stress and coping styles examined significantly higher score in psychological distress among women than men.

The present study shows that there is a negative correlation between age and psychological distress. It means as person grows in age there is a reduction in psychological distress. The finding is consistent with the study conducted by Jorm et.al., (2005). In his study he found that psychological distress generally declined across the age range 20-64 years. Baider et.al. (2003) conducted a study and reported that there is a tendency toward decreasing distress levels with age. Psychological distress is a major problem among the student population. Though it is a normal emotional response to a stressful situation, it can vary in different population and situation based on their culture, age, and gender.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the psychological distress among school-going adolescents in particular the gender difference in psychological distress and the relationship between age and psychological distress by using the General Health Questionnaire-12 among a sample of 60 school-going adolescents. The results revealed that adolescence undergo certain emotional

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difficulties during this period. In the present study it was found that there is no significant gender difference in distress but it was found that females are more psychologically distressed than males. Significant difference were not shown in psychological distress can be because both males and females were exposed to same environment. A negative correlation was found between age and psychological distress. This shows that adolescents who grows in age experiences reduction in their distress. Based on the study following recommendations are drawn:

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct psycho-educational program for the students in the school.
2. Organize group sessions to handle emotions in a healthy way
3. Provide awareness programme for the teachers and students on the developmental changes that take place during adolescents.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Major limitation of the study was of course, the samples taken. Samples were from only one school and the size was very small. Larger sample size can show significant difference in the result. Since they were from the same school the exposure of the students were to the same environment. It can also affect their mental disposition. Further study can be done with large sample from different schools.

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