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*THE IMPACT OF STRESS ON ACADEMIC
PERFORMANCE*

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Abstract

Stress is a natural phenomenon of emotional or physical tension due to a demand or challenge, which can come from a variety of different events or thoughts often leading to sadness, frustrations, and nervousness. In addition, as related to positivity, it is the body's reaction as a defensive mechanism to avoid danger; however, too much of it like anything else in life is not good for survival. In academic settings, stress plays major factors on student academic achievements. When students are overwhelmed by stress, it can take over their ability to focus and study on and off campus, so this paper has shown the effects of stress on academic performance like dropping of classes and school. Since stress affects thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, the impact of stress on academic performance plays major roles in learning both on and off campus. This paper aims to present studies about the stress related to the academic performance of students. The scope will be limited to the definition of academic stress, the sources of stress, factors affecting it, and its impact on the academic performance of students. Finally, a list of recommendations on how to cope with stress related expected academic performance.

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Introduction

Stress is the natural condition that an individual experiences throughout his/her life. It can also be defined as “a feeling of being overwhelmed, worried or run-down” (APA, 2018), or in other words, stress is the body’s ability to respond to change as a feeling of emotional or physical tension. It is the individual’s reaction when they are dealt with or reacts to internal or external problems and challenges. According to Richlin-Klonsky and Hoe, stress is defined as “any factor, acting internally or externally, which makes adaptation to environment difficult and which induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between himself and herself and the external environment. Similarly, stress is explained by (Pargman 2006) as “an uncertain reaction to external and internal factors” which connotes a negative or positive response to environmental stimuli. It can be said that stress is how the body in its entirety relates to the changes and unfamiliar situations that present themselves over time.

Numerous research studies have been conducted about the impact of stress on the academic performance of students. According to Hellhammer, 2007, physiologically, stress-related diseases in the form of reproduction, cardiovascular, metabolism, and gastrointestinal diseases are largely determined through genetic and developmental factors. These factors may differ from person to a person but symptoms of this disease may also be similar among individuals at times. Wheeler (2007), on the other hand, said that stress is a physics word that refers to the amount of force used on an object. When we relate it in a real-life situation, it is how we ascertain issues that have a direct impact on our daily life. Examples of which are worrying about financial matters, work-related issues, health and safety like the pandemic that we are experiencing right now, conflicts with friends, and academic-related stress (Heissel, et al., 2017). These all carry force or pressure on a person’s body -mind and spirit. Some of the pressure or force originates from the environment but most often comes from within a person’s head in the form of fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, discouragement, and low self-esteem. For some people, the effect is minimal which means they can endure pressure while in others the effect is enormous and has an adverse effect. This paper aims to present studies about the stress related to the academic performance of students. The scope will be limited to the definition of academic stress, the sources of stress, factors affecting it, and its impact on the academic performance of students.

ACADEMIC STRESS

Education is the process of acquiring information through the process of facilitating learning, developing one’s capacities, discovering the potentials of students, and preparing them to become a successful member of a specific society or culture in the process. Along this line,

education serves primarily as an individual development function. Education is also a lifelong process. It begins at birth and continues throughout life, it is constant and ongoing. Formal education generally begins somewhere between the ages of four and six when children with professional guidance start to learn skills and competencies that society deems important in preparation for future life. In the broader sense, education is defined as a process designed to inculcate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to enable individuals to cope effectively with their environment. Its primary purpose is to foster and promote fullest individual self-realization for all people. Achieving these goals requires an understanding of commitment to the proposition that education is a primary instrument for the social and economic advancement of human welfare (Verma, 1990).

While society is advancing with new technologies, education has evolved as well in order to meet the needs of people for guidance of a professional life and to promote the importance of an educated society. It is becoming more and more competitive especially in this time of the pandemic where from the traditional classroom set-up transitions into remote and online modalities. For example, over 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States closed their doors due to stress related to the pandemic of Covid-19 (Goldstein, 2020). In addition, millions of students were forced to finish the semester via remote learning, resulting in extraordinary disruptions to higher education in the United States and around the world (Goldstein, 2020). While many students are continuing with online/distance learning, many students continue to struggle with distance learning. In addition, one particular area of concern for students that emerges is academic stress and its impact on their academic performance and subsequently their ability to succeed in this new kind of environment. So, research has indicated that academic stress is mental distress related to some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure or even an awareness of the possibility of such failure (Gupta & Khan, 1987). In addition, it is the product of a combination of academic-related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Wilks, 2008). Also, it is commonly an emotional imbalance that may arise due to several factors such as exams, assignments, papers and projects, competitive nature in their courses of study, financial difficulties, and most recently, the inability to cope or succeed in this new learning environment (Heissel, et al., 2017).

According to Chew-Graham et.al. (2003), student is continued to face with various stressors such as the demand of academic of success and achievement, fear of unexpected, fear of becoming a member of the society system, fear of being accepted into social, fear of dealing with economical and emotional problems of family members, which all can potentially impact their learning or abilities to have a successful academic career. Also, according to Sulaiman et al. (2009), young people always face problems in adapting to various stresses. That shows

students of all ages often have serious difficulties such as academic performance and social or personal problems related to stress. That often starts to occur when students are starting to have more responsibilities and shifting to adulthood. According to Wilks (2008), some of the main reasons for the stress on students are as followed: (1) academic stress due to fear of failure, lack of time management, financial difficulties, lack of interactions with teachers, fear of failure of personal goals and objectives, lack of social life, unable to adapt to school climate, and inability to form networks and partnerships with either peers or educators.

According to Masih and Gulrez (2006), the contributing factors to academic stress are the following: admission actions, the high parental standards, the tight schedule of academic performance, the time of classes, the relationship between teachers and students, the non-conducive physical environment of classrooms, the absence of healthy teacher-student contact, the unreasonable discipline of school rules, punitive measurement physically, the works of schools in unbalanced form, teaching and learning methodology, the different views of teachers, emphasis on the weakness of student rather than their strong points. In addition, according to Calaguas (2011), Asian students revealed that schoolwork, family adaptation, and peer relationships are the main sources of academic stress. For example, Filipinos have high regard for the perceived expectations of others from them, which vastly increases stress on their academic and social life on and off campus. In addition, they often see themselves as being evaluated in terms of their academic performance and the pressure to excel is an important measure of their success (Calaguas, 2011). Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has added more stress on students, which increases their inability to cope with severe stressful situations or events or challenges like distance/online learning significantly (Son et al., 2020). Also, due to lack of online/distance learning experience, students from low socioeconomic background are becoming more stressed during this pandemic due to on-going challenging home conditions, lack of access to academic resources (e.g., computers and internet connectivity), and distractions in the home learning environment (Son et al., 2020).

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Academic performance is operationally defined as a measure of the level of learning in a particular area of the subject in terms of knowledge, understanding, skill, and application. In other words, it is the result of a process of education or training (Pizarro, 1985). For Caballero et al. (2007), academic performance involves meeting goals, achievements, and objectives set in the program or course that a student attends. These are expressed through grades which are the result of an assessment that involves passing or not certain tests, subjects, or courses. In addition, academic performance involves several factors such as intellectual level, personality, motivation, skills, interests, study habits, self-esteem, or the teacher-student relationship (Marti, 2003). Also, Cuseo (2007) identifies seven qualities that promote student success:

personal validation, self-efficacy, sense of purpose, active involvement, reflective thinking, social interaction, and self-awareness. Accordingly, research has also indicated that students are most likely to succeed when they feel valued by their school and when they actively participate in learning. Having a strong sense of self will also help students succeed as well as knowing where they wish to take their education, and knowing when to take breaks (Cuseo, 2007). Also, stress can strain many of those qualities, which may negatively affect a student's academic performance (Heissel, et al., 2017).

In addition, problems occur when there is a gap between the academic performance and the student's expected performance. According to Wilks (2008), academic performance-related stress is the product of a combination of academic-related high demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual. In addition, Sohail (2013) has shown the relationship between stress and academic performance of first-year medical students, which found high levels of stress associated with poor academic performance. Also, Bharti (2013) found a high level of institutional stress is associated with poor academic performance. To show the impact of stress on academic performance, Safree et al. (2010) have found that depression, anxiety, and stress are negatively correlated with academic achievement, which is also indicated the higher the stress, the lower the academic achievement of students. In addition, research has indicated the ability for students to manage stress is equally important as non-students (Safree, et al., 2010). The way students perceive stress is an important factor in its seriousness. Negative or excessive stress perception contributes to the students experiencing psychological and physical impairment (Murphy & Archer, 1996). That shows students who can effectively handle or manage their stress can perform much better than those who are unable to manage or control their stress on a regular basis. Finally, Kaplan et al. (2005) supported the hypothesis that early adolescent school-related stress both independently and in interaction with high academic expectations negatively affected academic performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has clearly shown that numerous research studies have indicated that academic-related stress clearly reduces academic performance as well as decreasing motivation to complete school assignments. Also, lack of motivation caused by stress is one of the factors related to the increasing dropout of student dropout of classes and schools. In addition, unmanageable stress is significantly affecting academic performance as well as one of the leading causes of students dropout of classes and school (Heissel, et al., 2017). As indicated throughout this paper, research studies have shown that stress from a variety of venues strongly affects student academic performance as well as showing stress exhibited by student

family social economic conditions and instructors' academic expectations also increases the stress levels of students on and off campus (Heissel, et al., 2017). When stress is unbearable on students, it can negatively affect cognitive functioning and academic performance including sleep and social activities; however, it is primarily found among students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. For those reasons, the impact of stress on academic performance varies among ethnic groups as one of the contributing factors to racial-ethnic and socioeconomic achievement gaps among both developed and under-developed nations (Heissel, et al., 2017). However, with resources to help students to manage stress like interventions to limit stress exposure on campus with reducing expectations can help students prepare to learn as well as to increase their academic performance like graduating on schedule, so they can help their families economically (Heissel, et al., 2017). Above all, that shows schools should develop and implement measures and programs to benefit low socioeconomic background and minority students to reduce academic performance or achievement gaps.

Recommendations to Cope with expected Academic Performance related Stress

Stress in itself is hard to control but we can do something in order to cope with it. The main important factor in the management of stress is the degree of willingness of people to create the needed changes for a healthy lifestyle (Shaikh, et al., 2004). Here are some of the recommendations in order to cope with stress related to academic performance:

1. **Holding on to positive thoughts.** According to Mazundar, et.al. 2012, positive thoughts can help to face problems easier, offer profound results and assist in resolving problems with a more output approach.
1. **Stable mental and physical health.** A person with a high self-esteem according to Meisenhelder (1985) in his/her research is the primary requirement and key factor in human health both physically or mentally.
1. **Exercise everyday.** Any one form of exercise to be done on a daily basis guarantees an environment of sustainable happiness according to Jain (2017).
1. **Meditation and breathing exercises.** Meditation and breathing exercises can also be incorporated to relieve stress during exams and students avoid panicking. It is also important to ensure that students receive enough sleep, it would help the students to be more patient and to have a better learning graph (Jain, 2017).

1. **Experimenting on several approaches and techniques.**

Phinney, J. S. & Haas, K. (2003), presented several approaches and techniques that were proven effective in managing and controlling academic stress. These are expressing honest emotions and sentiments, yoga, mind meditation, psychotherapy, exercising, leisure time and time-off from all workloads, and change in lifestyle.

Do the following on regular basis to Cope with Academic performance related Stress

1. Learning and practicing deep breathing exercises. Breathe in through the nose and exhale through the mouth. It helps relax the muscles and distribute oxygen evenly throughout the body on a regular basis.
1. It is important to use campus resource practitioners like Counselors, Healthcare Providers, Psychologists, etc.
1. Get plenty of sleep. A good night's sleep is important in order to process information throughout the daytime.
1. Be Present on a regular basis to class. This is to avoid extra workload that you missed when you are absent in the class.
1. Create a relaxing and restful environment. Having a clean and peaceful environment can actually lead to a relaxing environment.
1. Exercise on a regular basis as new skills through practices with others.
1. Practicing Self-care & Use Positive Self-Talk on a regular basis. Use of positive reinforcement heightens student's enthusiasm to participate in class activities.
1. Practicing self-control by focusing on what you can control.
1. Practicing taking Responsibility For Mistakes or own-decisions.
1. Avoid excessive use of legal and illegal substances.
1. Practicing self-forgiveness or Forgive Yourself for Past and Future wrongdoings or decisions.

1. Get routine preventive care on a regular basis (screenings and vaccinations).

Finally, Reddy et al. (2018) also concludes that several ways can be done in order to deal with stress. The following techniques have been found to be useful in dealing with stress: feedbacking, yoga, life skills training, mindfulness, meditation and psychotherapy. Identifying the main reason for stress is the key to deal with it. Professionals can develop tailor made strategies to deal with stress. The well-being of the students is important not only for the students but for academic institutions as well.

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