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Academic Stress among Students: Role and Responsibilities of Parents

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Abstract

The modern world, which is said to be a world of achievement, is also a world of stress. One finds stress everywhere; whether it is within the family, business organization or any other social or economic activity. Stress is physiological and psychological imbalance. It arises due to the demands on a person and that person's inability to meet those demands. Academic Stress in the students can be very taxing on the parents and the students themselves. Stress has been tightening its grip on the students, as they have to compete at every step of their academic career in this fast moving world. Academic stress is the product of a combination of academic related demands that exceed the adaptive resources available to an individual (Wilks, 2008) [38]. Academic pressure by the parents as well as the children are themselves tensed about their career and future, when fail to cope up with the situation or fail to satisfy their needs then it results into stress and depression. Social support is considered as one of the most important way of coping with academic stress. Students are the budding future of a nation and it is imperative for the teachers, parents and caregivers to understand the factors which might be stressful to students and recognize ways to help them cope up with such situation.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Students, Parents

Introduction

Stress is viewed as a negative emotional, cognitive, behavioral and physiological process that occurs as a person tries to adjust to or deal with stressors (Bernstein, *et al* 2008) [3]. Stress is a necessary and inescapable concomitant of daily living-necessary because without some stress we would be listless and apathetic creatures, and unavoidable because it relates to any external event, it is agreeable or anxiety producing. Stress is defined as a feeling of tension that is both biological and psychological. It refers to the consequence of the failure of an organism – human or animal – to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats, whether actual or imagined. Stress consists of any event in which environmental demands, internal demands or both tax or exceed the adaptive resources of the individual, social system or tissue system. A person's response towards stress depends on whether an event is appraised as a challenge or a threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) [20]. Stress symptoms commonly include a state of alarm and adrenaline production, short-term resistance as a coping mechanism, and exhaustion, as well as irritability, muscular tension, inability to concentrate and a variety of physiological reactions such as headache and elevated heart rate. Stress is widely accepted to have two opposite effects on individuals – good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress). Han Selye noted that eustress provides challenges that motivate individuals to work hard and meet their goals meanwhile distress results from the stressful situations that persist over time and produces negative health outcomes (Landy, 2007) [18]. Broadly, it can be concluded that the acceptable levels of stress help to improve the individuals' performance whilst excessive amounts of stress can lead to a decreased performance. Stress has become an important topic in academic circle as well as in our society.

Concept of Academic Stress

Academic stress refers to the unpleasant psychological situations that occur due to the educational expectations from parents, teachers, peers and family members, pressure of parents for academic achievement, present educational and examination system, burden of

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Home work etc. Academic stress is a mental distress with respect to some anticipated frustration associated with academic failure or even an awareness of possibility of such failure (Gupta and Khan, 1987) ^[12]. Academic Stress among students have long been researched on, and researchers have identified stressors as too many assignments, competitions with other students, failures and poor relationships with other students or lecturers. Academic problems have been reported to be most common source of stress for students. Stress in family like divorce, intrapersonal conflicts and maternal depression leads to stress in the adolescents which deteriorates functioning (Rex Forehand *et al*, 1991) ^[26]. Schafer (1996) ^[31] observed that the most irritating daily hassles were usually school-related stressors such as constant pressure of studying, too little time, writing term papers, taking tests, future plans and boring instructor. Students experienced academic stress arising from both their own expectations to excel as well as expectations arising from their parents and teachers (Ang and Huan, 2006) ^[2]. There are various coping strategies used by students when experiencing academic stress. Some resort to avoidant coping; alcohol/drug abuse, denial and behavioral disengagement; while others cope actively through acceptance, planning, and positive reframing and taking the necessary steps to overcome the academic stress (Sree rama reddy *et al.*, 2007) ^[35] Sapru (2006) ^[29] found that majority of adolescents in the stressed and unstressed groups were in the age group of 14–16 years. Stressed adolescents perceived academics as burdensome.

Sources of Academic Stress

Bernstein *et al.* (2008) ^[3] define the sources of stress as every circumstance or event that threatens to disrupt people's daily functioning and causes them to make adjustments. These sources of stress are called "Stressors". Stressors are demands made by the internal or external environment that upset balance, thus affecting physical and psychological well-being and requiring action to restore balance (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977) ^[19]. However, they differ from the degree of severity and duration of stress; what is stressful for an individual may not be a stressor for another. The sources of Academic stress are summarized as follows:

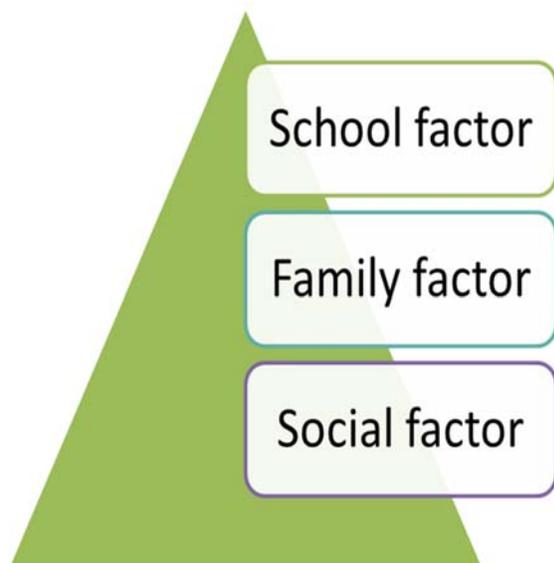


Fig. 1: Sources of Academic stress

Many factors contribute to the stress being experienced by students but one common cause of academic stress in India is School. Such stress comes from too much homework, unsatisfactory academic performance, preparation for tests, lack of interest in a particular subject, and teacher's punishment. Stress from high expectations of teachers, parents, and self is usually an agony for students studying in schools. Generally, parents are very concerned about their children's academic achievement and moral behaviors. Clift and Thomas (1983) ^[6] reported that course work assignment was a major source often keeping the students under continual examination puts to stress. Lack of parental help, congenial examination system, living up to parental expectation, and attitude of the teachers and fear of examination were the stress causing factors (Kohlon's, 1983) ^[16] Berg and Keinan's (1986) ^[15] also found that imposing excessively high self expectation was the most trouble stressor leading to academic stress. Examination related stresses were found to be causing high academic stress followed by class room assignment overload (Shirom, 1986) ^[34]. Students appeared to be under high pressure originating from course overload and academic evaluation procedures and least stressed by personal familiar and social factors (Zeidner, 1992) ^[39]. Curriculum being highly concept laden, inappropriate school timings, high student-teacher ratio, non-conducive physical environment of classrooms, the absence of healthy teacher-student interaction, irrational rules of discipline, physical punishment, excessive or unbalanced school-work, teaching methodology, indifferent attitudes of teachers, overemphasis on weaknesses rather than strengths (Masih & Gulrez, 2006) ^[22], expectations of students themselves, and expectations of teachers (Ang & Huan, 2006) ^[2]. Additionally, the following were recognized to be associated to academic stress based on studies: academic workload, attending lectures (Agolla & Ongori, 2009) ^[1], examinations, school curriculum (Shah, Hasan, Malik, & Sree rama reddy, 2010) ^[33], inadequate learning materials (Shah *et al.*, 2010) ^[33], subject-related projects (Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2010) ^[7]. Family is also one of the important sources of academic stress which includes the pressure placed upon students due to the expectations of parents for their child to do well academically (Deb *et al.* 2011) ^[8]. This often results in parents encouraging their child to study for a long periods of time in order to attain high grades or percentages in examinations. Deb *et al.* (2011) ^[8] found that the incidence of parental pressure differs significantly with differences in the educational levels of the parents, mother 's occupation, number of private tutors, and academic performance. Fathers possessing a lower education level (non-graduates) were found to be more likely to pressurize their children regarding better academic performance. Indian children from non-disrupted families have higher academic stress than children from disrupted families. It is likely that the children from disrupted families get less attention and guidance from their parents regarding academic matters than do their counterparts in non-disrupted families. This, paradoxically, reduces their academic stress – thus highlighting the negative impact of the parental vigilance and persuasion on the academic lives of their children (Ganesh and Magdalin, 2007) ^[10]. Formation of stress is highly associated with the social environment. Stress arises not only in a complicated and competitive environment but also in a monotonous and stimulus-less one (Feng, 1992) ^[9].

Symptoms which are helpful in identifying the stressful behaviors of Students:

- Students may be experiencing irritability because of lack of proper sleep at night. Then it is a Wakeup call for parents.
- They may be unable to concentrate on academics and sports.
- Students may be having unexplained fears or increased anxiety.
- Students isolate from family activities or peer relationships.
- Students may be experimenting with drugs and alcohol.
- Students may complain about headaches or stomach aches.
- Students may have poor appetite and low immunity

Role and Responsibilities of Parents

It is widely acknowledged that parents play a significant role in the cognitive, social and emotional development of their children. Through their role, parents provide children with socialization to cultural and societal norms and values meant to prepare them for the navigation of the communities in which they live and the needs of the society they will encounter in the future (Miller and Goodnow, 1995) [23]. Family, which serves as a first school for the child, appears to be an important source of rising expectations. Parents have an important positive or negative influence on the academic aspirations and achievements of children. An adolescent is strongly and positively identified with parental model but if that model is indifferent to or suspicious and critical of educational values and goals, the young person is likely to adapt him/ her to respective parent model. Review of relevant literature revealed that family and parents significantly affect child's performance in many spheres of life. Molnar (1979) [24] found that parents' education and home environment play a significant role in child's academic achievement. Shah and Lakhera (1986) [32] reported that family climate and level of adjustment were highly correlated. Where on one hand, parental involvement leads to better social adjustment and academic achievement, on the other hand over aspirations and negative attitude of the parents lead to depression and stress among students. Parents usually set unrealistically high goals for their children and expect them to come up to their expectations. When children are unable to come up to the expected standards, they are accused of being lazy or dull which induces a sense of inferiority among adolescents and sometimes leads to drastic outpourings by them in the form of mental disorders depressions, stress and even suicides.

How parents can help their child

- Be aware of your child's behaviors and emotions.
- Build trust with your child.
- Encourage the expression of feelings.
- Teach and model good emotional responses.
- Encourage them to tell you if they feel overwhelmed.
- Encourage healthy and diverse friendships.
- Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.
- Teach your child to solve problems.
- Remind your child of his or her ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends.
- Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes.

- Use encouragement and natural consequences when poor decisions are made.
- Help your child select appropriate extracurricular activities and limit over-scheduling.
- Make your child aware of the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol before experimentation begins.

Different Strategies of Stress Management



Fig. 2: Strategies of Stress Management

A number of approaches are currently being used to treat and control stress responses. Major methods include Stress Management, Relaxation techniques, Biofeedback, Drugs and Yoga that all can have therapeutic psychological effects. Stress management is a large family of techniques ranging from methods to reduce the occurrence of stress to techniques which can be used by people who feel overwhelmed by stress. Stress management refers to a wide spectrum of techniques and psychotherapies aimed at controlling a person's level of stress for the purpose of everyday living. It is the ability to reduce stress around or cope in a competent manner with stressors (Geridano, 1997) [11]. Yoga, humour and reading are simple effective methods to help reduce academic stress among adolescents (Rizzolo, 2009) [27]. With regard to the stress management of adolescents more comprehensive studies were conducted by many authors (Hampel, 2008, Patel, 2009, Rollin, 2003 & Singh, 2001) [13, 25, 28, 36].

Conclusion

Stress is part of every one's life. Academic Stress among students can create havoc in their life. Under Academic stress the performance gets hindered and students can take wrong decisions under the influence of stress. Social support is considered as one of the most important way of coping with academic stress. In order to overcome deviant behaviors the parents play a constructive role in channelizing energies of the students. Proper care should be taken in helping to take the right decisions which may affect their future. Hence, Students need to receive appropriate direction, nurturing, encouragement and guidance from significant adults for their successful transition into adult life (Linden, 2005) [21]. Students must learn and practice coping skills to get them through an immediate conflict or problem. Coping strategies must emphasize self responsibility to find positive, nondestructive ways to find relief. Communication skills involve being able to talk and selecting a good listener

(Chand and Sethi 1997) ^[5]. It is important to express feelings, vent emotions and talk about the problems and issues. They need help to learn problem – solving skills, sorting out the issues, setting goals and making plans to move forward, are skills that can be taught and practiced.

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