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Asrafuf Mustafa Kamal
Assistant Professor, Pragati
College of Education, Siliguri,
West Bengal, India

Academic stress and coping strategies of college students

Asrafuf Mustafa Kamal

Abstract

In today's extremely competitive human race, every undergraduate student is having academic situations comprising of academic stress, apathy in attending class to comprehend subject, fear of failing behind with studies and course work, struggling to meet academic and grade standards. The academic stress of these college students act as a motivating factor when appropriate coping strategies are used to control academic stress. Every undergraduate should identify and acknowledge stress signals and consequently adopt related coping strategies rather than believing on 'magical powers' of time as delay, disregard and hindrance can exacerbate stress level among college students.

Keywords: Stress, academic stress, stress among college students, coping strategies

Introduction

Every undergraduate student is ecstatic for their imminent college life with fresh opportunities and delight but simultaneously it can be overpowering as it poses many challenges and introduces lots of anxieties which are extremely familiar for under graduate students to become depressed. Most of the students experience lack of restraint and control in an environment that is filled with diverse challenges, temptations and un-favorable experiences which they struggle to acclimate. Under graduate students face more rigorous regiment of learning and easily engender enormous stress (Zinsser, W. 2009) ^[67].

Stress

The word 'Stress' is derived from Latin word 'Strictus' which means 'Tight' or 'Narrow'. Stress is an influential feeling of apprehension, lowest point and sadness which badly affects millions of undergraduate students. Stress is a unique and personal experience which is inevitable for everyone attending college. Stress may be simplified as perceptual phenomenon arising from comparison between demands, pleasant or un-pleasant, and ability to cope them. The important thing to remember about stress is that certain forms are normal and essential to keep a person challenged, motivated and energized. Stress in its positive form – eustress – is necessary, healthy, and enjoyable (Laura, 2011) ^[22]. However, the negative form – distress – can be damaging if left unmanaged. A constant state of stress can affect all aspects of under-graduates students' bodies: physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, and social abilities (Womble, S.L. 2001) ^[63]. Vermunt and Steensman, 2005 ^[59]; Keinan, et al. (2007) ^[20] have defined stress as the perception of discrepancy between environmental demands (stressors) and individual capacities to fulfill these demands. While Campbell (2006) ^[7] defines stress as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them.

Arnold (2000) ^[4] defines stress as a force that pushes a psychological or physical factor beyond its range of stability, producing a strain with in the individual.

Academic stress

Academic pressure has been identified as one of significant source of stress for under-graduate students transitioned to college life. Academic stress refers to mental and emotional pressure that occurs due to the demands of college life (Dedeyn, 2008) ^[13]. Stress perceived in college or university may take form of academic stress.

Correspondence
Asrafuf Mustafa Kamal
Assistant Professor, Pragati
College of Education, Siliguri,
West Bengal, India

Negative health outcomes, including depression and physical illness have been associated with academic stress (MacGeorge, Samter & Gillihan, 2005) ^[33]. A study commissioned by Grad Resources and conducted by sociologist, Woodberry, R. (2010) ^[64] indicated that the patterns of stress continue even today. Of the 675 students surveyed, 60% (63% of women) indicated that they need a greater "balance in life." 58% of women responding indicated a high potential for "burnout," listing it as a major concern. An additional element of this latest study also tells us that 85% of Hispanic students reported stress to be a major concern (compared to whites at 54%, African Americans at 47% and Asians at 44%). An alarming 43% of all graduate students surveyed indicated that their stress levels are "more than they can handle." Academic stress was identified in student respondents (n=20,507) as the leading impediment in proportion to academic performance for college students. The category stress (32.9%) out ranked other impediments to learning such as, sleep difficulties (25.4%), cold/flu/sore throat (24.8%), concern for friend or family (18.1%) and depression/anxiety disorders (15.5%) (Acha, 2007) ^[7].

Stowell (2004) ^[48] "The term 'Examination Stress' should be reserved for situation in which a discrete exam is used as a stressor, whereas the term 'Academic Stress' is more appropriate to denote the prolonged academic pressures associated with exam periods".

Sources of academic stress

Under-graduate students confront academic stress in pursuit of their educational goals. When such experiences are perceived as negative, they can have an adverse effect on students' motivation and performance. Moreover, if prolonged and perceived as unmanageable, these experiences have been shown to elicit helplessness, depression, and stress thereby placing some students' academic futures in jeopardy. Following are some of the observed sources of Academic Stress:-

Greater academic demands: In Colleges, fellow students are more motivated, Lecturers are more demanding and environment is more competitive. These higher academic standards and expectations are even more evident in under-graduate students as they are anticipated to be more sovereign. Against these academic demands and standards, under graduates students fall victim of stress (Chemers, Martin, Garcia and Ben, 2001) ^[10].

Grade Competition: Our education system is more designed to promote competition for grades and less designed to educate people. Consistent poor grades in examination can lead to disappointment and expulsion and therefore grade competition is considered as a dynamic factor of under-graduate student's stress level. Low grades will cause depression that can lead to absenteeism or feeling of hopelessness (Archer and Carroll, 2003) ^[33].

Work Load: The workload of college is significantly more convoluted than high school and it comes with less hand-holding from parents and teachers. With exigent classes, intricate tests and other academic obstacles, coupled with the more self-governing nature of the college learning structure, many new and returning students find themselves

studying long, hard hours resulting in stress (Scott, E. 2009) ^[50].

Social Stress: While undergraduates face the most obvious social challenges that usually involve leaving one's entire support structure behind, creating a new social network, dealing with being away from home for the first time and finding less parental support, most students has to stumble upon social stress (Nowakowska, et al. 2001) ^[40].

Time Management: Under graduate students generally fails to master large amount of contents in a small amount of time and this ineptitude leads to their stress. Having too much to do at one time leads to confusion, forgetfulness and feeling overwhelmed (Misra and Ranjita, 2000) ^[30].

Financial Responsibilities: College is expensive. While some students enjoy financial help from their parents, many other struggle to balance a low paying job with already significant obligations. Students who make little money suffer from stress due to financial problems (Danielle, 2010) ^[12].

Environment: The new environment will have new properties and the undergraduate students need to acclimatize themselves to new places, faces and schedule. Some students share increased level of melancholy and absent-mindedness within few weeks of their transition to new environment (Murray, et al. 2000) ^[35].

Extra- curricular Activities: Colleges inflict pressure on under graduate students to indulge in extra-curricular activities such as sports, festival celebrations, band and participate in volunteer work. The presence of these on a student routine can go far beyond than their acceptance and causes stress (Hart, A.2009) ^[17].

Parental expectations: Parents always want their children to thrive by outperforming others in college and earn good grades. Most of the parents doesn't weigh up & comprehend their children capabilities and judge against them with others which can lead to child frustration resulting stress (Saxena, R. 2011) ^[47].

Peer Pressure: Under graduate students are under constant peer pressure to bounce classes & exams, experiment with drugs and pamper in immoral activities which can be distressed for students. Stress can be accumulated even when a person tries to resist peer pressure (Mary, et al. 2007) ^[24].

Continuous evaluation: Under graduate students has to face continuous evaluation in terms of weekly, periodic & semester examination system imposing redundant burden on the students and their by resulting into stress among students (Ross, S. E., Niebling, B. C. and Heckert, T. M. 2000) ^[44].

Low on motivation: Most of the under graduate students are less interested in college studies and related course work. Learning requires patience, skills, hard work and efficiency whereas student doesn't have motivation in learning and when enforced they feel distressed (Heller, et al. 2001) ^[16].

Other Stresses: There are also numerous miscellaneous stresses that often found in under graduate students. Many students keep crazy hours from staying up late to study, getting up early for classes, and trying to cram in all the work and fun that can possibly fit. Often the logistics of living more independently-from laundry to car insurance-can cause stress.

Identifying the symptoms

There are certain indicators which signal that danger and traumatizing situations are arising. These symptoms can be classified into three categories:

1. **Behavioral eg:** Short temperedness, Inhibited nature, Aggressive behavior and Self-medication
2. **Physiological eg:** Headaches, Migraines, Stomach disorder and High-blood pressure
3. **Psychological eg:** Apprehension, Nervousness, Low self-esteem and Forgetfulness

Identifying these symptoms is the procedure by which students acknowledge that there is a problem. The root cause analysis and allied remediation should be done if either of the symptoms is observed in the students (Hulstein, 2009) ^[18].

By recognizing impact of academic environment and its oppressive nature in correlation of undergraduates personal traits such as perfectionism and their tendency to over-achieve, thereby identifying physiological and cognitive symptoms that indicate emotional exhaustion, the under graduate students can learn effective coping strategies to stop the destructive cycle of burnouts.

Coping strategies for academic stress

Coping strategies always plays a fundamental role in the manner under graduate students deal with stressful academic events. The main objective is to scrutinize academic stress and approach an interrelated method to mitigate or purge it. Rather than finding and adopting a short term strategy to cope academic stress in under graduates we should build up a healthy & harmonic way to handle academic stress as disregard and hindrance can exacerbate stress levels among them. Some of the healthy coping strategies are:-

Keep the goal visible and pragmatic

The different studies and research on academic goals suggest that under graduates should set *SMART* goals as they will be more realistic to achieve and students will feel less stressed in the process of attaining them (Meyer and Paul, J. 2003) ^[36]. SMART is the acronym for:

S – Specific, M – Measurable, A – Attainable
R – Realistic T – Timely

Reframe problems

Try to view stressful situations from a more positive & extensive perspective and reframe the problematic situations rather than fuming as that will give an opportunity to pause, reorganize and improvise the situation and under graduates will feel less stressed if they re-surfaces in future (Seelig, 2012) ^[46].

Maintain healthy habits

Under-graduates should maintain healthy habits (Balance diet, normal sleeping hours, meditations etc.) as that promises a life of vigor and vivacity and they are considered

as an important step in a stress management game plan for their academic life. (Scott, E. 2009) ^[50].

Don't stress about being stressed

A stressed under graduate will feel like on the edge and everything is barely being held together at that point. The best way to handle stress is to not get more stressed about... being stressed. If you are stressed out, admit it and figure out how to handle it. Focusing on it will only make things seem worse (Lucier, 2011) ^[23].

Expand optimism

“*What doesn't kill us makes us stronger*” When facing major academic challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own deprived choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes (Krypel, M.N. 2010) ^[21].

Administer your time efficiently

Effective time management is just one of many ways to keep from succumbing to stress overload. Anticipate stressful events and their effects and plan accordingly to mitigate their actual impact. Under graduates can learn effective time management skills and carrying a daily planner to prioritize their work as that will give them a feeling of more organized & less frazzled student (Cherry, K. 2011) ^[11].

Don't try to control the uncontrollable

Many things in life are beyond our control-particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems (Makin, 2011) ^[25].

Retrospect to past achievements

When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keeping things in perspective (Bhatnagar, Mathur and Sharma, 2007) ^[6].

Develop Social network

Undergraduates should accompany with blissful and flourishing people as their life's experience inspire & motivate others and students can learn quick and trusted methods to encounter stress by following them. Under graduates should learn to cultivate supportive friendships and expand their social circle so that they can lean on them when stressed (Staff, M. C. 2008) ^[49].

Face life with dignity

Failure and disenchantment are relatively mild and short-lived such as the upheaval we feel during times of emotional collapse but they can be more serious and enduring, precipitated by any number of misfortunes-ill health, financial crisis, or the death of a loved one. Under graduates should demonstrate ability to marshal inner resources of strength and resilience by keeping their dignity intact (Wong, P.T.P. and Reker, G. T. 2005) ^[65].

Stop talking about your miseries

Undergraduates should understand that they are not born to please others and live up to their expectations to the eternal. They should give up being perfect all the time and be

trained how to think rationally and optimistically (Mendelsohn, S. 2012) ^[29].

Build comfortable environment

Under graduates should show a willingness to make reasonable adjustments to the new surroundings as that will give them a comfort feeling to engage with new people & situations and consequently stress can be dealt more appropriately (Sykes, G. 2012) ^[57].

Maintain a Spiritual Practice

A lifestyle including religion or spirituality is generally a healthier lifestyle. Many people, especially seniors, use prayers & meditation as a major stress reliever thus Undergraduate students should use prayers or meditation, yoga to reduce their stress level (Nelson, D. 2011) ^[37].

Seek Professional Help

If academic stress becomes overwhelming and coping strategies do not help either, Under-graduates should seek professional help readily as waiting problems can only be exacerbated (Stephens, K. 2007) ^[53].

Conclusion

College experience represents one of the most exciting stages in an undergraduate's life - new goals, perspectives, friends and freedom can be exciting and change the direction of their life. It almost goes without saying that attending college is full of excitement but it's inherently stressful as there are so many activities, decisions, expenses, expectations and new roles involved. Every undergraduate student is familiar and accustomed to academic stress and it can become overwhelming if not handled appropriately. Fortunately there are plenty readily available coping strategies which can guide undergraduates to control their academic stress and lot's of research work is going to help them. There are certain indicators which signal that danger and traumatizing situations are arising and undergraduates should acknowledge and adopt a method on stress reduction rather than believing on 'magical powers' of time. Counselling regarding coping strategies should enhance student's success.

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