

# Stress among students in higher educational institutions in India: Causes, effects and coping styles

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Students may experience stress due to academic reasons, friends and peers, workload, teachers, parents, job and career aspirations and financial problems. It leads to distress causing physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral problems and to cope with stress, students adopt different kinds of coping styles. The present study was conducted in higher educational institutions in India to examine causes and effects of stress and to analyze coping styles prevailing among students. Online survey was conducted in which 616 students from colleges and universities from 26 states in India participated. It was found that the percentage of students experiencing high level of stress was maximum in case of job and career factor. Stress had direct positive correlation with various types of effects. The main effects were behavioral and psychological. In order to cope with stress, students mainly watched videos and films on U Tube, television, Netflix, etc. Talked to someone, used social media. They scored low on negative coping styles like consumption of cigarette/tobacco, drugs and alcohol.

*Keywords:* stress, students, coping styles, effects of stress

Transition from school education to the college and university environment is full of challenges for many students. They have to compete to get admission, adjust with friends and classmates, meet the schedules of lectures and assignments, bear the workload of classes and presentations, prepare for examinations, come up to the expectations of parents and teachers, study hard and be ready to lead a respectable life.

Students may experience stress due to academic reasons, friends and peers, workload, teachers, parents, job and career aspirations and financial problems. Academic stress may arise from a feeling that the course being studied will not help in shaping a bright future (Larson, 2006); pressure of studies and examination (Baldwin et al., 2009; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2006; & Sangsiri & Sail, 2006); fear of failure and negative evaluation of future (Basuri, 2012; Bataineh, 2013); language problem making it difficult to understand lessons, lecture schedules, missing classes, inadequate infrastructure (Agolla & Ongori, 2009); meeting deadlines and time management (Macan et. al., 1990). Education system requires students to cover vast syllabus which may be beyond the capacity of some students (Agarwal & Chahar, 2007). Too many time-consuming assignments, no time to relax, need to help parents/guardians along with studies

may give rise to the sense of inability to cope up with workload efficiently (Bataineh, 2013). Roommate in hostel may be non-supportive. Competition with peers for grades may be intense (Sinha et al., 2001). Parents expect their wards to work hard and fulfill their dreams. These expectations may be stressful for some (Kumar & Jadaun, 2018). Perceptions such as- 'teacher lacks in proper knowledge' or 'does not evaluate performance of students honestly and impartially' may cause stress (Reddy et al., 2018). Students from poor families face financial worries (Heckman et al., 2014).

Stress is known to have detrimental effects on the well-being of students (Van Eck et al., 1996; Shapiro et al., 1998; & Larson, 2006). It leads to distress causing physical, psychological, emotional and behavioral problems. Physical effects may be disrupted digestion, headaches, general aches and pains, nausea, sleep disorder, unusual changes in weight, and heartburn. Psychological effects are- impatience, feeling of sadness, restlessness, irritability and loss of interest. Behavioral symptoms include: change in sleep and eating habits, use of drugs, delay in completing daily responsibilities, change in performance, social isolation, lying, and trouble getting along with peers (Cohen, 2017). Social effects include difficulty in communicating with others, lack of mutual problem solving, difficulty in working in groups, getting impatient with others etc. Anxiety and depression among students have a direct relationship with stress (Janine, 2017). It may cause emotional exhaustion which may further lead to a progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose. It can cause incompetence and self-doubt (Gardner, 2010; & Kai-Wen, 2009).

One can deal with stress through a variety of interventions or coping styles. Negative coping styles like smoking, increased alcohol consumption, drug use, overeating, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, sleep deprivation, and increased caffeine intake. give momentary relief from stress but ultimately give rise

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose

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to some other problems (Hall et al., 2006; Nonis et al., 1998). Exercise, listening music, playing games with friends and family, reading books, writing, religious practices, sharing feelings with others are some of the positive styles of coping with stress.

### *Objectives of the study*

In Indian higher educational institutions, not much attention has been paid to the problems of stress among students. Therefore, the present study was conducted with the following objectives-

- To find the main causes and effects of stress among students in higher educational institutions in India.
- To examine the stress coping styles adopted by students in higher educational institutions in India.

## Method

The research was conducted in the month of April, 2020. The methodology adopted for the study is as follows-

### *Participants*

Students pursuing various degrees in higher educational institutions of India were contacted online. The survey questionnaire was sent online and 616 students from 26 states participated in the study. These respondents were from various streams of education like commerce, management, humanities, science, technology and architecture. Majority of them were male and from the age group of 18-25 years.

### *Instrument*

Primary data was collected with the help of structured and pre-tested questionnaire which included information about demographic profile of the respondents, causes, effects and coping styles of stress. It had seven sub-scales pertaining to different stress factors- academic, friends and peer pressure, work load, teachers, parents, job and career and financial. Four sub-scales were related to behavioral, psychological, physical and social effects of stress while another sub-scale was regarding the coping styles adopted by students. In each sub-scale, statements were included on the basis of study of literature and opinion of experts in the area. The respondents were asked to give their response on eleven-point scale ranging from zero (never) to ten (always).

### *Statistical analysis*

Internal consistencies of the overall scale and sub scales were evaluated on the basis of Chronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics like frequency distributions, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. Correlation, regression and ANOVA (F-test) were applied.

### *Procedure*

Research problem was conceptualized and review of literature was done. On the basis of concept, review of literature and gap

analysis the researchers developed the primary questionnaire to be administered to pilot study respondents. Necessary improvements and modifications were done as per the opinion of pilot study respondents. Further, final questionnaire was prepared after vetting by researchers, educationists, language and subject experts. The questionnaire was converted into Google form and administered to the target respondents. The questionnaire was available online for 21 days. The responses of 616 respondents were analyzed through the above mentioned statistical tools on the SPSS.

## Results

Profile of the respondents was studied and it was found that the majority (55 percent) were post-graduation students while 45 percent were doing graduation. About 69 percent were girls and 89 percent were from the 18-25 years age group. While 55 percent belonged to urban areas, 22.72 percent and 22.38 percent were from rural and semi urban areas respectively. Majority of the respondents (45 percent) had annual income less than rupees 2.5 lakh. In case of thirty percent students, annual family income was rupees 2.5 to 5.0 lakh while only 9 percent had income more than rupees 10 lakh.

### *Stress and its causes*

The overall stress scale consisted of seven subscales pertaining to academics, friends and peer pressure, work load, teachers, parents, job and career and financial factors. Reliabilities of overall scale and sub-scales pertaining to various stress factors were evaluated. The overall stress scale was found reliable with Chronbach's alpha value of 0.74. The sub-scales pertaining to various stress factors were also found to be reliable as the Chronbach's alpha value ranged from 0.61 to 0.79 (Table 1).

It was found that overall low to moderate stress (Mean=3.51) was experienced by majority of the students under this study (Table 1 & Table 2). This finding is in consonance with that of Gonmei and Devendiran (2017). About 45 percent of the respondents had high level of stress while 55 percent had low to moderate level of stress.

Stress caused by various factors was analyzed. The mean value of 'job and career' factor was the highest (4.81). 'Financial' factor was very close to this with mean value of 4.48. Academics and work load were the next most important factors with mean scores of 3.46 and 3.33 respectively. The lowest mean (2.79) was observed for the factor of 'friends and peer pressure'. Previous studies on factors of stress among students have mostly given academic stress as the most important factor (Nandamuri & Gowthami, 2011 & Bataineh, 2013) while they have proved that job and career and financial factors are also very important. The present research however reveals that these days job and career and financial factors have emerged as the most important ones.

Table 2 shows that the percentage of students experiencing high level of stress is maximum (48.05 percent) in case of job and career factor. Maximum percent (54.54) had low level of stress due to friends and peer pressure. In case of job and career, finance, parents, work load and teachers more than fifty percent of the students had moderate to high level of stress.

**Table 1***Summary of mean, standard deviation and Chronbach's alpha values of various factors of stress*

Sr. No.	Component of Stress	Mean	SD	Variance	S E	Upper Limit	Lower Limit	Chronbach's Alpha
1	Academics	3.46	1.57	2.47	0.06	3.59	3.34	0.71
2	Friends & Peer Pressure	2.79	1.40	1.98	0.05	2.90	2.68	0.70
3	Work Load	3.33	1.58	2.52	0.06	3.45	3.20	0.66
4	Teachers	2.83	1.82	3.33	0.07	2.98	2.69	0.79
5	Parents	2.86	1.52	2.33	0.06	2.98	2.74	0.68
6	Job and Career	4.81	1.58	2.51	0.06	4.50	4.25	0.61
7	Financial	4.48	1.55	2.42	0.06	4.48	4.35	0.65
8	Overall	3.51	1.02	1.04	0.04	3.59	3.43	0.74

**Table 2***Distribution of respondents on the basis of level of stress due to various factors (N=616)*

Sr. No.	Factor	Level of Stress		
		Low	Moderate	High
1	Academics	314 (50.97)	25 (4.06)	277 (44.97)
2	Peer Pressure	336 (54.54)	39 (6.33)	241 (39.12)
3	Work Load	303 (49.19)	25 (4.05)	288 (46.76)
4	Teachers	305 (49.51)	34 (5.52)	277 (44.97)
5	Parents	296 (48.05)	34 (5.52)	286 (46.43)
6	Job and Career	276 (44.80)	44 (7.14)	296 (48.06)
7	Financial	285 (46.27)	36 (5.85)	295 (47.88)
	Overall	310 (50.32)	32 (5.20)	274 (44.48)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

**Table 3***Summary of mean, standard deviation and alpha values of various effects of stress*

Sr. No.	Effect of Stress	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance	S E	Upper Limit	Lower Limit	Chronbach's Alpha
1	Behavioural	4.96	1.61	2.61	0.06	5.09	4.83	0.80
2	Psychological	4.70	2.21	4.91	0.08	4.88	4.53	0.91
3	Social	3.92	2.12	4.53	0.08	4.09	3.75	0.86
4	Physical	2.88	2.07	4.29	0.08	3.04	2.71	0.93
5	Overall	4.11	1.74	3.04	0.07	4.25	3.98	0.93

### *Effects of stress*

The scale pertaining to effects of stress consisted of statements regarding behavioral, psychological, physical and social aspects. The overall effects scale was found reliable with Chronbach's alpha value of 0.93. The sub-scales pertaining to various effects were also found to be reliable as the Chronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.80 to 0.93 (Table 3).

Different types of effects were analyzed. The mean value of 'behavioral effect' was the highest (4.96). The important behavioral effects were increased use of caffeine/alcohol, difficulty in communicate with others, unable to rest, relax and let things go, change in eating habits, change in sleep pattern, mistakes in routine work and getting into argument easily. Psychological effect was very close to this with mean value of 4.70. The important

psychological effects were being worried about safety of self and loved ones, feeling irritable, angry, anxious, fearful, sad, moody, depressed, misunderstood, unappreciated and always restless. Social and physical effects were the least with mean scores of 3.92 and 2.88 respectively (Table 3). The most important social effect was found to be difficulty in sharing feelings with others, remaining isolated from others and difficulty in mutual problem solving. The important physical effects were hair loss, headache, backache, sweating and chills, increased heartbeat and fatigue.

Table 4 shows that the maximum number of students (49.35 percent) experiencing high level of psychological effect of stress. Maximum percent (55.51) had low level of physical effect of stress. More than fifty percent of the students had moderate to high level of psychological, behavioral and social effects of stress.

**Table 4**

*Distribution of respondents on the basis of level of various effects of stress (N=616)*

Sr. No.	Factor	Level of Stress		
		Low	Moderate	High
1	Behavioral	275 (44.64)	44 (7.14)	297 (48.21)
2	Psychological	274 (44.48)	38 (6.16)	304 (49.35)
3	Physical	342 (55.51)	10 (1.62)	264 (42.85)
4	Social	302 (49.02)	35 (5.68)	279 (45.29)
	Overall	295(47.88)	38 (6.16)	283 (45.94)

*Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages*

**Table 5**

*Correlation and linear regression of stress and its effects*

N=616	Mean	Correlation of Total Stress (Average Score 3.51)	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F Sig	F Value	Change in total score with the change in one unit of total stress core
Behavioural Effect	4.96	0.52	0.27	.274	.000	233.378	0.17
Psychological Effect	4.70	0.56	0.31	.313	.000	280.685	0.21
Physical Effect	3.92	0.54	0.29	.295	.000	258.802	0.28
Social Effect	2.88	0.52	0.28	.279	.000	238.952	0.13
Total Effect	4.11	0.62	0.38	.386	.000	387.541	0.79

The table 5 is depicting important statistics in terms of relationship of overall stress with the impact of stress on the respondents. This table shows that the Total Stress score has a highly significant positive correlation with Psychological Effects on the respondents (0.56) out of the four various effects under the study. The figures derived from the linear regression analysis table show that Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of Psychological Effect is 0.313. The interpretation of Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of Psychological Effect is 0.313 is that there are 31.3% chances of changes in the positive correlation between Total Stress and its Psychological Effects on the respondents. The correlation of Total

Stress and its all effects viz., Behavioural Effect, Psychological Effect, Physical Effect and Social Effect is highly significant as shown in the column 5 of the table No. 5 (F Sig). The highest of Total Stress is on Total Effect as one unit of increase in total stress will put a positive impact of 0.79 unit on total effect of stress. Social Effect is the least affected effect of the total stress as increase of one unit of total stress will affect 0.13 unit of social effect. So far as the effect is concerned Physical Effect is the highest individually affect effect (0.28 unit per unit of total stress).

*Coping of Stress*

Stress coping styles adopted by the respondents were studied. The

coping styles scale was found reliable with Chronbach’s alpha value of 0.79.

**Table 6**

*Coping styles adopted by students*

Sr. No.	Coping Style	Mean	SD
1	Eating delicious food	6.68	3.02
2	Going to sleep, putting all burdens aside	6.16	3.32
3	Consumption of alcohol with friends or alone	1.15	2.44
4	Consumption of drugs	0.58	1.85
5	Enjoying cigarette/ tobacco	0.87	2.26
6	Sports/Exercise/Workout	5.36	3.37
7	Indoor games with family or friends	5.64	3.45
8	Talking to someone	6.76	2.98
9	Shopping online or outdoor	5.20	3.51
10	Computer games	3.62	3.57
11	Social media	6.13	3.21
12	Books	5.46	3.36
13	Movies	6.80	2.96
14	TV/U Tube/Netflix	6.86	2.98
15	Writing	3.58	3.47
16	Prayer to God/ Enchanting mantras	5.40	3.52
	Overall	4.83	1.48

As shown in Table 6, the respondents scored low on negative coping styles like consumption of cigarette/tobacco, drugs and alcohol. The main coping styles adopted by the students in higher educational institutions were frequently watching videos on U Tube, television, Netflix, etc. enjoying movies, talking to someone, going off to sleep and use of social media. This finding is contrary to that in the study by Reddy and Padmini (2019) where they conclude social media as a source of stress and not as a means of coping with it.

## Conclusion

Majority of the students experienced low to moderate level of stress. Among the various causes of stress evaluated in this study, job and career was the biggest stress factor. Students were worried about job prospects and career opportunities after completing their education. They had financial worries as they felt the pinch of the increasing cost of education. Maximum effect was on behaviour which included use of caffeine/alcohol, difficulty in communicate with others, inability to rest, relax and let things go, change in eating habits, change in sleep pattern, mistakes in routine work and getting into argument easily. Psychological effect was very close to this. The important psychological effects were being worried about safety of self and loved ones, feeling irritable, angry, anxious, fearful, sad, moody, depressed, misunderstood, unappreciated and always restless. The main coping styles adopted by the students in higher educational institutions were frequently watching videos on U Tube, television, Netflix, etc., enjoying movies, talking to someone, going off to sleep and use of social media. The adoption of negative coping styles was quite less among students.

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Received July 30, 2020

Revision received August 13, 2020

Accepted August 16, 2020