

Students Adapting to University Life: Stressors and Coping Strategies

Varsha Dixit

School of Management, Gautam Buddha University
Greater Noida, India

Email: varshadixit2003 [AT] gmail.com

ABSTRACT---

Purpose: *The purpose of this paper is to clarify what is stress and why it's important (particularly with respect to its effect on college going students) as well as identify the factors responsible for the same and the coping strategies.*

Design/ Methodology: *This paper is based on a review of the academic and popular stress management literature. Primary data is being used for identifying the stressors of Indian students who have recently joined a P.G. course.*

Findings: *Stress management is an important concept for the college going males and females. It stems in part from the widely shared belief that the youngsters of today are the future of tomorrow. They shall take organizations to competitive advantage; an essential asset that is becoming highly stressed. The benefits of implementing stress management exercises/techniques include healthy youth with n number of ideas, full of energy and enthusiasm. These outcomes in turn are associated with improved performance of the organizations.*

Practical Implications: *We have a big pool of youngsters joining colleges for higher studies. They are the future of tomorrow. If they remain highly stressed then it has a great impact on their performance and state of mind. In order to increase learning , sharpen their skills and improve performance it is necessary to decrease their level of stress and tell them about the coping strategies.*

Originality/value: *This paper would be of value to anyone seeking to better understand stress management or to improve student performance in colleges by coping with stress.*

Keywords ---- stressors , supportive communication, self-punishment

1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a part of everyday life. A 2010 search of the term 'stress' on Google revealed approximately 146,000,000 hits with definitions, understanding of stress, causes of stress, handling techniques dominating various HR and OB periodicals and websites. It may be school going child, a working women, college going student, a mother, a business professional or the top management personnel in an organization. Everyone looks stressed. In the year 1983, a TIME magazine covered a story on stress being considered as some sort of disease. It's an issue of concern. People are looking for solutions or ways to combat stress due to growing disorders. Although stress has various interpretations but still how it is taken up by college going students is an interesting area of study. The college students undoubtedly experience lot of stress because of stressors like academic issues, financial concerns , overextended loads, problems with managing time, interpersonal relationships, and social strains.

The aim of this paper is to address the shortfalls by listing the causing agents of stress in college going students and what should educational institutions do in order to minimise them and divert negative stressors into positive direction. Emphasis has been put on identifying stressors and finding ways to minimise them. The paper begins by briefly exploring what is meant by stress. The authors then argue why stress management is a particularly important concept for educational concepts. Associated with this is identification and listing of factors which cause stress. Next is an overview of positive and negative effect which are outcomes of stress. As a part of discussion, several relatively novel HR and OB related concepts- are reviewed. The paper concludes with suggestions on what educational institutions might take support of to reduce the stress level of its students especially the females, as they are more stressed than males.

2. WHAT IS STRESS?

In everyday discourse, ‘stress’ has a pejorative connotation. It generally means something to be avoided or, at best, a necessary evil: a critical, hard-driving boss; congested urban traffic; a final exam etc. If we look at the subjective feeling it is roughly termed as tension, dread, anxiety or worry. As a technical term in medical science, stress is not something “out there” nor is it a “state of mind”. The word ‘stress’ can be defined as “a state of affair involving demand on physical or mental energy”. A circumstance or condition, which can disturb the normal physiological and psychological functioning of a person or an individual.

Why to study stress causing agents for college going students?

College represents a critical developmental period for late adolescents and young adults (Chickering, 1969). College has been found to be more stressful to many young adults (Pierceall and Keim 2007). It mentions that at the age when a child moves from adolescence to adulthood he faces many challenges which may be reasons of stress. It has been said in past research studies that emerging adulthood, and the transition phase has increased college students’ vulnerability to stress. College students, especially freshmen, are a group particularly prone to stress (D’Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991) due to the transitional nature of college life (Towbes & Cohen, 1996).

The level of stress is high in case of girls as compared to boys in the courses where semester system is being followed. It may be due to family, academics, social relationships, financial matters and day to day hassles (Brougham, Ruby R., Zail, Christy M., Mendoza, Celeste M. And Miller, Janine R. 2009). These students also adopt different coping strategies to cope up with stress. They studied 166 students of different races in the age group of 20- 24. The results provide evidence for sex differences in ratings of selected stressors.

Apart from the problem of stress the author talks about the aspirations of the students who pass out from schools and are entering the colleges with new thoughts, ideas, live independently, handle finances, maintain academic standards, integrity, adjust to new social life and freedom to think and work. They look for other avenues of entertainment and want to be with friends, enjoying the college life. These students/adults are in a transition stage where they are shifting from their old roles as son or daughter to new roles. During this phase of life they base their decisions on the basis of the feedback which they receive.

Stressors and their effects

The major stressors could be: academics, finances, social relationships, daily hassles (like, parking and being late) and also family relationships (Abouserie 1994; Blankstein et al. 1991; Crespi and Becker 1999; Frazier and Schauben 1994; Larson 2006; Printz et al. 1999; Ross et al. 1999). Ross et al. (1993) conducted a study on a sample comprising of 80% females and 20% males, students of a university. The findings of the survey show that the intrapersonal events were the most common sources of stress and the other stressors were environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal sources.

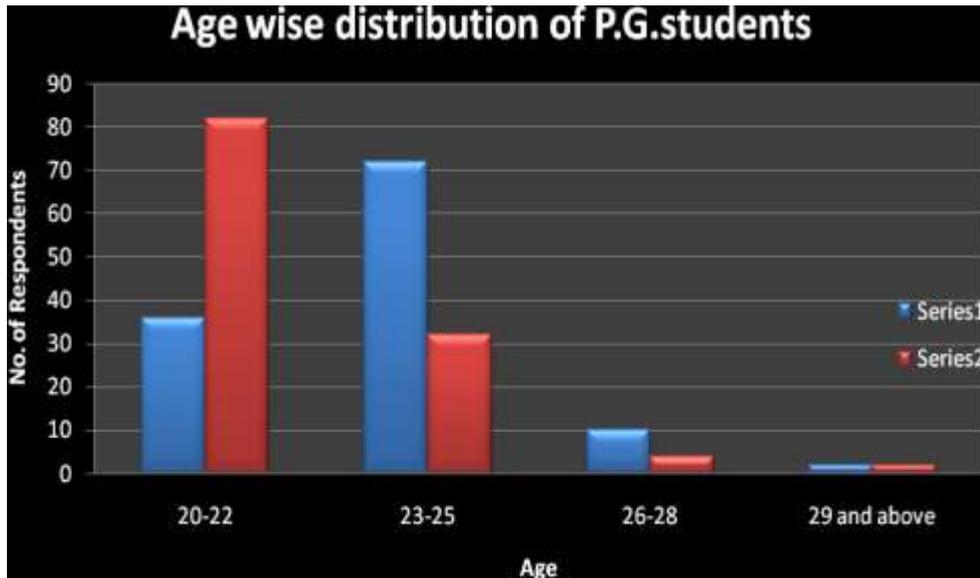
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A sample of 240 students was taken from 13 educational institutions located in Greater Noida Ghaziabad and Noida for identifying the stressors of Indian students. The data was collected through open ended questionnaire. The sample was mainly of post graduate students who have recently joined the course. The respondents were of the age group between 20 to 30 years. The sample consists of nearly equal distribution of males and females from different backgrounds like Engineering, Management, Information & Communication Technology and Biotechnology.

4. ANALYSIS

Table 1.1 Distribution of the students taken in the sample for study

| Age of respondents | Males | Females |
|--------------------|------------|------------|
| 20-22 | 36 | 82 |
| 23-25 | 72 | 32 |
| 26-28 | 10 | 04 |
| 29 -30 | 02 | 02 |
| Total | 120 | 120 |



The maximum students are in the age group of 20-22 and that too females are more. The maximum age of the student has gone upto 29 years. Most of the students in the sample are in the age of 20-25 years. The stressors identified by Indian students have been classified into seven main categories as shown in table 1.2 given below .The incidents which stress them under particular category have been put next to the main categories.

Table 1.2 Stressors felt by Indian students

| Stressors | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Academics | Working on subjects/papers and assignments Getting unexpectedly bad grade Difficulty choosing specialization area Uncertainty in getting employment |
| Family relationships | Joint families disintegrating into nuclear families Conflicts between parents Illness of a family member Intercaste love marriages Marriages and breakups in family Getting involved in an argument with a family member Being away from home –often for the first time Forcibly being asked to be strictly disciplined |
| Finances | Payoff the educational loan amount Overspending Financial crisis/problems |
| Daily hassles | Being stuck in traffic Waking up late Day to day activities |
| Social relationships | Difficulty in adjusting with roommate/partner Breaking up with girlfriend /boyfriend Wasting time by being too social |
| Environment | Being in one’s own environment New responsibilities Exposure to new people , ideas and temptations |
| Others | Substance abuse Making decisions, on a higher level than one is used to Preparing for life after education Awareness of one’s own sexual identity and orientation Psychological makeup |

Although stress is not bad always. Little bit of stress is required to exhibit better performance. This can also be interpreted as stress can be helpful and stimulating. A study done by Korthage in 2003 states that the challenges of life pose stress and if all the stress is avoided then it would lead to boring existence. On the other side it may cause many kinds of problems. According to findings of Large (1999) the stress can also interfere with the concentration of the students and also their ability to learn.

Adding to Hudd et al. (2000) the stressed students perceived themselves as less healthy and more prone to poor health habits with low level of self esteem. People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism, or are readily overwhelmed by stress may be especially prone to depression. If the stress level increases it may become the root cause of many biological problems. This can also be linked to growing crime rate among teenagers.

5. HOW DO COLLEGE GOING STUDENTS COPE WITH STRESS?

The study conducted by Dyson and Renk (2006), found that sex differences in college students were not responsible for stress. According to (Skowron, Wester and Azen, 2004) The college students undoubtedly experience lot of stress because of stressors like academic issues, financial concerns and social strains. Hudd et al. (2000) found through his research that the stressed students consumed a greater amount of “junk food,” They were also less likely to exercise. Stress has a bad impact on their sleep. They have sleepless nights.

Some research has been conducted on coping strategies. It was posited that coping strategies may affect stress by decreasing its level. (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Some college students’ used problem-solving strategy to cope up with it and it was associated with positive outcomes, like better health and reduced negative affect (Dunkley et al. 2000; Sasaki and Yamasaki 2007). Some students’ used emotion-focused strategies, i.e, the use of avoidance strategies which was linked with negative outcomes like poorer health and increased negative affect (Pritchard et al. 2007).

It has been posited that effect of stress can be reduced through some methods. The coping strategies can be classified into two main categories:-

a) Problem focussed strategies

They involve behavioural activities like use of action, planning, acceptance and positive reframing in response to stress.

b) Emotion focused strategies

They include expressing emotion and altering expectations. They consist of behaviours like self-help, self-punishment, feelings, seeking emotional support, denial, acceptance, mental disengagement and positive reframing

When these strategies were applied on college students the former strategy has better outcomes than the later one. Females prefer to use emotion focused strategy than college males. They also report greater use of social support than men. (Eaton and Bradley 2008; Ptacek et al 1994; Stanton et al 2000). To combat with stress college men use emotion focussed strategy such as mental disengagement by consuming alcohol.

The common coping strategies being used are self-help, accommodation, approach, avoidance and self-punishment. The college women generally use avoidance and self-punishment to combat with daily hassles. The college students ability to communicate effectively, regulate emotions, positive exchange in family relationships reduced stress to a great extent. The college males use avoidance and self-punishment to cope up with academic stressors . They prefer to opt for self-help, avoidance and self-punishment to combat with family stressors. Daily hassles are dealt with use of avoidance and self punishment. The coping strategy being adopted by college boys for social relationships are self-punishment, self-help and avoidance.

Male clients who are stressed about being in contexts in which traditional male dominance is threatened or tender emotions are expressed may rely on externalising defences. These men often speak in the language of threat. The female clients may respond with either overt shame or externalization to cope up with stress when male power has impact on them.

Out of many stress busters the family relationships and environment is an important component which is responsible to determine the personality of a person and also responsible for a child’s learning and behavior. Therefore the role of family is very important .

Although the students develop their own ways to combat stress but the institution to which they are a part must also take some steps. The community college counsellors have reported a list of issues which affect the students. The major ones are academic and education related, career and of personal concerns (Durodoye , B.A., Harris, H.L. and Bolden, V.I. , 2000).

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It is agreed that the level of stress is comparatively high in the students who recently join an institution. They find it difficult to adjust into new academic environment, develop new social relationships, defining extent of being social, manage within limited finances etc. In the initial phase they look for support to combat with stress.

The authors suggest of workshop for reducing stress level in college going students. Here the students would participate along with their parents. This shall improve supportive communication including emotional processing and emotional regulation between them. This will facilitate easy adjustment in this transition phase. It has been stated that supportive communication engenders behaviors like the validation of emotional experience and positive regard, which in turn, facilitates the processing of negative cognitions and emotions (Burlison and Goldsmith 1998). It can also be called as the processing of emotions and cognitions rather than avoidance which leads to a more functional appraisal of stressors and the experience of less stress. In Indian families family environment facilitates supportive communication. There have been number of studies being conducted and they have come out with the result that social support benefits college student's transition and adjustment to college (for example, Friedlander et al. 2007; Misra et al. 2000). However, the freshers in the college have few friends with a small friend circle which is formed mainly on the basis of the region to which they belong or their section . They also have inadequate social support and greater difficulty in coping with stress . (Dwyer and Cummings 2001). So, we suggest that the stress workshop should be in the form of a series and must begin from the orientation day and follow-up workshops could be conducted in future. As family of an individual plays an important role so they must also be part of the stress workshop. Some research studies have also supported presence of parents as stress releasing . Lopez and Brennan's (2000) finding that that quality of family relationships plays an important role in successful emotional adjustment for young adults.

The other way of reducing stress level would be by college counsellors . They can be made aware of the body image dissatisfaction and its relationship to self-esteem among college women. The counsellors have to see the male and female clients who are struggling with these issues. The counsellor must be well aware of the gender specific stressors.

7. REFERENCES

1. Abouserie, R. (1994). Sources and levels of stress in relation to locus of control and self-esteem in university students. *Educational Psychology*, 14(3), 323–330.
2. Blankstein, K.R., Flett, G.L., & Koledin, S. (1991). The brief college student hassles scale: Development, validation, and relation with pessimism. *Journal of College Student Development*, 32(3), 258–264.
3. Brougham, Ruby R., Zail, Christy M., Mendoza, Celeste M. And Miller, Janine R. (2009), *Stress, sex differences and coping strategies among college students*, Springer Science+ Business Media, Vol 28, pp 85-97
4. Crespi, T. D., & Becker, J. T. (1999). Mental health interventions for college students: Facing the family treatment crisis. *Family Therapy*, 26(3), 141–147.
5. Dunkley, D. M., Blankstein, K. R., Halsall, J., Williams, M., & Winkworth, G. (2000). The relation between perfectionism and distress: Hassles, coping, and perceived social support as mediators and moderators. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(4), 437–453.
6. Durodoye, B.A., Harris, H.L. and Bolden, V.I. (2000). Personal counselling as a function of the community college counselling experience. *Community college journal of research and Practice*, 24(6), 455-468
7. Dyson, R., & Renk, K. (2006). Freshmen adaptation to university life: Depressive symptoms, stress, and coping. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(10), 1231–1244.
8. Frazier, P. A., & Schauben, L. J. (1994). Stressful life events and psychological adjustment among female college students. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 27(1), 280–292.
9. Harris, S. (1995). Body image attitudes and the psychological development of college women. *Journal of Psychology*, 129, 315-330
10. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCR/is_2_33/ai_62839434/
11. http://healthnet.rutgers.edu/stress/stressed_out.asp [accessed June 22, 2004]
12. Hudd, S., Dumlao, J., Erdmann-Sager, D., Murray, D., Phan, E., Soukas, N., et al. (2000). Stress at college: Effects on health habits, health status and self-esteem. *College Student Journal*, 34(2), 217–227.

13. Korthage, J. (2003). Getting a grip on stress. *Parks and Recreation*, 38(5), 2-4
14. Large, R. (1999). Easing the strain of students' stress. *NEA Today*, 18(1), 39-40
15. Larson, E. A. (2006). Stress in the lives of college women: 'Lots to do and not much time.' *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 21(6), 579–606.
16. Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.
17. Pierceall, E. A., & Keim, M. C. (2007). Stress and coping strategies among community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31(9), 703–712.
18. Printz, B. L., Shermis, M. D., & Webb, P. M. (1999). Stress-buffering factors related to adolescent coping: A path analysis. *Adolescence*, 34(136), 715–734.
19. Pritchard, M. E., Wilson, G. S., & Yamnitz, B. (2007). What predicts adjustment among college students?: A longitudinal panel study. *Journal of American College Health*, 56(1), 15–21.
20. Ross, S. E., Neibling, B. C., & Heckert, T. M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *College Student Journal*, 33(22), 312–317.
21. Sasaki, M., & Yamasaki, K. (2007). Stress coping and the adjustment process among university freshmen. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 20(1), 51–67.
22. Towbes, L. C., & Cohen, L. H. (1996). Chronic stress in the lives of college students: Scale development and prospective prediction of distress. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 25, 199–217.
23. Burleson, B. R., & Goldsmith, D. J. (1998). How the comforting process works: Alleviating emotional distress through conversationally induced reappraisals. In P. A. Anderson, & L. Guerrero (Eds.), *Handbook of communication and emotion* (pp. 246–281). San Diego: Academic Press.
24. Friedlander, L. J., Reid, G. J., Shupak, N., & Cribbie, R. (2007). Social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(3), 259–274.
25. Misra, R., McKean, M., West, S., & Russo, T. (2000). Academic stress of college students: Comparison of student and faculty perceptions. *College Student Journal*, 34(2), 236–245.
26. Lopez, F. G., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). Dynamic processes underlying adult attachment organization: Toward an attachment theoretical perspective on the healthy and effective self. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(3), 283–300.
27. Dwyer, A., & Cummings, A. L. (2001). Stress, self-efficacy, social support, and coping strategies in university students. *Canadian Journal of Counseling*, 35(3), 208–220
28. wellness.rice.edu/documents/stress_and_college.pdf
29. www.essortment.com/family/stressmanagemen_sifb.htm
30. www.pcusa.org/nationalhealth/healthinfo/collegestress.pdf
31. www.uhs.uga.edu/stress/
32. www.womensforum.com/index.php?...stress...college-students...college