

Role of Academic Stress on Mental Health of Adolescence

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Abstract

Background: Adolescence is a critical developmental stage marked by heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges, with academic stress being a major contributing factor. Intense academic competition, parental expectations, and peer pressures often lead to anxiety, sleep problems, and emotional dysregulation among adolescents. Prolonged stress during this period not only hampers academic performance but also increases the risk of long-term psychological difficulties such as depression and anxiety. **Objectives:** This study aims to examine the key factors contributing to academic stress among adolescents and to explore effective strategies for reducing its impact on their mental health and overall well-being. **Methods:** A detailed and systematic review of the literature was carried out by searching multiple academic databases, notably including the Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, etc by searching terms viz. “Adolescence”, “Academic Stress”, “Mental Health”, “Psychological Intervention”, and “Well-being”. **Findings:** Research shows that academic stress in adolescence arises from multiple sources, including parental and societal expectations, peer pressure, heavy workload, and performance-oriented school environments. High levels of academic stress are strongly linked to academic burnout, anxiety, depression, and impaired well-being. **Recommendation & Implications:** Strategies such as counseling, stress management, mindfulness, and programs to improve self-efficacy have demonstrated effectiveness in lowering academic stress and supporting adolescents’ mental health. These results highlight the need for schools and families to recognize stressors, foster resilience, and provide timely support to help adolescents cope adaptively.

Key Words: Adolescence, Academic stress, Mental Health, Psychological Intervention, Well-being.

Introduction

School life represents a vital and memorable phase in an individual's development. During these years, students experience many enjoyable moments, forging friendships and engaging in a variety of academic and extracurricular activities that contribute significantly to their personal growth. This period also challenges students physically, mentally, and emotionally, helping to prepare them for the responsibilities of adulthood and further education. However, recent societal changes fueled by globalization and rapid technological advances have intensified the pressures faced by students. Many students now become aware of financial challenges at an earlier age, associating their actions and achievements with future economic outcomes. Moreover, the fast-paced and competitive nature of contemporary society demands that young people continually strive for higher academic and personal success to meet evolving expectations. School education serves as a fundamental pillar in person's life and marks a significant milestone in their educational journey. At this stage, a student's academic performance greatly influences the next level of education they pursue, which subsequently shapes their career path. In today's competitive environment, students face challenges such as exam-related stress, lack of interest in attending classes, and difficulties in understanding subjects. These increasing demands highlight the need for effective support systems that promote resilience and well-being among students.

Adolescence as a Critical Developmental Stage- Adolescence is considered one of the most crucial stages of human development, marked by rapid biological changes, cognitive growth, and emotional fluctuations. It is a period when young individuals begin developing their sense of identity, autonomy, and social belonging, while also facing new responsibilities and expectations. Alongside these developmental transitions, academic life becomes increasingly demanding, making this stage particularly vulnerable to the onset of stress. The heightened focus on performance and achievement places adolescents in a position where educational challenges become a central aspect of their daily experiences.

Academic Stress – The concept of stress itself was initially studied by Hans Selye in the early 20th century, describing how the body and mind respond to demands or threats. Although the term "academic stress" does not have a single clear origin or the name of a specific person who first coined it, the phenomenon has existed since formal education systems began. Academic stress gained focused attention as a distinct area of study particularly from the mid-1900s onward, when educational environments became more competitive and performance-oriented. In other

words, it refers to the anxiety related to upcoming academic challenges or the fear of failure. It can be described as the psychological discomfort caused by educational expectations from parents, teachers, peers, and family, along with parental pressure to achieve academically, the current educational and examination systems, and excessive homework demands. Academic stress is a type of mental distress arising from the anticipation of failure or the awareness that failure is a possibility¹. It is also defined as psychological distress connected to academic difficulties or the mere perception of potential academic failure². Wilks (2008) describes academic stress is the physiological and psychological reaction triggered when academic demands surpass an individual's coping capacity.

Prevalence of Academic Stress

Globally, academic stress is highly prevalent among adolescents and students, with studies indicating that approximately 60% to 70% of students experience moderate to severe levels of academic stress⁴. Surveys in various countries show that a majority of adolescents feel significant pressure related to exams, school performance, and future career concerns. For example, in OECD countries, about two-thirds of 15- to 16-year-olds report stress connected to schoolwork and test performance. In East Asian countries like China, this prevalence can exceed 70%, where intense competition and high parental expectations contribute largely to academic stress⁵. Moreover, female students often indicate experiencing greater levels of stress in comparison to males. The widespread nature of academic stress globally is linked with negative, psychological outcomes including anxiety, depression, and burnout making it a critical issue requiring attention from educators, policymakers, and families alike.

Vietnam, studies report that about 79.3% of secondary school students experience moderate educational stress, with 10.1% facing severe stress. Factors such as grade level, type of school (private vs. public), and internet usage influence stress levels significantly⁶. Similarly, in Nepal, research indicates that academic stress is highly prevalent among adolescents, especially those studying in private schools and higher grades, with stress linked to anxiety and depression risks. These country-specific findings collectively demonstrate that academic stress is a widespread challenge that varies in intensity and contributing factors depending on societal, educational, and cultural contexts. The patterns highlight the need for targeted interventions considering regional differences to better support adolescent mental health globally.⁷

Factors responsible for academic stress:

- 1. Family Related Factors-**High parental expectations, family disagreements, and the fear of not meeting parents' hopes are major sources of stress for students. When parents provide emotional support, it can help reduce this stress, but criticism or unrealistic demands tend to increase it.
- 2. Academic Environment:** Heavy coursework, vast syllabi, frequent examinations, competitive academic settings, lack of resources, and overloaded schedules contribute to chronic stress in students. The pressure to achieve top grades and consistently perform well is a consistent stressor.
- 3. Peer Pressure and Social Comparison:** Adolescents experience additional stress due to peer competition, fear of lagging behind, and the urge to match or exceed classmates' achievements. Negative social dynamics and unhealthy comparisons may undermine self-confidence and reduce motivation.
- 4. Personal factors:** Poor time management, low self-efficacy, fear of failure, and lack of interest or motivation in studies further increase academic stress. These individual-level vulnerabilities interact with external pressures, compounding stress outcomes.
- 5. Future Uncertainty:** Anxiety about future prospects, including performance in entrance tests, getting into good colleges, and career-related decisions, adds another layer of pressure.
- 6. Personal Factors:** Poor time management, low self-efficacy, fear of failure, and lack of interest or motivation in studies further increase academic stress. These individual-level vulnerabilities interact with external pressures, compounding stress outcomes.

Mental Disorders related to Academic Stress:

Academic stress in adolescence is closely linked to a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and academic burnout. Studies show that adolescents under significant academic pressure are more likely to exhibit feelings of anxiety about school performance and test results, which can, in turn, lead to depressive symptoms and behavioral problems. Academic stress has also been found to increase the risk of academic burnout a state marked by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and aversion to studies. Moreover, prolonged exposure to academic stress can heighten vulnerability to self-harm, suicidality, and other emotional

difficulties. The ongoing nature of academic stress not only affects student can negatively affect mental health and further impair overall well-being as well as academic achievement.

The most common disorders linked to chronic academic stress include:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD):** Persistent worry about grades, exams and performance can develop into chronic anxiety symptoms.
- **Major Depressive Disorder (MDD):** Continuous academic pressures and feelings of inadequacy or failure may lead to depressive symptoms and, in some cases, clinical depression.
- **Academic Burnout:** This is an increasingly recognized psychological condition marked by emotional exhaustion, loss of interest in studies, and a sense of hopelessness about academic achievement.
- **Adjustment Disorders:** Difficulty coping with academic transitions or excessive workload may manifest as emotional or behavioral disturbances, affecting daily functioning.
- **Sleep Disorders:** Academic stress can trigger insomnia, irregular sleep patterns, or poor sleep quality, further compounding mental health risks.

Materials & Methods:

An extensive web- based search was done on various platforms, viz, Pubmed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Academia etc, were searched with the following keywords: adolescence, academic stress, mental health, psychological intervention, well-being etc. All studies written in simple English comprising of any design or methodological quality were included.

Result & Discussion:

The analysis reveals that academic stress is a major challenge for adolescents, significantly affecting their emotional and psychological health. A large portion of students who reported high academic stress also experienced symptoms of anxiety, low mood, and academic burnout. The primary contributors to stress included to family expectations, strict educational demands, and pressure to keep up with peers. These stressors impacted not just day-to-day mood, but also self-esteem and motivation many students with high stress reported feeling less confident in their abilities and less interested in schoolwork. Additionally, the study found that when students struggled with stress over long periods, some began to develop patterns of irritability, withdrawal from social life, and in a few cases, even symptoms consistent with depression and sleep

disturbances. Importantly, the negative effects did not depend only on the amount of stress; how students viewed themselves (their self-concept) played a strong role in whether they coped effectively or suffered greater harm. These findings make it clear that academic stress should not be seen as a normal or harmless part of growing up. Instead, it is a deeply impactful experience that can undermine the mental health and well-being of adolescents, especially when combined with external pressures from family, teachers, and peers. Supportive and understanding family environments, positive school culture, and good relationships with teachers act as protective shields young people with these supports tend to handle academic demands with less emotional fallout. On the other hand, harsh criticism, unrealistic expectations, and frequent exposure to academic competition or negative teacher-student interactions make things worse and can lead to chronic anxiety, depressive feelings, or even self-harming behaviors. The mediating role of self-concept in this process is especially important: students who believe in their own abilities and maintain a healthy self-image are more resilient. This underscores the need for schools and families to work together, not only reducing unnecessary pressures but also helping adolescents build a strong and positive sense of self. Interventions that teach students coping strategies, foster social support, and keep academic expectations balanced could make a significant difference in preventing more serious mental health concerns in this vulnerable age group.

Conclusion & Recommendations:

The study highlights that academic stress significantly impairs adolescent mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, burnout, and lowered academic motivation. Family and school environments are key contributors, with excessive pressure from parents, demanding curricula, and competitive peer groups exacerbating the problem. Without effective interventions, such stress poses risks to students' overall well-being and educational outcomes.

Implement Balanced Academic Policies: Review and modify curricula and examination schedules to reduce excessive workload and high-stakes testing, allowing students to learn at a manageable pace.

Promote Mental Health Support in Schools: Establish easily accessible counseling services, train teachers to recognize and respond to signs of stress, and integrate mental health education and social-emotional learning into the regular curriculum.

Encourage Family Engagement and Support: Develop programs to educate parents about healthy expectations and effective ways to support their children's academic and emotional needs, reducing undue pressure.

Foster Safe and Inclusive School Environments: Create supportive spaces where students feel valued and heard, minimizing peer pressure and bullying, and prioritizing student well-being alongside academic achievement.

Target Vulnerable Groups: Pay special attention to students who show higher stress levels, such as girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by providing targeted interventions and resources.

Promote Resilience and Coping Skills: Incorporate resilience-building activities and stress management workshops to equip students with practical tools for handling academic challenges and everyday stress. These actions require collaboration among education departments, mental health professionals, schools, and families. A supportive setting that encourages both learning achievements and mental well-being in adolescents.

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