

Mental Health and Academic Stress among Youth: A Comparative Study across Educational Types

Khant Ankitkumar Dipakbhai

Students

Department of Psychology,

Shri S K Shah and Shri Krishna O M Arts College Modasa Gujarat

Abstract

Academic stress is a growing concern among youth worldwide, especially in developing countries like India where educational competition is intense. Stress related to examinations, parental expectations, and career uncertainty significantly affects the mental health of students. This paper examines the relationship between academic stress and mental health among youth, with a comparative focus on educational types such as Arts, Science, Commerce, and Professional courses. It highlights the causes and consequences of academic stress, explores theoretical frameworks, reviews international and Indian studies, and discusses comparative variations across disciplines, gender, and urban-rural contexts. The paper also integrates policy perspectives such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and suggests recommendations for reducing academic stress and promoting well-being. Findings suggest that science and professional course students face higher stress levels due to workload and competitive examinations, while arts and commerce students experience stress related to future career uncertainties. The paper emphasizes the urgent need for culturally sensitive interventions, student support systems, and institutional reforms to ensure holistic youth development.

Keywords:

Academic stress, mental health, youth, comparative study, educational types, India

Introduction

Youth represent the backbone of any nation, and their mental health determines the future of societies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), one in seven adolescents experiences mental disorders, with depression, anxiety, and behavioral conditions being most prevalent. In India, the National Mental Health Survey (2016) found that nearly 14% of students between 13–24 years report symptoms of mental distress, often linked to academic pressures.

Academic stress refers to the psychological distress generated by academic demands such as examinations, assignments, heavy workloads, and competition (Deb et al., 2015). While some stress is motivational, chronic and excessive stress impairs mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and even suicidal tendencies. Educational type plays a crucial role in shaping stress experiences. Students in professional or science streams often face higher pressure due to intensive curricula and competitive entrance examinations, while arts and commerce students frequently encounter uncertainty regarding career prospects.

This study seeks to comparatively analyze mental health and academic stress among youth across different educational types. It emphasizes the Indian context, where parental expectations, societal norms, and limited mental health infrastructure intensify the problem.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between academic stress and mental health among youth.
2. To compare the stress experiences of students across educational types (Arts, Science, Commerce, Professional).
3. To review theoretical and empirical studies on academic stress and youth mental health.
4. To explore the Indian context, including cultural and policy perspectives.
5. To propose recommendations for reducing academic stress and promoting positive mental health.

Review of Literature

Global Studies

Globally, research indicates that academic stress is a major predictor of mental health issues among youth. Misra and McKean (2000) found that time management difficulties and high workloads increased stress levels among college students. The American College Health

Association (2019) reported that more than 60% of students experienced overwhelming anxiety, and 40% reported depression affecting academic performance.

In Asian contexts, where educational competition is high, stress levels are significantly greater. Liu and Lu (2012) observed that Chinese high school students faced chronic stress due to examinations and parental expectations. Similarly, South Korean students reported one of the highest suicide rates among OECD countries, largely attributed to academic pressure (Lee & Larson, 2000).

Indian Studies

In India, Deb et al. (2015) reported that 63% of students experienced moderate to high levels of academic stress, with science students showing the highest levels. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR, 2019) highlighted that suicide is the leading cause of death among Indian youth aged 15–29, often linked to academic failure.

NIMHANS (2017) studies confirm that excessive parental pressure, rigid school systems, and lack of coping skills exacerbate student stress. A UGC (2019) report further emphasized that professional course students, particularly in engineering and medicine, face high levels of burnout due to competitive environments.

Conceptual Framework

Mental Health Theories

Marie Jahoda (1958) conceptualized positive mental health as encompassing self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. The WHO (2004) defines mental health as a state of well-being where individuals realize their abilities, cope with normal stresses, and contribute productively to society.

Stress Theories

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress highlights stress as an interaction between the individual and environment, shaped by appraisal and coping resources. Students who perceive academic challenges as threats experience distress, while those who see them as manageable demands cope better.

Academic Stress among Youth

Causes of Academic Stress

1. Examinations and Performance Pressure – High-stakes exams such as NEET, JEE, and board examinations create intense anxiety.

2. Parental and Societal Expectations – Indian parents often equate academic success with social prestige.

3. Competition and Peer Pressure – Limited seats in professional colleges heighten rivalry.

4. Curriculum Overload – Rigid and information-heavy syllabi strain cognitive and emotional capacities.

5. Career Uncertainty – Students in non-professional streams often face ambiguity about employability.

Consequences of Academic Stress

Psychological Outcomes: Anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, hopelessness.

Physical Outcomes: Headaches, sleep problems, hypertension, weakened immunity.

Behavioral Outcomes: Procrastination, substance use, withdrawal, suicidal tendencies.

Comparative Dimensions across Educational Types

Arts Stream

Arts students often report stress related to undervaluation of their field and career uncertainties. They may experience lower academic workloads compared to science but face identity struggles and societal stereotypes (Rao, 2016).

Science Stream

Science students face high stress due to complex curricula, competitive exams, and parental expectations of entering professional careers such as medicine or engineering (Deb et al., 2015).

Commerce Stream

Commerce students experience stress regarding employability in dynamic market conditions. Chartered Accountancy (CA) aspirants, for example, face multiple exam attempts and failures leading to distress.

Professional Courses (Engineering, Medicine, Law)

Professional students experience the highest levels of stress due to rigorous schedules, competitive entrance examinations, and future career demands. Medical students particularly show high rates of depression and burnout (Gupta et al., 2019).

Indian Context

The Indian education system is deeply examination-oriented, with limited emphasis on creativity or emotional well-being. Cultural values emphasizing academic success as a pathway to family honor create additional pressure.

The NEP (2020) acknowledges the need to reduce rote learning, integrate vocational skills, and prioritize student well-being. Initiatives like “Manodarpan” under the Ministry of Education provide psychological support to students. However, the implementation remains limited in rural and marginalized communities.

Challenges and Limitations

1. Stigma and Awareness: Students hesitate to seek mental health help due to stigma.
2. Infrastructure Gaps: Shortage of trained counselors and psychologists in schools and colleges.
3. Urban-Rural Divide: Rural students often face additional stress due to lack of access to quality education and resources.
4. Overgeneralization: Comparative studies may overlook socio-economic and cultural diversity.
5. Digital Divide: Online education during COVID-19 exacerbated inequalities in stress experiences.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

1. Integrating Mental Health into Curriculum: Schools and colleges should include stress management and life skills training.
2. Strengthening Counseling Services: Mandatory counselors in educational institutions.
3. Parental Awareness Programs: Educating parents to reduce unrealistic expectations.
4. Balanced Assessment Reforms: Shift from rote-based exams to continuous and holistic assessment.
5. Government Initiatives: Expansion of programs like Manodarpan and National Mental Health Programme (NMHP).
6. Peer Support and Mentorship: Encouraging peer counseling and alumni mentorship systems.

Conclusion

Mental health and academic stress among youth are pressing concerns in India and globally. Comparative analysis across educational types reveals that while science and professional students face high pressure due to rigorous demands, arts and commerce students experience stress from career uncertainties. Excessive stress impairs mental health, with long-term consequences for individuals and society. A multipronged approach involving policy reforms, counseling support, parental awareness, and curricular innovation is essential to promote well-being. By fostering resilience and reducing stressors, educational systems can prepare youth not just for examinations but for life.

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