

COPING MECHANISM FOR LEARNING PRESSURE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: University students frequently struggle with learning pressure, which has an adverse effect on both their academic achievement and mental health. Although it is common, little research has been done on how students handle this kind of pressure in the classroom. Examining university students' experiences with learning pressure and determining the useful coping strategies they use are the goals of this study. Three university students from English Language Education department participated in semi-structured interviews using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The interviews were supplemented by participant journals that detailed daily stress and coping mechanisms. The results show that high expectations, time constraints, and heavy workloads are the main causes of pressure for students. Time management, peer cooperation, and emotional control techniques like mindfulness are examples of common coping mechanisms. Stress reduction is greatly aided by social support from family and teachers. According to the study, in order to lessen the strain of learning and improve the well being of students, universities should offer stress management workshops and cultivate encouraging learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Academic stress, which is sometimes defined as the emotional stress carried on by academic difficulties, is a major factor in determining students' mental health as opposed to being a result of their difficulties (Saleh, Camart, & Romo, 2017). Sailo and Varghese (2024) stated, understanding the dynamics and consequences of stress is essential, as college students often describe it as a major aspect of their academic experience. Furthermore, a number of mental health conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders, have been connected to academic stress, so these conditions impair students' capacity to succeed academically and psychologically (Kumaraswamy, 2013; Zhang et al., 2022). Recent years have seen a significant increase in interest in the relationship between academic stress and mental health, especially as higher education grows more demanding and competitive.

Students frequently experience elevated stress levels as a result of the shift to higher education due to greater academic demands, competitive situations, and pressure to achieve (Kumaraswamy, 2013). Students usually face difficulties like managing their workload, preparing for tests, and juggling their personal and academic obligations while they struggle to attain high standards (Reddy et al., 2018). Research on these stressors is crucial since they have been connected to physical health issues, anxiety, and depression (Chen et al., 2020). The shift to university life introduces additional stressors, including academic workload and social integration (Ochanda, 2024). According to Karaman et al. (2019), self-imposed expectations, fear of failure, and time restrictions are important predictors of academic stress. By showing that students who participated in calming activities reported improved emotional well-being, Zhang and Zheng (2017) emphasised the importance of leisure activities in reducing the negative impacts of stress. Additionally, Dimitrov (2017) looked at how educational and cultural factors affect stress levels and found that students from different backgrounds face different stresses that call for customised solutions. University students now frequently struggle with academic stress, which affects their entire mental health, emotional stability, and academic success.

Academic stress was made worse by the COVID-19 epidemic, which upended conventional classroom settings and increased psychological strains. According to Barbayannis et al. (2022), students also had to deal with loneliness, adjusting to online learning, and uncertainty about their academic destiny. According to Clabaugh et al. (2021), stress levels rose sharply during the epidemic, making it difficult for many students to stay motivated and access resources. These results highlight how academic stress is dynamic and subject to outside variables. Academic stress was made worse by the COVID-19 epidemic, which upended conventional classroom settings and increased psychological strains. According to Barbayannis et al. (2022), students also had to deal with loneliness, adjusting to online learning, and uncertainty about their academic destiny. According to Clabaugh et al. (2021), stress levels rose sharply during the epidemic, making it difficult for many students to stay motivated and access resources. These results highlight how academic stress is dynamic and subject to outside variables.

The fact that academic stress may be both a motivator and a stressor present one of the special difficulties in researching it. A certain amount of academic pressure can motivate students to achieve and build resilience, but too much stress frequently has negative effects like procrastination, burnout, and decreasing academic performance (Nonterah et al., 2015).

According to a substantial amount of research, there are a number of reasons why students experience academic stress, including heavy course loads, trouble comprehending the material, and high expectations from both internal and external sources (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Reddy, Menon, & Thattil, 2018). Despite these difficulties, colleges frequently don't have the specialised resources needed to assist students in effectively managing these responsibilities, which leaves many without the means to reduce stress.

Developing successful coping mechanisms requires an understanding of the causes and consequences of academic stress. The Perception of Academic Stress Scale was developed by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) as a means of quantifying stress levels and determining its main sources. Their research indicates that time management concerns, peer competition, and academic overload are important factors. Furthermore, Yikealo et al. (2018) emphasised how environmental stresses, like limited support networks and limited funds, could worsen academic expectations. These studies highlight the complexity of academic stress and the requirement for all-encompassing solutions. Research has shown that both adaptive and adaptive coping methods are important for handling academic stress. Fostering resilience and self-efficacy can help students manage more effectively, according to Nonterah et al. (2015), who investigated how the fear of a negative evaluation influences the association between stress, anxiety, and depression. According to Sailo and Varghese (2024), frequent coping mechanisms include time management, relaxation techniques, and reaching out for social support. Their results are consistent with those of Riani et al. (2024), who highlighted the detrimental effects of avoidance procrastination on stress levels and academic performance.

There are still gaps in the understanding of the complex impacts of academic stress on a range of student demographics and academic environments, despite a wealth of research on the subject, Zhang et al. (2022) investigated the role that hopelessness and anxiety play in mediating the link between academic stress and signs of depression, highlighting the necessity of comprehensive support networks. In the meantime, Fellingham et al. (2024) examined the transitional difficulties that students encounter when they go to college, discovering stresses associated with social adjustment and academic readiness. Additionally, this study seeks to pinpoint particular student populations who might be especially susceptible to academic stress, such as those enrolled in demanding programmes or dealing with socioeconomic difficulties (Ramachandiran & Dhanapal, 2018). According to Chen et al. (2020), good stress management includes more than just lowering stress levels; it also involves offering students the tools they need to deal with difficulties in a more positive way. However, many universities continue to

neglect institutional solutions such fostering open communication with faculty, offering counselling services, and establishing flexible academic calendars (Sailo & Varghese, 2024).

These findings imply that focused therapies may reduce certain stressors and enhance general wellbeing. By investigating the real-life experiences of college students under academic pressure, this study seeks to add to the expanding body of literature. This study uses qualitative approaches to investigate how students cope with stress, how effective these coping strategies are, and how support networks contribute to resilience. The results will guide useful suggestions for improving student wellbeing and fostering encouraging learning environments in classrooms.

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative phenomenological approach is used in this study to investigate how college students understand and handle academic stress. The phenomenological approach is a perfect fit for examining the intricate phenomenon of academic pressure since it can effectively capture people's subjective viewpoints and lived experiences. Three university students who were purposefully chosen to guarantee diversity in academic subjects, year of study, and socioeconomic backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews for the study. Open-ended questions about the causes of academic stress, how it affected their academic and personal life, and the coping mechanisms they used served as the framework for each interview.

Thematic exploration, a reliable technique for finding, examining, and summarising patterns in qualitative data, was used to examine the gathered data. Six steps were included in the thematic analysis process: getting to know the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, identifying and labelling themes, and creating the final report. All participants' informed agreement was obtained, and their identity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, in accordance with strict ethical guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research revealed insight into the many causes of academic pressure as well as the coping strategies used by college students. Recurring themes in the participant replies include workload, individual expectations, and the impact of academic culture. Their coping mechanisms and viewpoints on stress management also highlight the difficulties students encounter in finding a balance between their academic and emotional lives.

Sources of Academic Pressure

Workload was repeatedly cited by the participants as a primary cause of stress, with assignments and deadlines receiving special attention. For example, the first participant specifically mentioned "lecturers and their freaking endless assignments" as a major source of stress, whereas the second participant found it difficult to finish assignments and get over personal inactivity. In a similar vein, the third participant emphasised how difficult it was to balance her responsibilities as a friend, daughter, and student and how unexpected deadlines made her stress worse. These results are consistent with earlier research by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015), which found that the main causes of academic stress are personal expectations and academic workload. According to the findings, students frequently feel overburdened by the amount of work they have to do as well as the pressure to achieve well in any aspect of their lives.

Coping Strategies and Their Effectiveness

A variety of coping mechanisms were used by the individuals, such as eating, relaxing, and rewarding themselves. Both the first and second participants said they turned to eating as a way to relax, while the second one also mentioned entertainment like reading or watching TV. The first individual, however, reported poor physical outcomes, including weight increase, suggesting that emotional eating may offer short-term time off but may have negative consequences over time. A positive approach to motivation is demonstrated by the third participant's self-rewarding tactic, which involves promising oneself a nap once a task is finished. Although these tactics provided short-term relief, most participants were not happy with how well they worked in the long run. This supports research like that of Chen et al. (2020), which contends that coping strategies should not be used as short-term diversion but rather to treat the underlying causes of stress.

Support-Seeking Behavior

The findings show that different people have different ways of asking for help. While the second person preferred to handle stress alone until the pressure became unmanageable, at which time they confided in a close friend, the first participant acknowledged that they released to others who experience similar difficulties. Talking with her mother and other trusted people late at night provided comfort to the third participant. These results show that people frequently turn to unofficial support networks, such friends and family, to ease their emotional pain. The limited reach of this kind of assistance, however, emphasises how crucial it is to develop more organised institutional stress-reduction strategies. Similar to this, Sailo and Varghese (2024)

stress the necessity for colleges to establish peer support groups and easily available counselling facilities.

Perception of Academic Culture

Every participant agreed that academic culture had a big influence on how they experienced stress. The first participant recognised its twin effects, pointing out that it both creates excessive pressure and encourages a hardworking mindset. Academic culture has the "biggest role," according to the second participant, while the third compared it to a common battle in which everyone is "just surviving, not thriving." These answers support the findings of Barbayannis et al. (2022), who underline that stressful situations are frequently normalised in competitive academic settings, becoming a part of being a student. Academic culture can motivate students to pursue brilliance, but it also feeds an endless loop of incompetence and pressure.

Discussion and Implications

The results highlight how complicated academic stress is and how many coping strategies are ineffective at offering sustained respite. For instance, emotional eating can provide temporary comfort but it frequently results in other difficulties like physical health issues. In the same way, the dependence on unofficial support networks draws attention to a weakness in official institutional actions. Establishing environments that not only push students academically but also offer enough support for stress management should be a top priority for universities. Flexible timelines, mindfulness training, and normalising discussions about mental health are a few examples of how to achieve this.

Furthermore, a more thorough analysis of the function of academic culture is necessary. Universities need to find a balance between encouraging ambition and dedication and providing assistance and empathy. To create better learning environments, it is essential to promote open communication between instructors and students, lessen the stigma associated with asking for assistance, and include stress management instruction in the curriculum. Institutions can better assist students in managing the demands of college life and help them succeed academically and psychologically by addressing these structural problems.

The findings set up the foundation for further investigation into focused interventions, especially those suited to the various requirements of students. The effectiveness of institutional support systems may be further improved by comprehending the intersections between stress experiences and particular demographic aspects, such as gender, socioeconomic position, and

academic specialities. Universities can change their academic cultures to foster resilience without sacrificing mental health by making consistent efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of this study illustrate the complex nature of academic stress that college students face, which is mostly caused by workload, deadline pressure, and the need to manage multiple tasks. To deal with stress, students use a variety of coping techniques, including self-reward techniques, socialising, and emotional eating. Nevertheless, many individuals only experience short-term relief, and these approaches frequently have little long-term effect. The dependence on unofficial support systems, such friends and family, highlights the absence of easily available and effective institutional support networks. Additionally, the widespread impact of academic culture creates a two-pronged atmosphere that encourages students to put in a lot of effort while also normalising high levels of stress.

Universities have to bring organised mental health services, flexible academic policies, and stress management instruction into their frameworks in order to address these issues and take a more comprehensive approach to student well-being. The negative consequences of academic stress can be lessened by promoting a friendly academic environment and encouraging open communication between students and faculty. In order to guarantee that students not only survive but also improve in their academic efforts, these steps are crucial. In order to develop more inclusive and successful methods for assisting students under pressure, future research should examine customised treatments and the relationship between demographic characteristics and stress experiences.

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