

## ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR COUNSELLING

BY

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### Abstract

*Academic Stress has been seen tightening its grip on the students, as they have to compete at every step of their academic career in this fast moving world. Consequently they feel the effects of stress in harsh and also negative ways. It has been observed that academic problems are the most common source of stress for students. Most of them are faced with more academic programmes which are to be covered within a short period. Stress can create positive or negative feelings. When effectively handled, stress can help to compel one to greater action which can lead to higher achievement while negative feelings can lead to some health related problems, such as headache, stomach upset, insomnia, high blood pressure and even stroke Students should have excellent knowledge and skills to help them manage the stress they are facing in their academic pursue. This study aims to consider the academic stress among post graduate students in Kwara State and its implication for counselling. Therefore, the paper suggested that the counsellor should contribute in raising awareness among lecturers and non academic staff to create a supportive school environment to reduce student's academic stress.*

**Keyword:** *academic stress, counselling, undergraduate, student.*

### Introduction

The very mention of the word 'stress' brings thoughts such as increased rate of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and other potentially life-threatening issues to one's mind. Often times, a student rushes from one end of campus to the other, trying to make their next class on time. Since classes are scheduled back-to back, there is less or no time to even eat. Take, for instance, it is three o'clock and a student is extremely hungry. This week, they have got three mid-semester examinations to study for, and a backlog of 100 pages to read. They are meeting with a study group tonight to finish studies on a rushed research presentation. Too bad they have also got three other assignments due tomorrow, so it looks like they will not be getting much sleep tonight.

The fact is indisputable that, having the above introductory paragraph as a schedule, in reality, will certainly make a student be tensed up. Yet, those are the hectic routines we experience as students these days. We feel lost, overwhelmed, frozen, or unable to cope when confronted with so many tasks. Busy schedules crammed with studies, study, and extracurricular activities can take a toll on student's physical and mental health, especially if one is not eating or sleeping properly. If untreated, these stressors can compound over time, leading to even greater levels of stress. It is also worth noting that stress is an inevitable part of student-life; as it takes a toll on most students' physical health, emotional well-being, and academic performance (Shield, 2015)

The rise of this pandemic in students is on account of factors such as the somewhat sudden change in lifestyle, increased study load, new responsibilities among others is not anticipated. Even as we delve into the core of the subject matter, ample attention needs to be accorded the proposal that,

introducing successful coping strategies may help students to avoid the destructive consequences of excessive stress (Salami, 2021)

Tertiary education has become increasingly complex; the students are faced with more academic programmes which are to be covered within a short period. Stress can create positive or negative feelings. When effectively handled, stress can help to compel one to greater action which can lead to higher achievement while negative feelings can lead to some health related problems, such as headache, stomach upset, insomnia, high blood pressure and even stroke (Shield, 2015). Stressors in this study are the challenges encountered by university students which are perceived to generate stress. Stress level is the extent to which students experience tensions, worries, pressures and anxiety in the process of pursuing their academic activities in the universities (Greenberg, 2016).

### **Concept of Counselling**

Counselling is a process where an individual, couple or family meet with a trained professional counsellor to talk about issues and problems that they are facing in their lives in a confidential manner. The counsellor will draw on tools and techniques from their training and should provide understanding and empathy to their client, while their client works out how to move through the issues that they have brought to counselling. During the process of counselling, goals will be identified, and this is the purpose of the counselling process. The goals can change if that is what the counsellor and client see as beneficial. Counselling is often client-centred, the goal is for the client to make the decision on the best course of action with the support of their therapist. The counsellor can provide tools, techniques, suggestions and homework. Ultimately it is the client who needs to make the decision on what is best for them as a key part of the process.

### **Concept of Academic Stress**

Academic stress refers to a stress that arises due to academic factors such as heavy school schedule, unrealistic expectation and demands of parents and teachers, low academic performance, poor study habits and not having enough time to deal with school's multiple priorities (Banerjee, 2016). Therefore academic stress is defined as the stress that comes from the pressure to perform well in school examinations and competitive college entrance examinations. As it has already been discussed that stress is not always negative but its optimum level is indispensable for the sound survival of life. In the same way it has been found that moderate amounts of stress can help motivate students and sometimes increase academic performance.

Academic stress has been studied in relation to adjustment. In this connection, Hussain et al. (2018) explored the level of academic stress and overall adjustment among public and government high school students and also explored the relationship between academic stress and adjustment. Results showed that magnitude of academic stress was significantly higher among the public school students whereas government school students were significantly better in terms of their levels of adjustment.

### **Aspects of Stress**

The aspects of stress according to (May, 2015) include the following:

1. **Anxiety:** In May's book "The meaning of anxiety" (2015), anxiety is explained as the manner in which a person reacts or response to stress, accept and interpret. In this view, stress is seen as a journey to anxiety thus anxiety is an outcome of stress and how an individual handles stress. A good handler of stress is likely to experience few or no form of anxiety.
2. **Burnout,** also refer to as soulless situation is where a person loses the eagerness and motivation in continuing to a particular kind of studies or activity as a result of both external and internal factors. The skills and expertise is still active but the desire and the wellness to perform is dead in the person as such activity or studies become huge responsibility without any joy. Burnout destroys a person's motivation and may kill the initiative's at studies or school. Service providers like teachers, counsellors and other officers experience these issues much and make them at times to be hostile to the people that they dedicated to serving. It normally affects people whose studies are interaction with people like team leaders, managers, etc.
3. **Distress** is a moment of great pain sorrow, acute physical and mental suffering; Affliction, trouble (Dictionary.com 2016). It is as a result of an inability to handle or deal with a challenge or problem encountered in the performance of a specific activity or studies. Distress result in both

emotional and physical pain. An example of emotional pain is sadness, resorting to drugs, violence, a low concentration at studies, low participation in social activities. Most often than none, distress is caused by external factors.

4. Fear “is a chain reaction in the brain that start with a stressful stimulus and ends with the release of chemicals that cause a racing heart, fast breathing and energise mussels, among other things also known as the fight of light responses” (Layton 2016). Fear is a common aspect of human emotion that is sentenced in our nervous system. Fear is a result of instinct in human that responses to sensed danger or unsafe. It protects and alerts us to an impending danger and that’s help to prepare for this danger. It is a natural aspect of humans and in some cases it very good because it can be a warning or a signal that cautions us to be very careful. However, it is and can be extremely dangerous to the life of a person. Fear can be mild or intense and it can be short term or last longer. When a person senses danger the brain responses immediately and sends signals which affect the nervous system this causes various aspect of the body to response to the reaction to the nervous system and core symptoms of these are fast breathing and heartbeat, increased blood pressure, experience of sensation in their legs, head, chest and hands. There is also profuse sweating. The fight of light is a term used to express how the body react to these symptoms and reactions thus either fighting off the danger or running fast to get away. (Layton, 2016).

#### **Major Sources of Academic Stress in Students**

Indeed, students have a unique cluster of stressful experiences. Student’s academic performances can be affected by many factors. Bernstein et al. (2018) defined the sources of stress as every circumstance or event that threatens to disrupt people’s daily functioning and causes them to make adjustments. Similarly, Phinney and Haas (2013) stressed out sources of stress more specifically as a unique set of stressful encounters among student which includes: difficult financial challenges, domestic responsibilities, responsibilities related to holding a job while in school, and a heavy academic load.

1. **Relationships as a source of stress:** Relationship or Relations on its own is a broad topic that can be discussed and it has had a lot of effect on most aspects of a life of individuals. The term relationship talks about how people are connected and the connection can be through blood, marriage, adoption and other legal ways like neutralization for a country and registration. This bond that is created between people can at times turn to be a burden on them and others to turn out to be victims of relationship abuse. Relationship abuse is an example of oppressive and coercive practices used to keep up force and control over a previous or current cozy accomplice. Abuse can be enthusiastic, money related, sexual or physical and can incorporate dangers, seclusion, and terrorizing. Abuse has a tendency to raise after some time. All these relationship issues can be in the form of change in a relationship, conflicts with a room-mate, working with people you don't know, contact with strangers and family problems.

2. **Personal factors as a source of stress:** Personal factors happen to really cause so much stress than we can imagine and they also play a very important role in the various aspect of the life of a student. These factors vary from person to person which results in a different set of perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. Personal factors can take a form of so many ways which one way or the other affect student performance and stress them up. Some of these factors are: Change in Living Environment, Change in Sleeping Habits, New responsibilities, Financial Difficulties, Combining Job with studies, Health Problems and Poor Eating Habit.

3. **Academic factors as a source of stress:** There are some factors that happen in the academic curriculum that causes so much stress to students. So many things take place in the day to day activities of the academic processes that make students stress up which are: Increased class workload, Lower grade, Many hours of studies, Language difficulties, Procrastination, Examinations, Missing Lectures and Frustration due to misunderstandings.

4. **Environmental factors:** The environments students leave in plays a major role in how their life will be in school. Some students turn to adapt to new environment whiles others also feel discomfort being in a new environment. The environment student finds themselves in can stress them up which may cause them not focus on their studies or other academic issues and work. Examples are:

Lack of vacations or Breaks, Computer problems, Bad living conditions, Divorce between parents, Placed in unfamiliar situations, Fear, Future worries and Unrealistic expectations.

### **Effects of Stress on Students**

Students today experience high levels of stress in many areas of life. This is an important domain for further research and an effective channel of intervention for university mental health professionals. Study schedules, especially in universities, are very challenging. The act of combining a busy life along with education causes stress and depression. Limited stress is beneficial and can lead to excellent performance. However, uncontrolled stress can lead to exhaustion, depression and several other sicknesses. In fact, college students are prone to episodic stress. This happens when exams are around the corner. Stress and depression also occur when getting ready for a presentation or an interview. Several students contemplate or commit suicide (Haas, 2013).

Stress affecting students academically leads them to have bad performance in school work. Students experience a lack of concentration. Stress in college students can affect the ability to concentrate, and there have been studies conducted that prove that stress interferes with a student's ability to concentrate, Stress in students is not something we can take lightly. Ironically stress Improves concentration for a short term because when students are little stressed up they then to focus to try to get the issue in question which stresses them away but these concentrations doesn't last for long since they will have more school work or others assignments to do which demand long-term concentrations rather than the short term (Clark & Rieker, 2016).

Furthermore, stress affects the productivity or the output students make. When students are stressed up they turn not to give their maximum best when doing school work and as a result, it manifests in the outputs they bring which are clearly seen in the grades. Stress makes students spend fewer hours trying to get some school work done and they also do it in a shabby manner not following the instructions giving the assignments in question. They also don't make adequate preparation for examinations. In the long term, it can even affect their plans for the future (Linn & Zheppa, 2019).

Lastly, stress cause students to be confused and also suffer from amnesia. In the academic life of students, they easily have misunderstandings with what is been taught in school and don't know what to do. On the other hand, many of them also forget easily what they have known or have been taught because their minds are burdened with the issues that are stressing them up. All these points impact the stress level of students, in the long run, cause them to perform poorly in school (Haas, 2013).

### **Counselling intervention on Academic Stress**

Ability to manage stress is really an important issue when it comes to the topic of stress. Due to this, the counsellor has laid down some stress relieving techniques which help a lot especially students to enable them to manage their stress issues (Hiriyappa 2022).

#### **Meditations**

The first technique that can help with the management of stress is meditation. Meditation that cultivates mindfulness can be particularly effective at reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions. Mindfulness is the quality of being fully engaged in the present moment, without over-thinking or analysing the experience. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness meditation switches the focus on what is happening right now. Mindfulness meditation is not equal to zoning out. It takes an effort to maintain your concentration and to bring it back to the present moment when your mind wanders or you start to drift off. But with regular practice, mindfulness strengthens the areas of the brain associated with joy and relaxation. (Clinic Community Health Centre, 2020)

#### **Body Scanning**

Furthermore, body scanning is also another good way of managing stress. Body scanning promotes mindfulness by focusing your attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, you can start with your feet and work your way up. However, instead of tensing and relaxing your muscles, you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels, noticing any sensations without labelling them as "good or bad". (Clinic Community Health Centre, 2020)

### **Deep Breathing**

Another way which is easy to practice and do is deep breathing. Deep breathing releases tension from the body and clears the mind, improving both physical and mental wellness. We tend to breathe shallowly or even hold our breath when we are feeling anxious. Sometimes we are not even aware of it. Shallow breathing limits your oxygen intake and adds further stress to your body. Breathing exercises can help to reduce this stress. The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much air as possible into your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel. (Clinic Community Health Centre, 2020)

### **Guided Imagery**

Guided imagery is also a convenient and simple relaxation technique that can help you quickly and easily manage stress and reduce tension in your body. It is virtually as easy as indulging in a vivid daydream and with practice, the technique can help you to ease the tension and stress that you feel. When used as a relaxation technique, guided imagery involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether a tropical beach, a favourite childhood spot, a therapist's chair, or a quiet place in the woods. (Clinic Community Health Centre, 2020)

### **Self-Massage**

Lastly, self-massage helps so much in managing stress much more than we think. Getting a massage provides deep relaxation, and as the muscles in your body relax, so does your overstressed mind. There are many simple self-massage techniques you can use to relax and release stress. (Clinic Community Health Centre, January 2020).

### **Psychological Stress: The Lazarus Theory**

Two concepts are central to any psychological stress theory: *appraisal*, that is, individuals' evaluation of the significance of what is happening for their well-being, and *coping*, that is, individuals' efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands (Lazarus 1993). Lazarus research (in Brannon & Feist, 1997) revealed that the ability of people to think and evaluate future events makes them more vulnerable in ways that animals are not. Thus the effect that stress has on the individual is based on that individual's feelings of vulnerability and ability to cope. Lazarus recognized that individuals use three kinds of appraisal to analyze situations namely: Primary appraisal, Secondary appraisal and Reappraisal.

Primary Appraisal concerns the first encounter with the stressful event. At this point, the individual appraises the situation in respect of its effect on his/her well-being. The situation may be viewed as positive or negative or unimportant. A stressful appraisal would indicate the individual sees the situation as harmful or threatening. This type of interpretation is likely to generate an emotion or what Lazarus refers to as —harm| which results in anger, sadness or disappointment. The interpretation of —threat| is seen as the anticipation of harm and the interpretation of —challenge| as the individual's confidence in overcoming the demands of the situation. Within primary appraisal, three components are distinguished: goal relevance describes the extent to which an encounter refers to issues about which the person cares. Goal congruence defines the extent to which an episode proceeds in accordance with personal goals. Type of ego- involvement designates aspects of personal commitment such as self- esteem, moral values, ego-ideal, or ego-identity.

After the individual's appraisal of the event, he /she forms an impression of his or her ability to control or cope with the situation, be it —harm| or —threat| or —challenge|. This stage is referred to as a secondary appraisal. Three secondary appraisal components are distinguished: blame or credit results from an individual's appraisal of who is responsible for a certain event. The third type of appraisal is reappraisal. This implies that the individual's appraisals of the situation may change as new information becomes available. Reappraisal does not always reduce the stress; it can increase it since a previously non-threatening situation may be viewed as threatening once more information has become available.



Since its first presentation as a comprehensive theory (Lazarus 1966), the Lazarus stress theory has undergone several essential revisions. In the latest version, stress is regarded as a relational concept, i.e., stress is not defined as a specific kind of external stimulation nor a specific pattern of physiological, behavioural, or subjective reactions. Instead, stress is viewed as a relationship ('transaction') between individuals and their environment (Folkman, 2014).

### **Cox' s Theory of Stress**

According to Cox (1985), the individual becomes stressed when a discrepancy occurs between the perceived level of the stressful demands and his/her perceived ability to respond to and to cope with the demands. There is thus an imbalance between a perceived demand and a perceived capacity to cope. Cox (1985) noted that: The classic stressful situation is one in which the person's resources are not well matched to the level of demand and where there are constraints on coping and little social support. Stress, itself, is an individual psychological state. It is to do with the person's perception of the work environment and the emotional experience of it.

Cox (1985) maintained that perception plays an important role in recognizing stressors. The individual's ability to cope with environmental —threats| or adverse events is also emphasized. This view would suggest that if the individual can perceive environmental and psychological demands made on him, he can learn (for example, through counselling as a form of intervention) to recognize which are the best resources to call upon when confronted with perceived stressful demands. Cox (1985) emphasized that the stress phases experienced by the individual involve a complex interactive process with various levels of appraisal, emotion and response, with the immediate response to a stressful situation being in the form of negative emotion, propelling the individual into flight or fight action.

Cox (1985) maintained that stress is an imbalance between a perceived demand and a perceived capability, with the demands changing at various levels of appraisal during the phases of the stress process. An appraisal of capability takes into account external resources as well as internal capabilities. In using the —capabilities| the individuals makes an assessment of the social support available (external factors) and appraises his or her internal strengths or limitations in order to deal with the stressor.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the negative impact of stress on student's life, such as ineffective studies, poor academic performance and the general health status, putting effective measures in place is pertinent to their academic success and general life. This is done by identifying the main causes of stress which includes changes in lifestyle, increased workload, new responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships and finding the appropriate remedy.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the implication of this study, it is necessary to put into consideration, the following:

1. The school counsellor should try to help the students remove unnecessary academic stress using various counselling techniques.
2. The counsellor should contribute in raising awareness among lecturers and non academic staff to create a supportive school environment to reduce student's academic stress.
3. There should be frequent interaction between academic staffs and students on how best to schedule intensive courses in the cause of the semester work
4. Enough sleep and exercise is an important remedy to stress management.

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