

Stress and Coping Among Undergraduate Students: A Mixed-Methods Exploration

Mukund Giri¹, Aabriti Sharma²

¹Research Scholar NEHU, Shillong

²Assistant Professor Dept. of Education, Sikkim University

Abstract

Stress is the state of being worried or tensed caused by difficult and unwanted situations. It is body's involuntary responses to cope up threat. Every people in the world experience stress at a one point of time but the level of stress may vary ranging from low level to high level stress. Effective coping mechanism is needed to handle the stress at unwanted and difficult situation. The purpose of the present study is to examined stress levels, factors causing stress, and coping strategies adopted by undergraduate college. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design is used in this study. The 122 students were selected randomly across different academic streams and quantitative data were collected using the Stress Scale by Naraian and Lakshmi (2020), a statistical tool (Jamovi 2.5.6) were used to analysed the quantitative data followed by semi-structured interviews for the qualitative data collection. The findings revealed that male students have lower stress as compared to females. The qualitative analysis revealed that family pressure, academic workload, health issues, future uncertainties, and time management are the key factors causing stress. The widely used coping strategies are recreational activities, physical exercise, socializing and sleeping. The study highlights the specific need for effective coping strategies in managing stress to enhance positive mental health and academic performance.

Keywords: Stress, Factors causing stress, Coping strategies

INTRODUCTION

Stress is the body's typical response or reaction to demands imposed on it or disturbing events in the environment. Everyone suffers stress at some point in their lives. According to Anspaugh, Hamrick, and Rosato (1997), stress comes in various forms and impacts individuals of diverse ages and backgrounds. Stress can be triggered by external events or personal events often referred to as stressors. Stressors are conditions that cause stress, both personal and external factors (Mathew, 2017).

The college life is most unforgettable and exciting phases of the individuals filled with the energy, friendships and lively atmosphere the variety of opportunities be it academic or extracurricular activities which nourishes, nurtures and afterward prepares the teenager for adulthood. College students face a range of challenges that sometimes become overwhelming and if not managed these leads to increase stress and may impact academic performance, emotional health, and social well-being (Pariat et al, 2014).

People all around the world has experienced stress and it happens when people find something hard to handle be it physically or mentally on their everyday work it's natural to have stress sometimes it's challenging but not life threatening. Irrespective of their culture, age, religion, race, academic background and profession (Yelkipieri & Esia-Donkoh, 2011).

The factor that causes stress is called stressor and stress is the unwanted changes in the emotion. The levels of stress vary from mild to severe depending on individuals' take. Eustress and distress are two types of stress. Eustress is positive, motivating stress that enhances learning. Distress is negative stress that hinders learning and should be avoided when it becomes overwhelming (Yusoff, 2010).

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping Theory are theoretical framework that assesses harm, threats, and challenges, focusing on coping with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping strategies has a significant role in individual managing the stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping strategies as the ever-evolving cognitive and behavioral actions taken to address external or internal demands that are assessed as challenging or surpassing an individual's available resources. Adler and Park (2003) state that effective coping reduces stress's impact on physical and mental health. People use various mechanisms to manage stress. Some people use drugs, alcohol, overeating, and smoking, while others exercise, meditate, and listen to music, which has been shown to relieve stress. Individuals have various methods to overcome or reduce stress.

Students have experienced stress due to pressures related to academic success, uncertainty about future, difficulties in adjusting college life, maintaining societal and parental expectations, when faced with such challenges the learning outcomes and academic abilities may be negatively affected (Fish and Nies, 1996; Chew et al., 2003). The significant stressors are high expectations from parents, society, the academic work, recognition from college, and maintaining the ranks in academics. Students believe that if these obstacles are addressed their mental and physical health could get better (Feld, 2011).

Undergraduate students experience significant stress, requiring effective coping strategies. Stressors include internal and external pressures to succeed, economic challenges, uncertain futures and societal and personal issues and if these concerns are overlooked it can lead to anxiety, alcoholism, depression, and mental health issues, negatively impacting academic performance and well-being of the students. Thus, stress management studies are crucial for mitigating issues related to stress and wellbeing of students, and one's personal development (Scott, 2009).

Research Gap

The existing studies has examined stress among undergraduate college students in different institutional contexts and have found that academic pressure, financial difficulties, personal relationships, and socio-cultural factors significantly affect students' stress levels (Mahees, 2020; Mathew, 2017; Kadapatti & Vijayalaxmi, 2012). Studies also found gender variation among undergraduate college students reporting female students has higher stress level than the male students. The female students generally use emotion-focused coping strategies, while males rely on problem-focused coping (Amin et al., 2019; Anbumalar et al., 2017). Research also shows association between stress and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (Lee et al., 2021; Chuan et al., 2022). The coping mechanisms also varies among students such as engaging in sports, social support and to avoidance, substance use and excessive social media engagement (Ganesan et al., 2018; Jain & Verma, 2016).

Overall, the existing studies highlights the factors causing stress, its consequences and coping mechanism among undergraduate college students in other Indian states and worldwide but there is dearth of studies conducted in context of Sikkim. This highlights the importance of conducting research studies involving undergraduate college students in Sikkim. There is a need for research to underscore the stress level among undergraduate college students, the factors causing stress and how they cope with stress. The methodologies used in existing studies are mostly quantitative approach rather than mixed method. The

current study will use a mixed-methods approach to examine the connections between stress and coping strategies among undergraduate college students for a thorough understanding. Thus, examining stress levels among undergraduate college students in Sikkim and their coping mechanisms can help them to better handle stress throughout their lives rather than engaging in negative influences such as substance abuse, smoking, alcohol consumption, and suicide.

Therefore, the study into this topic can help in the development of targeted stress management and coping strategies to meet the needs of undergraduate college students in Sikkim.

Objectives of the study

- To find out the level of stress among undergraduate college students.
- To find out the level of stress among undergraduate college students in relation to gender and stream variation.
- To find out the factors causing stress among undergraduate college students.
- To identify the coping strategies used by them.

Research Method

The mixed-method design is used in this study, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the research problem.

Research Design

The sequential explanatory design was used in this study, which involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data to elaborate on the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

- Got permission from the concerned department and the university to proceed for the study.
- Took consent from the respective Principal and undergraduate college students for the data collection and ensure that their identity will be kept confidential.
- Data used only for research purposes.

Sample for the study

The sample for this study consisted of 122 undergraduate students from the Gangtok district.

Sampling Technique involves selecting units from a population systematically. This study used random sampling to select a representative sample from the population.

Tool Used for the Study: For the quantitative phase, the 'Stress Scale' by Naraian & Lakshmi (2020) was used. For the Qualitative study semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore the factors causing stress among undergraduate students and their coping strategies.

Techniques of Data analysis and interpretation

In this study, a statistical tool (Jamovi 2.5.4) was used in quantitative data analyses and statistical tests were done for graphical representations. The goals of the study were considered, and the data was presented in tables for analysis and interpretation. The analysis focused on the stress levels of undergraduate college students.

For the qualitative analysis respondents were interviewed through a set of questions and their

responses were transcribed, coded, and themes were generated based on the objectives of the study.

Findings and Discussion

Findings of Quantitative Study

The quantitative findings of this study indicate significant differences in stress levels among college students, with particular emphasis on gender and academic stream variations. Female students generally report higher stress levels than male students across all streams, with science stream females experiencing the highest stress levels. This aligns with the findings by Amin et al. (2019), who observed that female undergraduate students perceive higher stress levels than their male counterparts. Similarly, Ganesan et al. (2018) found that female students reported higher levels of stress.

The study also highlights that Commerce students, both male and female, exhibit higher stress levels compared to those in Arts and Humanities, with the highest stress dimensions being pressure, physical stress, anxiety, and frustration. These findings resonate with Chuan et al. (2022), who identified a moderate correlation between academic stress and anxiety among Malaysian undergraduate students, suggesting that academic demands contribute significantly to stress levels.

Additionally, the results of the study show that male and female students experience similar levels of pressure, physical stress, and anxiety, female students report significantly higher levels of frustration. This matches with the findings of Anbumalar et al. (2017), which reports that female students exhibit higher levels of anxiety and emotional responses such as crying and despair compared to males.

The one-way ANOVA results did not find statistically significant differences in overall stress levels among students from different academic streams. This contrasts with Lee et al. (2021), who reported that stress levels varied significantly among students based on demographic factors during the COVID-19 pandemic. This difference may be attributed to the unique stressors introduced by the pandemic, which were not present in this study. The study by Jahagirdar and Raghuvanshi (2023) further emphasizes the significant negative impact of stress on mental health. Their findings, which revealed a strong negative correlation between stress and emotional stability, as well as overall adjustment, highlight the importance of therapeutic support for students experiencing high stress levels.

Findings of the Qualitative study

The qualitative findings of the study identified key factors of stress among college students, including family pressure, academic workload, health issues, future uncertainties, and time management difficulties. These stressors are consistent with Mahees (2020), who found that academic workload, economic hardships, and personal relationships significantly contribute to stress among Sri Lankan university students.

The study also explored various coping strategies employed by students, such as recreational activities, physical exercise, socializing, and sleeping. These strategies align with findings from Mathew (2017) and Jain and Verma (2016), who emphasized the importance of positive coping mechanisms such as prayer, meditation, and sleep in managing stress. However, they also noted the prevalence of negative coping strategies like smoking and alcohol use, which were not prominently reported in this study. Nurnima et al. (2021), found that a substantial proportion of first year and undergraduate students experienced varying degrees of depression during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the importance of preventive measures and support services to meet their needs.

Overall, it is cleared that there are different factors of stress and has affect students on different levels and ways. Thus, effective coping strategies is needed to better address the stressors faced by college students

and enhance their academic abilities and personal development.

Conclusion

This study looked at the stress levels of college students, focusing on differences between genders and academic streams, and identifying the main sources of stress and coping strategies. The findings show that stress among college students is complex and varies by gender and academic stream where Arts and Humanities students experience moderate stress levels, with female students reporting more stress than males. Commerce students, especially females, show higher stress levels in many areas. Science students report higher stress levels compared to other streams, with male Science students feeling the most pressure. Statistically, Female students have significantly higher overall stress levels and frustration compared to male students. Stress levels among students from different academic streams did not show significant differences, except for pressure levels, where Commerce and Science students reported more pressure. The study found that major sources of stress include family pressure, academic workload, health issues, future uncertainties, and time management difficulties. Common coping strategies are recreational activities, physical exercise, socializing, and sleeping. Thus, addressing stress among college students requires a comprehensive approach that considers gender, academic stream, and specific sources of stress.

References

1. Amin, R., Asadullah, M. A., & Sultan, S. (2019). Perceived stress and coping strategies among undergraduate university students: Role of gender. *Bahria Journal of Professional Psychology*, 18(1), 63.
2. Anbumalar, C., Dorathy, A. P., Jaswanti, V. P., Priya, D., & Reniangelin, D. (2017). Gender differences in perceived stress levels and coping strategies among college students. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 4(4), 22-33.
3. Ansbaugh, D. J., Hamrick, M. H., & Rosato, F. D. (1997). *Wellness: Concepts and applications*.
4. Chew-Graham, C. A., Rogers, A., & Yassin, N. (2003). 'I wouldn't want it on my CV or their records': medical students' experiences of help-seeking for mental health problems. *Medical education*, 37(10), 873-880.
5. Esia-Donkoh, K., Yelkpieri, D., & Esia-Donkoh, K. (2011). Coping with stress: Strategies adopted by students at the Winneba Campus of University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Online Submission.
6. Feld, L. D. (2011). Student stress in high-pressure college preparatory schools.
7. Fish, C., & Nies (formerly Albrecht), M. A. (1996). Health promotion needs of students in a college environment. *Public Health Nursing*, 13(2), 104-111.
8. Ganesan, Y., Talwar, P., & Oon, Y. B. (2018). A study on stress level and coping strategies among undergraduate students. *Journal of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development*, 3(2), 37-47.
9. Jahagirdar, D., & Raghuvanshi, K. (2023). Effect of Stress on Mental Health among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(2).
10. Jain, A., & Verma, S. (2016). Prevalence of stress and coping strategies among college students. *Journal of Advanced Medical and Dental Sciences Research*, 4(6), 95.
11. Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping* (Vol. 464). Springer.
12. Lee, J., Jeong, H. J., & Kim, S. (2021). Stress, anxiety, and depression among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and their use of mental health services. *Innovative higher education*, 46, 519-538.

13. Mahees, M. T. (2020). Stress among university undergraduates: A case study of University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. *Int. Educ. Appl. Res. J.(IEARJ)*, 4(05).
14. Maheshwari, K. U., & Deepa, M. (2013). A Research Study on the Impact of Stress upon the Academic Performance of B-School Students. KCT Business School, Coimbatore.
15. Kadapatti, M. G., & Vijayalaxmi, A. H. M. (2012). Stressors of academic stress-a study on pre-university students. *Indian Journal of Scientific Research*, 3(1), 171-175.
16. Mathew, C. P. (2017). Stress and coping strategies among college students. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 22(8), 40-44.
17. Nurmina, N., Fahrianti, F., Haryani, M., & Wahyuni, H. (2021). Depression, anxiety, and stress among first-year students and undergraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Research in Counseling and Education*, 5(2), 206-214.
18. Pariat, L., Rynjah, A., Joplin, M., & Kharjana, M. G. (2014). Stress levels of college students: Interrelationship between stressors and coping strategies. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(8), 40-46.
19. Scott, E. (2009). Stress in college, Common causes of stress in college. *Health Promotion International Journal*, 2(16), 215-232.
20. Yusoff, M. S. B. (2010). Stress, stressors and coping strategies among secondary school students in a Malaysian government secondary school: Initial findings. *ASEAN journal of Psychiatry*, 11(2), 1-15.