



A Study on understanding Psychological Distress and Academic Stress among College Students

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Abstract

Students today navigate a complex web of academic expectations, deadlines as well as the uncertainty about the future, often leading to anxiety, depression, and burnout. The current paper delves into the connection between academic stress and psychological distress in college students, focusing on the personal experiences and pressures they face. A total sample of 30 college students was taken. Standardized scales were administered. The results found significant positive

correlation between psychological stress and academic stress (exam and classroom stress). The result emphasizes the importance of institutional support and practical coping strategies to ensure students maintain both academic successes and mental well-being.

Keywords: *Psychological Distress, Academic Stress, College students*

Introduction

The shift to college life is a crucial time that frequently represents intellectual inquiry, personal development, and the pursuit of goals for the future. This stage is not without difficulties, though; for many students, it turns into a period of severe scholastic stress and psychological anguish. Teachers, lawmakers, and mental health specialists have all taken notice of the rising number of college students experiencing mental health problems. Fostering well-being and academic performance in this population requires addressing the issues causing psychological suffering and academic stress.

Anxiety, sadness, and emotional tiredness are just a few of the emotional and mental health conditions that fall under the umbrella term of psychological distress. The difficulties that college students encounter frequently lead to psychological anguish. According to studies, anxiety and melancholy have become more common in recent years, and many students report feeling depressed, lonely, and overburdened by stress.

College students' psychological suffering has a variety of causes. This group's mental health issues are exacerbated by financial strains, societal expectations, academic pressure, and the need to negotiate a more competitive labor market. Furthermore, the issue is made worse by the stigma associated with mental illness, a lack of coping strategies, and restricted access to mental health providers. In a recent study by Rajaju et al. (2024) investigated mental health help seeking

attitude among college students. The results found there exists a negative association between self-stigma and seeking professional help. The researchers also add that seeking mental health support may equate with being weak and thus many students do not seek help even when psychologically distressed.

The strain and anxiety brought on by academic obligations and expectations define academic stress, which is a subcategory of psychological suffering. College students frequently struggle with demanding coursework, high workloads, and the need to do well. An environment of high pressure is created when this stress is exacerbated by outside variables like peer competition and family expectations.

According to research, students' mental health can be significantly impacted by academic stress, which can manifest as symptoms including poor sleep, difficulty concentrating, and poor academic achievement. Prolonged academic stress can, in extreme circumstances, lead to burnout, a condition of physical, mental, and emotional tiredness that seriously hinders functioning.

Academic life can be incredibly demanding with students juggling assignments, exams, extracurriculars, and future aspirations all at once. This pressure can feel overwhelming, leading many students to experience high levels of stress that affect their mental health. Academic stress is something almost every student has encountered, whether it's from a heavy workload, the fear of failing, or the uncertainty of what comes next. When this stress becomes too much, it can lead to psychological distress-feeling of anxiety, sadness, or hopelessness that make it difficult to cope.

Thus, the current research aims to explore how academic stress impacts the mental health of students, the source of that stress, and ways students can manage it. By understanding this relationship, we can better support students in handling their challenges and prevent the negative consequences that come with prolonged psychological distress.

Academic Stress

Academic Stress is defined as “a student's psychological state resulting from continuous social and self-imposed pressure in a school environment that depletes the student's psychological reserves” (Misra et al., 2000). Academic stress is defined as “the body’s response to academic-related demands that exceed adaptive capabilities of students” (Wilks, 2008).

Agolla and Ongori (2009) did a study on 320 students, the results of which concluded various reasons for academic stress. These include academic workload, lack of resources, low motivation, poor performance in academics, packed lecture halls and the stress of getting a job after graduation resulted in stress amidst the students.

According to Karaman et al. (2019) inquired into the indicators of college students' academic stress and 317 undergraduate students engaged in this study. The results concluded that female college students had higher academic stress than did male college students.

Psychological Distress

Psychological Distress (PD) is broadly defined as “a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression (e.g., loss of interest; unhappiness; desperateness) and anxiety (e.g., restlessness; feeling tense” (Horwitz, 2007).

According to Mirowsky and Ross (2002) psychological distress is defined as “a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of depression (e.g. loss of interest, sadness and hopelessness) and anxiety (e.g. restlessness, feeling tense).”

Knowlden, Hackman and Sharma (2015) did a study on college students to predict if mental and lifestyle indicators differed in context to self-reported levels of psychological distress. The outcome showed an enormous difference between the three categories of mental distress and levels of positive attitude, self-esteem and social support. Investigation of the lifestyle factors suggested groups were different for behaviors can be connected to computer screen time, fruit consumption and sweetened beverage intake when graded into the three-tier groupings. No significant differences were found for the remaining lifestyle factors or for body mass index. Additionally, the results discovered that poor self-esteem and social support significantly predicted mental distress.

Jaisoorya et al. (2017) conducted a study to investigate psychological distress among college students in Kerala, India. The conclusion came out to be that the generality of psychological distress was 34.8% (Mild-17.3%; Moderate-9.2%; Severe-8.3%) with a female predominance. Students with psychological distress were more likely to face academic failures, substance use, suicidality, sexual abuse and symptoms of ADHD.

Purpose

The aim is to study psychological distress and academic stress among college going students.

Hypothesis

There will be a significant positive correlation between psychological distress and academic stress.

Method

Samples

A total sample of 30 college students in the ages of 18-21 from Chandigarh and Ludhiana.

Measures

Kessler psychological distress scale (k10): the Kessler distress scale is developed by Kessler (2001). The scale measures the psychological distress among college going students taking care last 30 days and contains 10 items. Respondents were asked to rate each item on a 5-scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all the time).

Academic stress scale: The scale is given by Kaushik, Anupam, Yadav (2023). The scale contains 30 items. Further divided into 2 subscales: exam stress scale (14 items) and classroom stress scale (16 items). Respondents were asked to rate each item on the scale of 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaire and with their consent the forms were filled face to face. Each participant was thanked for their participation. standardized psychological tests were administered to the participants.

Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Psychological Distress	Exam Stress	Classroom Stress
N	30	30	30
Median	22.5	28.5	22.0
Standard Deviation	8.53	11.1	11.0

Table 2: *Correlation between Psychological distress and Academic stress*

	Psychological Distress	Exam Stress	Classroom Stress
Psychological Distress	—		
Exam Stress	0.514**	—	
Classroom Stress	0.457*	0.597***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion of Results

The result came significantly positive between exam stress and psychological distress ($r = 0.514$, $p < .01$). The result also showed significant positive correlation between classroom stress and psychological distress ($r = 0.457$, $p < .05$). Further, the result showed significant positive relation between classroom stress and exam stress ($r = 0.597$, $p < .001$).

The research findings aligned with Stallman (2011) who studied psychological distress among university students. 6,479 students participated in the study. The estimated figure for mental health problems was 19.2% with 67.4% reporting subsyndromal symptoms. These rates were extremely higher in student population than the general population. Psychological distress was linked with poor academic achievement.

Zhang et al. (2022) did a study on 1309 college students from a local university in China. The conclusion came out that anxiety symptoms, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms were common among college students. Additionally, these were all notably positively associated with academic stress levels. Further, academic stress could indirectly affect depressive symptoms by anxiety symptoms, hopelessness, and both anxiety symptoms and hopelessness.

Cordova Olivera et al. (2023) did a study on 1,265 undergraduate university students from a private university in Bolivia. The results found that self-inflicted stress was the major stressor among undergraduate students. This referred that students' self-demands and self-efficacy perceptions were important factors in the development of high academic stress levels.

Conclusion

There is an obvious link between academic stress and psychological distress: students' mental health frequently deteriorates when they feel overburdened by their academic responsibilities. However, this stress can be managed and kept from causing more severe mental health problems if the proper coping mechanisms and support networks are in place. The following are some strategies for stress management such as maintaining an optimistic outlook. Recognizing that the person has no control over certain events and instead of getting defensive, furious, or passive, voicing one's thoughts, feelings, or convictions. Additionally, developing better time management skills and establishing reasonable boundaries and refusing requests that might cause one undue stress.

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