

Academic Stress and Coping Strategies Among College Students: A Literature Review

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Abstract: ***Background:** Academic stress significantly affects the mental health and performance of students in higher education. It arises from various academic, social, and environmental challenges. Effective coping strategies are essential to manage stress and maintain academic performance and emotional well-being. **Objective:** This literature review aims to explore the levels of academic stress and the nature of coping strategies employed by college students, based on empirical studies from 2010 to 2025. **Methods:** A comprehensive literature search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR with keywords such as "academic stress", "college students", and "coping strategies". Studies included were peer-reviewed, in English, and focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students. **Findings:** Common academic stressors included workload, financial strain, poor time management, lack of sleep, and post-pandemic academic changes. Coping strategies ranged from problem-focused to emotion-focused and avoidance-based techniques. Time management, social support, and mindfulness were identified as effective coping tools. **Conclusion:** College students face significant academic stress due to various personal and institutional factors. Appropriate institutional interventions, such as mental health counseling, skill-building workshops, and digital well-being tools, can support students' coping and resilience.*

Keywords: Academic stress, Coping strategies, College students

1. Introduction

Academic stress has become a significant psychological concern in higher education. Students today face increasing pressure to perform academically, manage time effectively, and balance social and personal responsibilities. The stress is often intensified during transitions—such as adjusting to university life, adapting to online learning, or preparing for professional careers.

Unlike earlier views of stress as a reaction to failure, academic stress is now understood as a multifactorial response to continuous academic demands, high expectations, and competing priorities. If unmanaged, stress can result in anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and poor academic performance. Coping mechanisms play a crucial role in determining how students respond to stress, with both adaptive and maladaptive strategies influencing long-term outcomes. This literature review aims to consolidate the existing evidence on sources of academic stress and the coping strategies adopted by college students across disciplines.

2. Methodology

A comprehensive search of electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR was conducted. Keywords used included "academic stress", "college students", and "coping strategies". Inclusion criteria comprised studies published between 2010 and 2025, focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students, and published in English. Studies with no empirical data or unrelated to academic stress were excluded.

3. Factors Influencing Academic Stress

Academic stress is multifactorial, emerging from academic, psychological, social, financial, and technological domains. Numerous studies have documented the interplay of these factors and their cumulative effect on the well-being and performance of college students.

3.1 Academic Workload

Heavy academic demands—including frequent assessments, strict deadlines, competitive grading systems, and extensive course content—consistently rank among the top sources of stress for students. Misra and McKean (2000) highlighted a strong relationship between academic pressure, poor time management, and heightened anxiety. Ganesan et al. (2015) emphasized that continuous academic overload leads to elevated stress levels, particularly in professional courses like medicine and engineering. Similarly, Sohail (2013) found a significant inverse relationship between academic performance and stress among medical students.

3.2 Environmental and Social Support

The presence or absence of social support significantly influences students' stress levels. Lack of interpersonal relationships, minimal peer interaction, and emotional disconnection from the academic environment increase vulnerability to anxiety and depression (Bland, 2012; Wilks, 2008). Bayram and Bilgel (2008) noted that limited social support networks were correlated with high rates of depression and anxiety among university students. Conversely, social resilience and a sense of belonging were found to buffer the effects of academic pressure (Wilks, 2008; Dyson & Renk, 2006).

3.3 Financial Stress and Autonomy

Financial instability remains a persistent stressor, especially for students managing tuition, living expenses, and material costs. Alkhawaldeh (2022) identified financial burdens as a primary contributor to elevated stress levels. Students balancing part-time work and studies often report reduced academic efficiency and increased emotional exhaustion (Deb et al., 2015). Autonomy in financial management, while fostering independence, may also place psychological strain on students unprepared for budgetary responsibility (Saleh et al., 2017).

3.4 Sleep and Health Habits

Irregular sleep patterns, poor nutrition, and sedentary lifestyles are common among college students and are significantly associated with increased academic stress. Balaji et al. (2019) reported a direct link between sleep deprivation and heightened anxiety and stress during examination periods. Gade et al. (2014) also emphasized that unhealthy lifestyle habits contribute to reduced academic performance and higher stress levels. Vaez and Laflamme (2008) concluded that students with better self-care practices reported lower stress and improved academic achievement over time.

3.5 Technological and Post-Pandemic Factors

The transition to online and hybrid learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced novel sources of academic stress. Ahuja (2023) found that 84.8% of students experienced moderate to severe academic stress during online examinations, citing lack of interaction, internet instability, and increased screen fatigue as contributing factors. Gazder et al. (2021) observed that coursework stress increased substantially in digital learning environments. The abrupt technological shift created challenges in student engagement and coping, particularly for those with limited digital access or support.

4. Coping Strategies among Students

Coping strategies refer to the cognitive and behavioral efforts employed by individuals to manage internal and external demands that are perceived as stressful. Among college students, coping mechanisms can significantly influence academic performance, emotional regulation, and overall psychological health. These strategies are generally categorized into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance-based approaches (Carver, 1997).

4.1 Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping involves taking direct steps to eliminate or mitigate the sources of stress. These strategies are typically proactive and goal-oriented, such as organizing study schedules, breaking large tasks into smaller goals, and actively seeking academic or peer support. Olowookere et al. (2015) emphasized the significance of time management and structured academic planning, demonstrating their positive impact on students' academic outcomes and personal development. Similarly, Saleh et al. (2017) found that

students who adopted task-oriented approaches to stress management reported better academic engagement and lower anxiety levels. Such strategies are particularly effective when the stressor is perceived as controllable or modifiable.

4.2 Emotion-Focused Coping

Emotion-focused coping aims to regulate the emotional distress associated with academic stress rather than addressing the root cause directly. Common methods include venting emotions, engaging in mindfulness or spiritual practices, seeking social and familial support, and reappraising the situation in a more positive light. Bland (2012) identified prayer, meditation, peer discussions, and emotional expression as common emotion-focused coping strategies among college students. These techniques are especially useful in managing stressors that are perceived as uncontrollable, such as examination outcomes or institutional policies. Dyson and Renk (2006) further observed that emotional resilience and effective emotional coping contributed significantly to freshmen's adjustment to college life.

4.3 Avoidance-Based Coping

Avoidance-based coping involves efforts to distance oneself from the stressor or to deny its significance. This includes behaviors such as excessive use of digital media, procrastination, oversleeping, and substance use. While these strategies may offer temporary emotional relief, they often exacerbate academic stress in the long term by delaying necessary action or compounding academic responsibilities. Sami et al. (2015) reported that while some students initially relied on avoidance tactics, they often transitioned to healthier practices such as group discussions and relaxation exercises once they recognized the ineffectiveness of their initial coping responses. Beiter et al. (2015) also cautioned that high reliance on avoidance was linked to increased risk of depression and poor academic outcomes.

5. Key Findings from Reviewed Literature

A growing body of literature underscores the significant impact of academic stress on college students and the importance of coping strategies in mitigating its effects. Freire et al. (2020) highlighted that students using flexible, approach-oriented strategies like planning, reappraisal, and support-seeking showed greater self-efficacy and resilience. Reddy et al. (2022) reported that around 45% of students face academic stress due to exam anxiety, parental expectations, and poor time management. Barman et al. (2023) found that 69.3% of students in Shillong experienced moderate stress linked to personal inadequacy and faculty issues. Gazder et al. (2023) observed that senior students relied on internalized coping like wishful thinking. Jagiello et al. (2024) noted that CBT-based school interventions effectively reduced stress and anxiety. Overall, adaptive coping especially involving planning, emotional regulation, and social support proves beneficial, while avoidant strategies often lead to negative outcomes.

6. Recommendations for Institutional Support

- Develop on-campus mental health counseling services for students.
- Include time management, study skills, and stress-coping workshops in orientation programs.
- Train faculty to identify stress symptoms and provide supportive referrals.
- Introduce mindfulness and peer-support sessions to promote resilience.
- Implement flexible academic policies during high-stress periods such as examinations.
- Use digital tools and apps to track and support student mental well-being.

7. Future Research Directions

There is a lack of longitudinal and experimental studies on how coping strategies evolve over semesters. Future research should explore gender differences, the role of personality traits, and digital interventions (e. g., stress management apps). Also, qualitative studies involving focus groups can offer deeper insights into students' lived experiences. Integration of AI tools to identify stress in real-time through wearable technology and online learning platforms is another future area.

8. Conclusion

This literature review highlights that academic stress is a pervasive issue among college students, driven by academic, financial, environmental, and post-pandemic factors. Effective coping strategies—such as time management, emotional regulation, and institutional support—are vital for student success and mental well-being. Institutions must adopt a student-centric approach through counseling, resilience training, and flexible academic frameworks to mitigate the impact of academic stress.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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