

Anxiety and Stress and their Influence on Undergraduate Student Performance in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of stress and anxiety on students' performance. Stress has a long lasting impact on the life of a student and influences their performance, sometimes in a positive and sometimes in a negative manner. This research report analyzes the impact of stress on the performance of students, in order to help develop an effective program to infuse learning and improved performance in students. The researchers utilized a researcher-developed questionnaire that was distributed on a sample of 148 students in order to measure students' perceptions of the effect of stress on their performance. It has been identified that the stress decreases the academic performance of students and creates a situation of discomfort, forcing students to focus more on grades rather than learning.*

Keywords: Stress, Anxiety, Academic Performance, College students.

1. Introduction

Stress is a very common issue in today's world. In this competitive era, stress is an expected outcome where everyone is trying hard to adapt the changing competitive environment. Stress affects our behavior, feelings and thoughts. Although stress is beneficial for self-development and growth, it also causes many problems and affects people destructively. Parveen & Inayat (2017) defined stress as "a forceful interaction between the individual and the environment". Specially in the academic field, stress has become an essential subject and many academics emphasis on this subject (Rees & Redfern, 2000).

In educational institutions, students continuously face challenging situations on the daily basis such as some students move to developed cities or countries for better options to study and have to settle into the new and totally different environment, some students are pressurized to get high grades, some students face problems in understanding and learning, some students face problem in building healthy relationship with peers, whereas on the other hand, sometimes students have to face some financial or family crises. These challenging situations create stress for students as they have to adjust in such situations. So students undergo a different type of educational stressors. It is important to determine these stressors and their effects on the performance of students so that students can overcome work over this stress if its imposing negative impact on their health and studies. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of stress on student's performance. Furthermore, it will present some recommendations to accelerate the learning and performance of students.

2. Literature Review

For centuries, success and intelligence has been associated with the academic performance of a student. Children who score well on exams are predicted to be more successful in

their future while those who score average marks are assumed to have lower levels of intelligence. Having this false perceptions, parents pressurize their students to work day and night, tirelessly, in order to perform well and to secure their future. Another major reason behind parental pressure is the image that they wish to maintain in their family and peers, saying that their children are academically bright and that no one should score more than their children (Calvarese, 2015). Often parents do not realize that they are laying unnecessary pressure on their children, but sometimes, the stress and pressure is intentional as they want their children to be better than the best and score well on the SAT and other tests, marking their intelligence (Gunnarsdóttir, 2014). Many schools allow parents to track each test, homework and quiz, giving them a wider access to confront their children after every result, which leads to a constant monitoring. Also, parents realize that the competition is increasing with time, therefore, to get into a good professional college and workplace, their children must score very well (Inbavanan, 2014).

There is an inverse relationship between text anxiety and academic achievement of students, as students with higher level of anxiety and stress score less than the students who are much relaxed. Cognitive factors contribute more to text anxiety that the emotional factors hence the students score poor when under stress. The cognitive test anxiety and stress is majorly caused by the pressure to score, by the fear of failing a course and the demands of the test (Rana, 2010). Students who are likely to experience and feel relatively unfavorable stress face low self-esteem and are controlled externally to a greater extent while students with favorable stress have higher self-esteem and more internal control. Unfavorable stress leads to decrease in academic performance and vice versa (Linn & Zeppa, 1984). Stress and academic performance are inversely related and students with higher level of stress and pressure are likely to perform lower than those with a relaxed and calm mind, because when the mind in anxious and under pressure, it tends to lose its focus on important things since it continuously thinks

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about the results, deteriorating the quality of performance. Stress also harms the physical and psychological health of students and often forces them into depression and frustrations, making them restless and unsatisfied with their lives (White, 2011).

Sometimes, there are situations in which stress play a positive role in the lives of students. It has seen that stress forces students to get higher grades, enable them to enhance their sense of responsibility, and work to the best they can, and so on (White, 2011). Furthermore, it has been observed that the position holders of the class used to work hard as they have stress of getting the position which pushes them to give their best. Regarding this perception, there are various personalities found like Einstein, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, etc. who were failed by the society but due to the stress of proving themselves they worked hard and showed their skills to the entire world. As per Lawson & Holford (2015), stress is the source of creating self-compassion in students which is a condition in which students realize their capabilities and start working over them to get success.

Stress in a student's life is a common thing that used to work either in a positive manner or in a negative manner. By teaching proper stress management techniques, the stress levels in students can be reduced and other associated problems can also be minimized such as physical and verbal abuse among the practicing doctors (Linn & Zeppa, 1984). Parents and teachers must work together to ensure that students are focused and determined to work hard, without having to be pressurized. Also the examination system must be designed such that it does not lay much pressure on students (Lawson & Holford, 2015).

3. Methodology

Design

The descriptive design of research study is utilized for this paper. The main significance of this research design is that it provides answers to the research questions in descriptive manner. Moreover, the descriptive design is used to obtain and acquire general information that can be further analyzed to identify the niche issues of particular subject. In this manner, the research is overall presentation of the problem which exists and can further discover focused problems to be researched in future.

The research has followed both, qualitative and quantitative approach for the research. The qualitative approach was used to collect secondary data from the available sources including research papers, online magazines, journals, books and other internet sources. The information obtained from secondary research was then thoroughly interpreted and analyzed to form the basis of the research report.

Participants

The primary data of quantitative nature was collected by using a survey method. The participants included 148 students from two universities who were given a questionnaire that included ten closed ended questions and their responses were recorded anonymously for conducting the research results. The participants included both male and female students however there is no major role of gender in

this research study and all participants are treated alike. The ages of participants were between 18-25 years.

Instrument

The research instrument used for this research paper consists of the questionnaire based on 10 closed ended questions. The scale used for identification of responses from participants was based on 4 options. These options included the options of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree; hence they were ideal for recording the views of our participants. Subjects of questionnaire were chosen irrespective of nationality and race, while gender was considered during result formation.

4. Results and Discussion

1. Stress has a positive impact on students' performance

It is human nature to perform well when there are no obligations or constraints of results, as it allows them to deliver their creativity. When subjects were questioned about their performance when there are no obligations of results, 46% of the subjects mentioned that they perform better in a relaxed situation than under stress, 27% agreed, while 15% disagreed and 12% strongly disagreed to the statement.

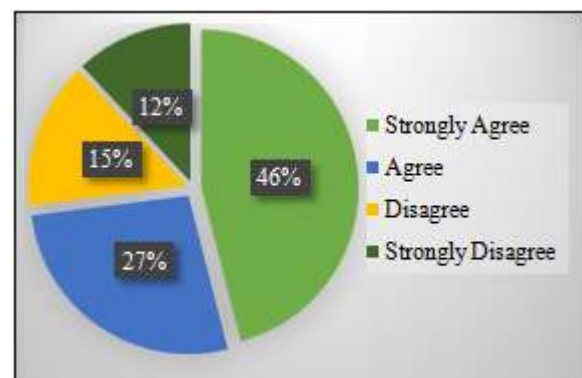


Figure 1: Percentage of People who perform better when not under Pressure

When time is less, we often become more productive, such as on the last day before exam or submission of an assignment. When participants were asked about their progress of work while having tight deadlines and pressure, 35% of the students strongly agreed that pressure makes them work quicker, 30% agreed while 20% disagreed and 15% strongly disagreed.

Researchers have proved that the human beings perform better when they don't have any obligations about the process or the results and are allowed to work as per their own understanding. According to Savage, student with relatively relaxed parents, stable financial conditions and very minimum psychological pressure perform better in terms of academics and overall performance (Savage, 2006).

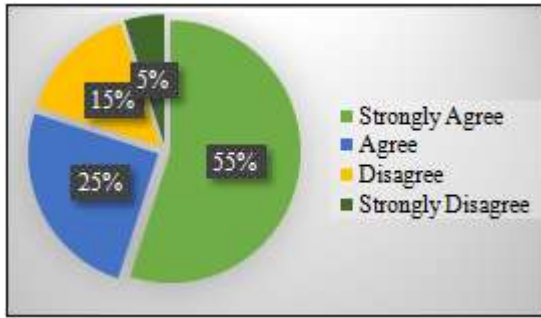


Figure 2: Percentage of people who work faster under pressure

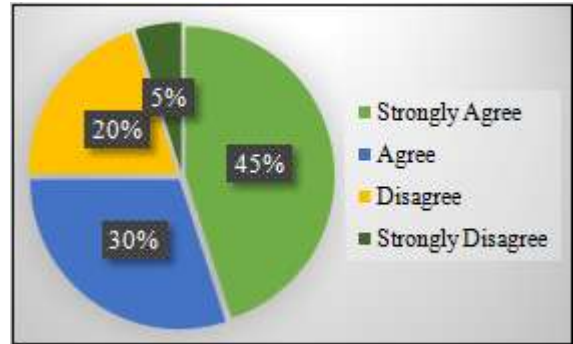


Figure 4: Percentage of people making more mistakes under pressure

This result has also been approved by Kubicek, according to his study, students are able to complete their assignments and projects on time, when deadlines are tight and there is a lot to do, so they finish up things quickly, while if there is no pressure and stress by the teachers, they procrastinate and get lethargic, which eventually lowers their performance (Kubicek, 2011).

It has been identified in a longitudinal research study by Hopkins, that parent and loved ones get involved in the academic curriculum design of their students for helping them in their studies. Therefore, the students feel ashamed to disappoint them with their grades which can be perceived as negative stress or positive stress depending upon the students' psychological ability of deriving results (Hopkins, 2014).

2. Stress has several drawbacks on student's performance

It is a general perception that parents often pressurize their children to work hard and score well in the exams, so that they can have a bright career. When asked, 55% of the subjects agreed that parents were after them to perform well in the exams, 25% agreed, while 15% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed.

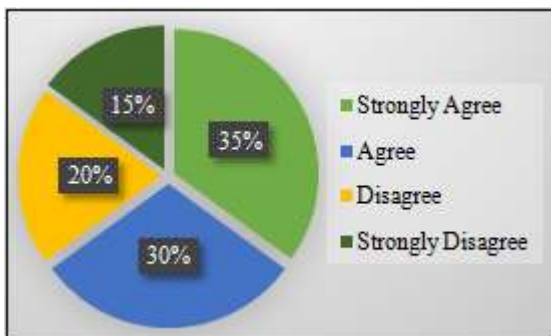


Figure 3: Percentage of students pressurized by parents

Since students are under stress and pressure, their academic performance is at risk. when asked the subjects about the influence of psychological pressure to 'not fail', nearly 45% of the students said that they were unable to perform with the best of their abilities and made more mistakes than usual when they were being psychologically pressurized, 30% agreed, 20% disagreed while 5% strongly disagreed.

According to Weissbourd, students who are constantly pressurized by their parents perform lower than those who aren't. Gender also has a significant impact on how a person reacts to pressure and stress (Weissbourd, 2011).

Pourrajab points out in his research study that students are highly pressurized by the society because they are the future bread earners and their academic performance determines their financial stability in the later years that causes psychological stress in them regarding their ability to perform better than the rest (Pourrajab, 2014).

Students are often criticized by the society for not achieving higher grades as compared to other children. They have a fear of not fulfilling the standard set by the society. According to Omomia, students are under stress when their parents have high expectations from them while they are not inclined towards studies as much as required (Omomia, 2014).

According to Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whalen, students often fail to execute the concepts and face serious problems in attempting the questions because the time is very limited hence within a few hours, one has to decide his future opportunities through the results(Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whalen, 2005).

5. Recommendations to accelerate the learning and performance of students

When a child is in his early classes, the pressure of grades is less hence one performs better. 35% strongly agreed that they were able to score well in their early classes, 30% agreed, while 18% disagreed and 17% strongly disagreed.

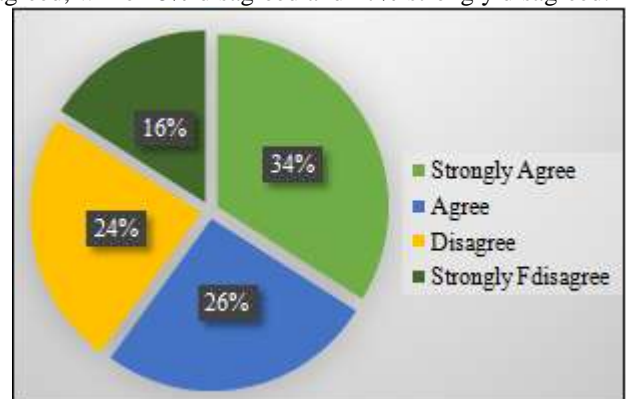


Figure 5: Percentage of people who performed better in early classes

The stress and pressure of exams often makes even intelligent and bright students to score less. 40% of the subjects mentioned that during a classroom setting, they understand the concepts but are unable to execute them in exams, 30% agreed while 20% of the students disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed.

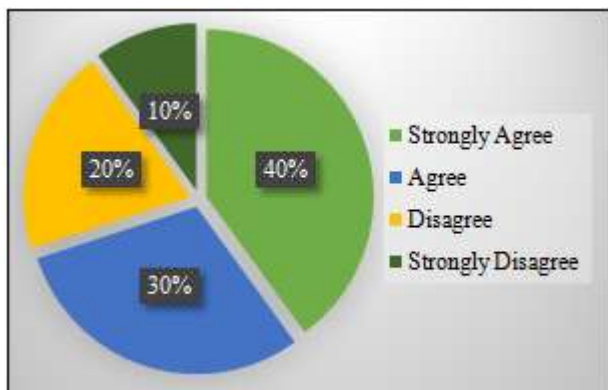


Figure 6: Percentage of people who are unable to perform well in exams

According to Pierceall & Keim, the psychological pressure and stress has negative impacts on the academic performance of students which is identified to be more in grownup students rather than the students in their early age (Pierceall & Keim, 2007). The reason is because they are given easy exam questions, not pressurized for results and do not take much stress.

Under such stress and psychological pressure, students often fail to execute the concepts and face serious problems in attempting the questions. According to Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whalen, the time is very limited hence within a few hours, one has to decide his future opportunities through the results (Dusselier, Dunn, Wang, Shelley II, & Whalen, 2005). Researchers have proved that even bright students, who have been performing well throughout the year, are unable to get as good grades as they should have because of the anxiety and stress of exams.

According to Khan, from getting good grades to performing better than your friends, from getting top positions to getting into good colleges and from getting a good CGPA to getting into a reputable organization, a student is under constant stress and pressure even when attempting the questions in exam (Khan, 2013). Therefore it is necessary that student should be relaxed during the exam to avoid the impact of pressure on answer sheet.

6. Conclusion

This research report analyzes the results of stress on the performance of students, in order to help develop an effective program to infuse learning and improved performance in students. Stress of students and its impact on them is a subject matter of this research. Stress has a long lasting impact on the life of a student and influences their performance, sometimes in a positive and sometimes in a negative manner. Moreover, the stress decreases the academic performance of students and creates a situation of

chaos and havoc, forcing students to worry about grades rather than learning.

The stress and pressure of exams often makes even intelligent and bright students to score less. Therefore, the students should have a relaxed mind when attempting the exam. The undue pressure from parents and society can often lead to negative impacts on the personality of students and score lower than expected. Students confessed that they perform better in exams when there is no pressure of results in their mind.

Although, the negative causes of stress on students are identified in the research paper, it is also found the study that stress can be positively utilized to accelerate the learning of students. Positive pressure with time limitation for assignments and projects can make the students perform better in their academics. The recommendations also include that grading system should be improved. Moreover, the students should be given small assignments for judging their learning in appropriate manner without stressing them.

The findings of this research paper can be conveniently applied in the contexts of examinations for different level of students. The parents should be given the knowledge about the psychological pressure that is imposed by them on their children to perform better. Even the common people must be acknowledged of not bullying the students for their results because often the students are bright and skillful and their abilities cannot be portrayed on sheet of paper. The grading system must be improved by teacher observing the performance of students in the class with their ability of asking questions and by completing their small projects on time. Also the simple activities related to the academics must be performed in classrooms which are identified to be good source of learning and expose the practical implication of their studies as well. The positive stress of time limitation and rewarding the children should be followed to make the students feel comfortable.

Stress and pressure have more negative effects on students than positive influences. Students can become tensed and are unable to deliver as per their abilities and one is likely to work better in quality, when there are no constraints of time and results and without any psychological pressure, however, the benefits include speedy completion of projects and no room for procrastination. Nevertheless, teachers and parents can play an important role in the overall learning and performance of students, by generating the interest in understanding and learning rather than working for grades. Therefore, the acceptable level of stress can be applied for deriving positive results in students' performance but they must not be pressurized more than their ability to grasp it.

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