

Carrying the Weight of the Exam: Stress, Coping, and Help-Seeking Among Civil Services Aspirants in Thiruvananthapuram

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Abstract: *Preparing for the Civil Services Examination is long, costly, and uncertain, yet little research has listened to aspirants in India's Tier 2 cities. This descriptive survey asked 523 aspirants enrolled in coaching in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, about their stress, coping, attitudes to professional mental-health support, and the support their institutions offer. More than half (55.8%) called the past month very or extremely stressful, and financial strain, family expectations, and fear of judgement were prominent. Aspirants coped through peers, breaks, and planning, yet 84.3% felt they had not found a strategy that worked. Most (90.6%) thought professional help reasonable, but only 23.9% had used it, mainly held back by fear of peer judgement, cost, and confidentiality worries. Most (84.1%) rated stress-related support from their institutions as inadequate or absent. The findings are descriptive, not causal, and suggest support should change the conditions of preparation as well as strengthen individual coping.*

Keywords: civil services aspirants, stress, coping, help-seeking, institutional support

1. Introduction

Ask almost any civil services aspirant how preparation feels, and “hard” rarely covers it. The Civil Services Examination draws roughly five to seven lakh applicants a year, and only a small fraction clear its three eliminative stages. In Thiruvananthapuram, a Tier 2 centre for coaching, there is a financial side too: leading private institutes charge ₹80,000 to ₹1,00,000, before accommodation and food. Earlier studies report heavy distress among aspirants (Fatima, 2025; Rao et al., 2025; Shandilya, 2023), but they seldom look at stressors, coping, help-seeking, and institutional support together, or in cities like this one. This study does. I use four theories only as lenses for interpretation: the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the demand–control–support model (Karasek, 1979), effort–reward imbalance (Siegrist, 1996), and the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2. Method

I surveyed 523 consenting aspirants who had lived in Thiruvananthapuram for at least three months and were

enrolled in formal coaching. Most were women (60.2%), aged 22–25 (44.0%), and six to twelve months into preparation (72.7%). The questionnaire was a research instrument, not a clinical tool, and no scale score was calculated. Only aggregate counts were available, so results are reported as percentages of the full sample, and multiple-response items can sum to more than 100%. Interviews proposed in the synopsis are not reported here.

3. Results

Stress was close to universal. Nobody called the past month “not at all stressful,” and 55.8% called it very or extremely stressful. Money and family weighed heavily: 80.7% reported considerable or extreme stress about expenses, 96.2% felt considerably or extremely responsible for meeting family expectations, and 89.3% feared being judged after an unsuccessful attempt. Figure 1 shows how many strands there were. Social comparison, loneliness, the syllabus, and career uncertainty were each chosen by around nine in ten respondents.

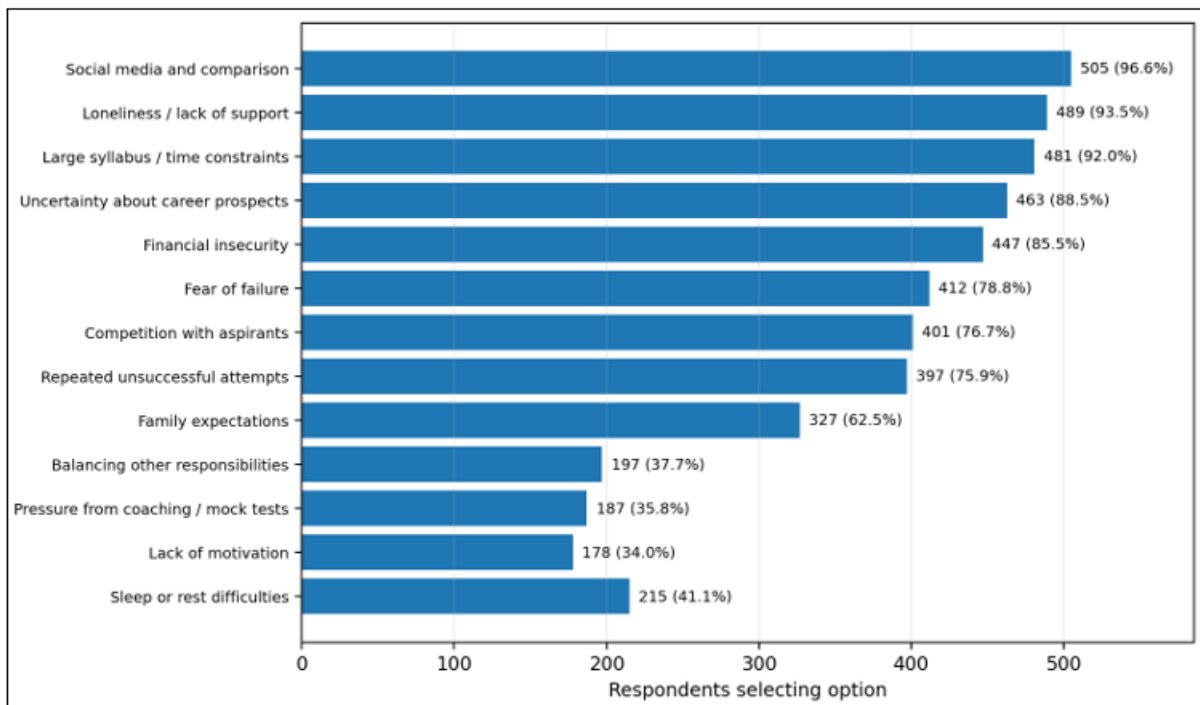


Figure 1: Frequently Selected Contributors to Stress

Note. Multiple responses allowed; $N = 523$.

People were not passive. Most talked with friends or fellow aspirants (97.7%), took short breaks (96.0%), and revised their timetables (91.0%). Even so, 84.3% also selected “I have not found an effective strategy yet.” That item allowed several answers, so it more likely reflects coping that feels insufficient than coping that is absent.

Attitudes towards professional help were warm in principle: 90.6% agreed that seeking it is reasonable. In practice, 23.9% had ever sought help, and 63.5% were unsure whether they would if stress became substantial. Willingness rose when conditions were right, with 82.0% likely to use counselling that was confidential, affordable, and compatible with their schedule. As Figure 2 shows, the barriers were mostly social and financial, not practical.

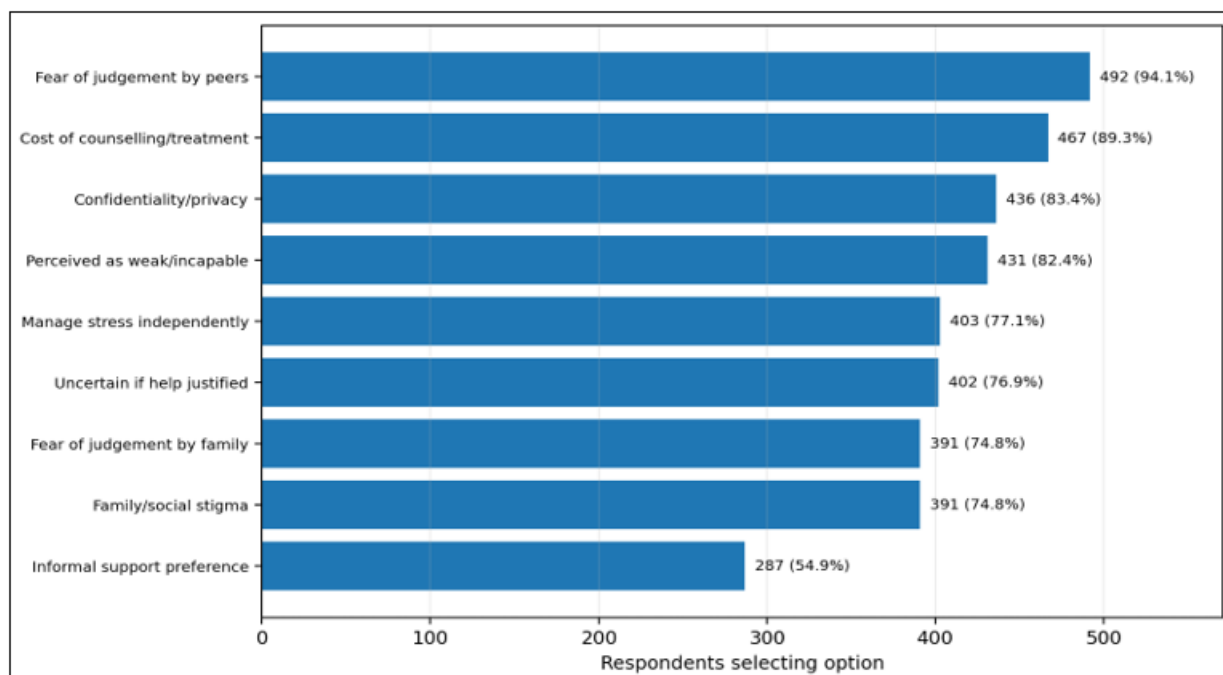


Figure 2: Frequently Selected Barriers to Seeking Professional Help

Note. Multiple responses allowed; $N = 523$.

Institutions fared worse on emotional support than academic support. Mentoring and peer activities were reported by everyone, but only 2.3% reported access to a qualified

counsellor, and 84.1% rated stress-related support as inadequate or unavailable. Almost every respondent (99.6%) wanted better feedback after mock tests.

4. Discussion

Read through the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), aspirants face heavy demands and use real coping resources, yet most feel those resources fall short. The weight of money and family fits effort–reward imbalance (Siegrist, 1996), where years of effort carry no guaranteed return. The help-seeking paradox fits the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): peers are the main source of coping support and also the group aspirants most fear being judged by. And while teachers were seen as respectful, the lack of counselling echoes the demand–control–support idea that high demands need matching support (Karasek, 1979). These findings agree with earlier work reporting financial pressure, loneliness, and calls for counselling in coaching centres (Fatima, 2025; Rao et al., 2025; Shandilya, 2023).

The practical message is that asking aspirants to be more resilient is not enough. What they asked for is concrete: respectful feedback, realistic schedules, affordable and confidential counselling, and financial guidance. Some cautions apply. The data are aggregate self-reports from one city, collected through coaching programmes, so they cannot show causes, group differences, or diagnoses. Some tallies still need checking against original records. Future work with individual-level data, validated scales, and interviews could test how stressors, coping, and help-seeking connect.

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