

Physical Health and Well being of College Students: Impact of Environmental Stress

S. Suganya, V. Andal

Abstract—Environmental Stress among students is potentially dangerous occurrence since it can physically and mentally affect the student's future. A series of anonymous, short one-on-one interviews were conducted with undergraduate students from VISTAS, Chennai and they were questioned on how they faced stress, how their peer community was affected, how stress affected their physical health and academic performance, and the measures they took to deal with it. The findings were critically analyzed and compared with established facts from international publications. The causes may be due to the environment, biological stressors, emotional factors and more. Symptoms and impact are related to a general decrease in productivity, poor health conditions. An analysis of stress causing factors reveals them to be emotional, physical, social, cultural, and so on. Stress has profound effects on physical health and academic performance of students. As our world's future, the youth such as college students must be taken good care of as well as taught how to tackle real life situations and stress tactfully and remain safe.

Key words: Environmental stress, College students, Physical Health

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress, to simply put it, is a pressure. Just as a mechanical load exerts pressure over the entire exposed surface of an object, stress is equivalently a pressure on a person's physical body as well as mental set-up.

Stress, as a pressure, may be positive (eustress) or negative (distress). The positive kind acts as a medium to further nag or give a push to a person in pursuing whatever activity he/she is engaged in – to perform and work hard for achieving a pre-set goal or receive a justified reward. The negative kind, distress, is the subject for this paper – henceforth referred to as simply “stress”. Such stress is known to have a variety of causes, can be detected from plenty of symptoms, and has profound impacts on one's productivity, health, mental well-being, prosperity, etc.

The youth of the world is the future of Earth and will be responsible for a lot of what the world will become in the coming decades – they are gifted the ability and time to wield their abilities in nation-building, acting as guardians of the planet as well as protectors of humanity. While the expectation everyone has of the youth is high and their expected future deeds undoubtedly honourable, the faltering standards among some pockets of this community garners serious attention. Much of these are correlated to stress.

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Dr. S. Suganya, Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, T.N, India. (suganyasiva46@gmail.com)

Dr. V. Andal, Associate Professor, Department of Commerce, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, T.N, India (andalgokul79@gmail.com)

Stress is allegedly the cause of a fall in work output, failing physical health, questionable mental stability, pressurized mental health and a plethora of other issues the youth faces.

The perceived stress is most in the age-group of roughly college-going students, a delicate stage between school and professional life. While physical changes have not yet stabilized, changes in the physical environment continue. Also, there is a mental pressure to perform, to get a degree. There may be plenty of personal factors as well as an anxiety for the future. As a result, college-students are part of the primary focus in the stress-afflicted community. The last stage of a responsibility free life, college-age brings with it its own stresses and it is necessary to deal with it lest it carries forward into the professional stage and impacts larger-than-life scenarios such as administration, policies, etc.

There is therefore a need to study and be aware of the causes and symptoms of stress in this particular community as well as the impact on physical health and academic performance. Awareness and will-power bring to the fore solutions and coping strategies to most of these problems.

For study purposes, the undergraduate student community in VISTAS, Chennai in Tamil Nadu, India was chosen. With its cosmopolitan environment and reasonable reputation, a study here is expected to yield results that are in demographic agreement to the real-life scenario.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Students were selected on a random basis in random locations peppered throughout the campus, including the canteens, academic buildings and the hostels. The questioning was based on a simple, short and anonymous personal interview to gain a general understanding of the case.

The students were asked when and where they faced any stressful situations during their tenure in the University, whether they ever felt physically affected by the stress, whether they felt their academic performance was connected to this stress and if so, they were questioned about their coping strategies regarding stress. They were also questioned on what symptoms they could see in friends affected by stress.

Anonymity was consciously maintained to ensure honest replies. The findings that this simple person-to-person empathizing and questioning experiment yielded were



analyzed and correlated with established facts laid down by certain international publications. The overall discussion is as laid down in the following passages.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

1. Physical Environment
2. Causes

IV. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment, including the prevailing climatic conditions like general temperature, season cycle, humidity, sunshine and precipitation affects a person's comfort level. When discomfited, performance is seen to decrease.

Dust, pollution, noise, water quality, etc. are also known to play a key role. People with allergies are greatly affected by their environment physically.

From the interviews it was found that adjustment to a change in the environment is also a stressor. While people come to study from various parts of the country (and abroad), some aren't able to adjust as quickly to the new environment and culture. Usually this stress is for a limited time and people slowly fit in, but if they are not able to, then it becomes a general attitude to abhor the physical surroundings while they continue to suffer.

V. CAUSES OF STRESS

Life Events

A near and dear one being the victim of an accident or passing away has a deep reverberation in the psyche of a young person. While their life is still new and fresh, such bitter happenings take a heavy toll on their mind. Coming to terms with such events is not that easy and this creates stress. When confronted with frustration and life stress, individuals might tend to approach the Internet or other equivalent means for emotional catharsis or to relieve the anxiety triggered by stressful life events.

VI. SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND RESTRICTIONS

In a different environment, one often experiences new customs and ways of living. While being school students, the people were accustomed to a homely way of life when everything was familiar. From our interviews, it is learnt that a change in the culture sometimes produces what is known as a culture shock. Depending on the individual, there are various extents to which adjustment is made. In all cases, there is a certain level of stress, due to the public's expectations on them to behave in a certain manner which may be different from what they are accustomed to.

Girls are often expected to observe social customs and restrictions in Indian society comparatively more than boys. The girls are usually busy in the daytime often due to a hectic life style and in addition, they are not supposed to leave the hostel after a certain time every day, whereas boys usually more choice and freedom.

Academic Factors and Competition

India is a country with a strong competitive culture. From a young age there exists a will in the child to perform and

excel. This carries forward into the college age. However, with plenty of talented individuals and a high population, there exists a tough competition for those who seek to outshine others.

Students who find it hard to study and struggle to keep up with the academic curriculum aren't the only people who are stressed. As our interviews suggest, the high ranking students, usually the toppers also face at least an equal level of stress as low performers, if not more. A high competitive spirit among plenty of highly talented young individuals compounded by politics played by some agents adds to the stressful worries.

A college curriculum packed with examinations and assignments with no breathing time for the students or an unnaturally long semester also stress college students. Engineering students especially find it tougher due to their vast curriculum and syllabi.

VII. SOCIAL STATUS AND CONNECTION

The ripe young age of college-goers opens up new avenues for socializing. College serves as a platform to make new, mature, adult friendships and establish contacts that would potentially last into the future.

It is not to be ignored that the hormonal changes are yet to have completely stopped, or it might just be settling down. While most of them are officially adults, many are far from behaving as such. According to some of the interviews, youth causes rash decisions to be made because there is a drive to perform socially and showcase one's individuality in a particular manner. In short, it is a version of impression management, albeit flawed in some aspects.

These factors include interpersonal communication, self-care ability, and family conditions. Most students agree that bad relationship with classmates, room-mates, and friends of opposite sex will produce stresses.

VIII. ADDICTION

Youth comes with its highly volatile temperament as well as gullible nature. College students are one of the high-risk groups related to substance abuse and addiction to drugs. While some may not want it, it is known that peer pressure is a strong stressor in itself and we hypothesize that to avoid that stress as well as fear of getting ostracized from a seemingly important and influential community drives students to go down the path of drug experimenting, smoking and alcoholism.

Internet addiction is another problem associated with stress, according to our interviews. Many students consider that the Internet acts as a useful medium to vent out all the frustration that is going on with life. However, the balance required is forsaken and Internet addiction leads to wastage of precious time which could be utilized otherwise. When time runs out and there is a lot to do in less time, stress kicks in and people suffer. Most college students usually feel overwhelmed because they are not managing their time correctly and are doing everything at the last minute.



IX. PERSONAL EXPECTATIONS

College students, despite behaving immature at certain times, exhibit strong cases of adult determined behaviour. For instance, as observed from almost all of our interviews, they are heavily focused on their career and most of them have already set in their minds unique goals to arrive at, have answered questions regarding what they want to do with life.

When people are unable to live up to these self-made standards, they experience stress of the most profound type – because, as they believe, they are failing themselves, despite the fact that they are still young and have the entirety of life ahead to live out their dreams. It also causes stress from low self-esteem.

X. PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

Physical disabilities like impairment of walking, poor eye-sight or blindness, deafness, dumbness, and host of other impairments are known to cause a lot of stress on people.

When in constant contact with people who are “apparently” normal, such differently - abled people find it of utmost priority to showcase that there is no difference between them and others. This pressure to perform and create and image acts as a stressor sometimes and if it affects the person negatively, then their social standing, reputation, etc. suffer.

In a college environment, with high competition, people with disabilities find it even harder to fit in than in their careers, since they meet more people from broader spectra of life in college rather than at work in the future – where their areas of focus will be specialized.

XI. SYMPTOMS

Stress is a feeling that's created when we react to particular events. It's the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness. To put in a nutshell, Stress symptoms commonly include a state of alarm and adrenaline production, short-term resistance as a coping mechanism, and exhaustion, as well as irritability, muscular tension, inability to concentrate and a variety of physiological reactions such as headache and elevated heart rate. From our interviews, we have been able to isolate the different kind of symptoms we see in stressed out individuals as follows.

Some general symptoms involve memory problems, inability to concentrate, constant worrying, poor judgment, seeing only the negative and plenty of anxiety. The next stage involves emotional symptoms, such as moodiness, short temper, irritability, agitation, an inability to relax, mild depression, feeling overwhelmed and a sense of isolation. Behavioral symptoms involve cases like anorexia or the feeling that one is always full and feels no hunger, that is, no reason to eat. Another is the polar opposite – overeating, an example of escapism. Some people feel that eating will help to drown out all the other fears, put all the nasty aspects away while concentrating on only one thing, a comfort food. Other behavioural symptoms involve too much sleeping or an entire lack of sleep, self-isolation from social company,

seriously low self-esteem issues, wasting of time, neglecting responsibility, nervous habits and even substance abuse and addiction such as overuse of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.

Students from the interview reckon that stressed-out individuals are easily recognizable from their outward behaviour. Such people may be prone to mood-swings, nervousness and easy startling. They are also the ones who start avoiding classes, public events and even social hang-outs with friends. Such people exhibit escapist tendencies and either sleep most of the time or while time away by watching TV shows or playing computer games back to back. These findings are in accordance with established symptoms of escapism.

With respect to a large part of our society, college students are apparently more vulnerable to Internet addiction because of the psychological and developmental characteristics of late adolescence/young adulthood, the expectation of using the Internet and easy access. Addictive Internet use by students may cause poor academic performance, frequent conflicts with parents, problem with socializing and sleeping disorders.

XII. IMPACT ON PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELL – BEING

Stress and negative thinking greatly affect the mental state of a person: The more sensitive the mind is - the larger the extent to which stress has an impact. The mental effects of stress such as mental imbalance, memory problems, sanity issues, etc. are well known. However, the mind is the image of the body. If the image somehow changes, it can only imply that the object itself has been affected – that is, if one's mind is affected, so must be the body, by reverse thinking. With such correlation and real life experiences, it has been found that stress has deep impacts on one's physical health.

In contrast to stress-hardy people who have been conditioned to react appropriately to stress and not be greatly influenced by it, most people are physically affected. Stress initiates the well known fight-or-flee response in the body to a larger extent. Breath quickens, the pulse rate increases, mouth becomes dry, and pupils dilate. There are many temporary changes that occur physiologically when one encounters a sudden stressful situation. These changes can manifest in larger ways should the stressors last longer.

In our interviews, those who experienced difficulty in adjusting to the new environment suffered problems in their digestion. The new cuisine did not agree with them and temporarily their nutrient intake was in jeopardy. Some people who still haven't quite fit in find it hard to adjust to the food provided and have lost a lot of weight by avoiding food. This in itself acts as a source of stress on the body.

Stress also triggers escapism. Some people deal with stress by over-eating as mentioned earlier. High levels of fat compounded by lesser exercise can mean a high blood pressure. Our interviews reveal that people with problems of over-eating due to anxiety as well as obesity are at a higher risk of developing high blood pressure. High blood pressure

may not simply be due to these factors but also due to performance anxiety, high anticipation of important things about to happen, etc.

High stress also makes people forgetful about maintaining their own health. Poor eating practices and irregular consumption of water are responsible for an irrational rise in body temperature which is not fever. Such high temperature is damaging to one's internal organs as well as causes low productivity and ill health akin to sickness. It may also cause rapid burning off of essential fats and severe weight loss even to the tune of (allegedly) ten kilograms.

However, fever is not far. High anxiety due to upcoming project reviews, examinations, public events, college festivals, etc. may cause a person to develop a fever due to extreme nervousness. At such an occasion, even the digestive system is thrown into chaos. People with breathing problems may experience frequent asthma attacks should they be too stressed. The need to perform well academically creates a stress that causes people to neglect the bodily fitness. As a result, many college students, especially in the examination season, stay shut up in their rooms noses buried in textbooks or eyes glued to laptops. People reveal in their interviews that they can gain anything between 2 to 5 kilograms of weight by the time an entire examination schedule ends, such as term end examinations. This is due to a complete lack of physical exercise during the examination's tenure, compounded by the fact that people tend to munch food more while they study – another sign of stress.

Stress also causes hair-fall, dandruff, poor nail health and dull complexions. Physical appearance is compromised when a person isn't mentally fit. Blood impurities may also initiate severe attacks of acne.

XIII. ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The impact of stress on the academic performance of college students is visible among all strata of the student community. While positive stress can act as a drive for a student to perform and excel, how things are perceived depend entirely on the individual. What could be a positive factor for one person might be an imposing factor for another. Here, we discuss only the impact of the negative side of stress. Sometimes a student's expectations, needs, parental and peer pressure – all play a role in the stress that comes with performing well in academics.

Students who are slow-learners find it hard if the University does not consider the pace of their learning. They may not be necessarily dumb, but simply slow in grasping a variety of concepts. Often, they fall back and are not able to cope with it all. In the end, there remains a vast amount of topics to be covered with hardly any appropriate help provided and too less time even if people are ready to help. This kind of stress may make them give up entirely and perform badly or even fail in examinations, while they may be talented in some aspects. Universities should arrange special programmes for slow learners with an appropriately timed academic schedule.

Medium performers, similar to low performers, may fall to lower ranks if they let stress get the better of them. While whatever is the case for slow learners may hold true for them in certain subjects, there is also an inner need, an

ambition to rise higher and enter the high performer ranks. If they get demoralized by stress, they may fall. Those who do not give up and keep trying hard to rise in ranks often neglect their own health. This kind of stress also affects them badly.

High performers, surprisingly, face high levels of stress which are at least equal to, if not more than the levels in low performers. In an era of high competition and plenty of talented, skilled competitors vying for the Number One position, it is a difficult task to maintain one's standards. Such students try by hook or by crook to maintain their status and this stress affects them physically and mentally. Not only is it their own ambition, but subconsciously they know that everyone keeps a tab of what they do. Their parents, teachers, peers – everyone expects them to perform well. Some peers may even want to see them fail and bite the dust. It is this pressure that creates an immense stress for them.

XIV. CONCLUSION

Stress is known to decrease one's productivity as well as negatively impact them in a variety of ways. The youth of the country is its future. College students are especially important as they are young and still at a learning age. Stress can cripple their activity and this must be dealt with sensitive understanding.

An analysis of stress causing factors reveals them to be emotional, physical, social, cultural, and so on. Likewise, the symptoms may be physical or emotional. Detection at an early stage is necessary to prevent damage and care must be taken. Stress has profound effects on physical health and academic performance of students. As our world's future, the youth such as college students must be taken good care of as well as taught how to tackle real life situations and stress tactfully and remain safe.

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