

## Academic Stress — Analysis and Measures

Tanu Tandon\*

### Abstract

*Stress refers to the way the mind and body respond to physical and emotional stressors. Continued exposure to such stressors may lead to mental problems like anxiety, depression, anger and frustration, and even develop suicidal tendencies (as seen in a few cases), apart from causing health disorders and fatigue. One, often, hears of students, functioning under extreme stressful conditions. Academic or educational stress is one of the most common problems affecting students. It, therefore, becomes imperative to identify the sources of academic stress and its adverse effects on students. This paper discusses these issues and suggests ways through which learning may be made stress free and fun.*

### INTRODUCTION

Given the fast-paced life and intrusion of social media sites in the private lives of people, no one, including students, is untouched by the harmful effects of stress. Continued exposure to 'academic stress', coupled with peer and parental pressure to excel in exams and extracurricular activities, causes a host of mental and physical disorders in students like anxiety, depression, anger, frustration, inferiority complex, fatigue, etc.

The only task that society commonly bestows on students is to 'study' and it never considers 'studying' as 'stressful'. It is observed that even at the primary stage, a child is burdened with performing the best in class and one's family and neighbourhood, compelling one to study harder and for more number of hours than appropriate for one's age, leaving hardly any time to play and rest. One also notices children being reprimanded for not meeting parents'

---

\* Professor and Dean, Faculty of Education, Nirwan University, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

expectations in exams, which may add to their stress levels.

While conducting the study, the researcher came across cases, where stress had severely affected students both at the primary and elementary stage. In some cases, it even led to psychosomatic diseases like irritable bowel syndrome, migraine, fatigue, etc. Significant behavioural changes were also observed in a few students, transforming them into reticent, nervous and withdrawn from being confident, cheerful and friendly.

### **CASE STUDY-1**

Vrinda (name changed), a student of Class VII, was sent for school counselling as her class teacher felt that she was depressed, withdrawn and inattentive in class, which affected her performance in academics and extracurricular activities. It was found that being a single child of doctors, she had immense pressure to excel in academics. On further probing, she shared that she had interest in art and music. She loved to paint and sing, and was full of life before the traumatic journey of academic excellence began. As her grades continued to drop in science, she eventually, started losing confidence and was even reluctant to participate in extracurricular activities, which she, initially, enjoyed. Her talents were suppressed and she often had to face mockery and jibes at school and home. Her parents often told her that medical education was the only key to success

and appreciation in life. This made her sink into depression, apart from transforming her into a withdrawn and nervous child from being a bubbly one.

### **CASE STUDY-2**

In another case, it was found that stress may develop delinquent tendencies in a child, where one, may even try harming oneself and others. Abhinav (name changed), a Class V student, was often reprimanded and punished by teachers for not completing homework and scoring low marks in class tests. His parents, too, scolded him, while his classmates jeered at him. This made him dislike and bunk school, and also transformed him to becoming an aggressive child from a jovial one. Teachers soon noticed aggressive tendencies and uncontrolled anger in Abhinav. Many a time, he even tried harming himself and others in the class in a fit of rage. He was, then, referred to the school counsellor. It was found that Abhinav was dealing with a lot of unexpressed emotions, which made him angry. He had even developed anxiety issues and was unable to adjust in class. It was observed that more than him, it was his parents and teachers, who needed counselling.

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of education is to liberate a person from ignorance and prejudices. It aims at the holistic development of the child, including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

According to some case studies conducted at a prestigious school near Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, some of the factors, leading to stressful education, are discussed as follows.

### **Homework pressure**

After returning from school, a child has the pressure of completing the home assignments. Since these assignments need to be submitted to the class or subject teacher the very next day, this hardly leaves any time for the child to unwind and relax, adding to the stress levels. As a result, the young learner may become irritated, frustrated and even aggressive.

### **No time to play and relax**

The students are under immense pressure at school and are also burdened with home assignments, which they need to complete on time. Moreover, they have to deal with the pressure of excelling in exams and extracurricular activities. All these leave them with no time to play and relax, adding to their stress levels.

### **Lack of sleep**

Inadequate sleep due to longer school and study hours also leads to stress in students. According to doctors, an uninterrupted sleep of 8–10 hours every night is important for students, especially, till the elementary stage.

### **Rigid evaluation**

The government has introduced the ‘no-detention policy’, according to which no child till the elementary stage

can be declared ‘fail’ in the year-end or final exam. But many schools in the country still follow the traditional method of evaluation, where even a Class V student is declared ‘fail’ in the report card and parents are advised to make the child repeat the same class, which makes one feel humiliated, making education stressful. Therefore, every aspect of examination instills the fear of failure in students.

### **Comparison with others**

Parents’ obsession with their children’s performance, i.e., marks and ranks, makes them compare their wards with others. This puts unnecessary burden on them to ‘compete’ with others and perform better.

### **Development of delinquent tendencies**

The undue pressure to outshine their peers makes many students take to unethical practices like cheating and copying in exams to score high marks. It also implies being selfish and acting mean with classmates like not sharing the class notes and books, etc.

## **MEASURES FOR ENSURING STRESS-FREE EDUCATION**

Some of the innovative measures that may be adopted to ensure stress-free education are as follows.

### **IPASITIVE approach**

It is a psychological approach, which implies comparing one’s present performance with the previous one.

This approach motivates the students to compete with themselves, without the pressure of outshining their peers, leading to stress-free learning. It also ensures that there is no jealousy, inferiority or superiority complex in the process, thus, encouraging healthy and collaborative learning.

### **Redefining assessments**

Education is stressful because of traditional parameters of assessment and evaluation. Assessments must be continuous in nature so as to achieve the overall and holistic development of the students, apart from ensuring optimum learning. Besides, teachers' performance, too, needs to be assessed at regular intervals. Assessments should critically engage the teachers in self-analysis, where they reflect on their teaching strategies and classroom performance. The students, too, must be taught to self-evaluate and rate themselves accordingly. This motivates them to perform better the next time, and encourages them to work on their shortcomings. Moreover, the teachers must realise that all children are unique and blessed with diverse talents. Therefore, their achievements — big or small — must be recognised and celebrated.

### **Creating happy classrooms**

Efforts must be made to create a happy and relaxed classroom atmosphere as it helps achieve stress-free and optimum learning. Children learn the best and are creative only when

happy and relaxed. For example, apart from focusing on academics, teachers must ensure that children have some hobbies. They must see to it that the students practise their hobbies in free time and also talk about these in the classroom, which must be applauded. More such activities may be implemented in the classrooms to convert these into happy places of learning.

### **Stress releasing breathers**

To ward off boredom and check academic stress, breaks or energisers after every period are important for children. These serve as breathers and help them release stress. There may be short nutritional breaks, in which the students are encouraged to eat fruits, while Saturdays may be treated as 'fun' days, on which no academic activity is conducted. In order to ensure that the students remain active throughout the day, teachers must encourage them to participate in extracurricular activities like sports, drawing, painting, singing, dancing, etc. This will enable them to stay happy and energised, wanting them to attend school every day.

### **Learning through teamwork**

Schools need to encourage teamwork and collaborative learning among students. They must be encouraged to be part of teams, houses or committees like hygiene and sanitation, beautification, personality development, etc., where they work as a cohesive unison, helping out each

other, sharing, caring, and developing citizenship values and empathy in the process.

### **Words of encouragement**

Teachers play an important role in shaping the overall personality of students. Therefore, they must use kind and encouraging words at all times while interacting with the students. They must show empathy and positive reinforcement in the students, and help them work on their shortcomings.

### **Action research for teachers**

Schools need to encourage every teacher to become an action researcher. In contemporary times, a teacher is much more than merely being a teacher. The person is a friend, a surrogate parent and a facilitator of learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to study the problems and demands of dynamic classrooms, and implement changes by working on their teaching strategies and using interactive audio-visual teaching aids.

### **Parental calendar**

This ensures the active involvement of parents in their wards' activities. A parental calendar is designed around 3Ps, i.e., Participate, Practice and Promote, as the three roles of parents. The 3Ps are corresponded with 3Ls, i.e., Learn, Live and Lead, the three roles of children, to help strengthen the parent-child relationship. Parents are encouraged to spend quality time with their children every day, which

ensures their holistic and all-round development. Many schools regularly give such calendars, along with audio recordings of weekly and monthly activities held there, to parents. The schools guide the parents to go through these materials and encourage their wards to have fun as they learn. Meanwhile, teachers, too, check the students' weekly progress and provide necessary support to them, which helps minimise their stress levels and improves academic performance.

### **Nature and heritage walks**

Such activities must often be organised by schools to develop hobbies like gardening, environment and monument conservation, etc., in students. These help the students de-stress as they learn about their surroundings.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thus, it is observed that a variety of factors lead to stress in students. Parents, teachers, school managements, policy makers and other concerned stakeholders need to realise that the real purpose of education is to ensure the holistic and overall development of students. But it is even more important to understand that the young learners should not be burdened with an unnecessary overload of information and examination pressure as these lead to stress. The well-being of children (physical, mental and emotional) is one of the key aspects of education as they are the architects of the future.

So, coping up with stressors and managing them is what education needs to support. A learning system that uses recreational pedagogical methods of imparting education could be implemented to relieve the students of stress. Besides, the examination and evaluation systems, too, need

to be reorganised and restructured to mitigate the effects of stress. Self-paced learning culture also needs to be promoted. Hence, educators and educational institutions need to be mindful and reorient education, eliminating obstacles that may cause stress in students.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- BENARD, B. 1991. 'Fostering Resiliency in Kids — Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community'. *Educational Psychologist*.
- . 1995. 'Fostering Resilience in Children'. *ERIC Digest*.
- GARDNER, H. 1993. *Multiple Intelligences — The Theory in Practice*. Basic Books. USA.