

## **IMPACT OF STRESS ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND COPING STRATEGIES**

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**Abstract:** The study was undertaken to investigate the impact of stress on student's academic performance. The concept of stress was discussed. It revealed that stress is a challenging life situation that requires physiological, cognitive and behavioural adaptation. Stress affects everybody not minding the age, sex or position. Suffix it to say that total freedom from stress simply means death. Students like every normal human being experience stress arising from a relationship, family, finance and academic pressure. They also experience emotional, psychological, physical and environmental stress. The study talks about stressors, as agents or factors responsible for stress in an individual's life. Stressors are environmental circumstances that disrupts peoples daily functioning and cause them to make adjustments stressors are classified into crises/catastrophes, major life events, daily hassle/micro stressors and ambient stressors. This work highlighted on the signs of stress which are; low self-esteem, racing thoughts, constant worry, irritability, feeling of anxiety, muscle tension, headache pains and dizziness. Some causes of students' stress were mentioned such as; finance, family death, academic pressure and relationship. Major causes of student's stress like; emotional stressors, physical, psychological ere mentioned. The work highlights the effect of stress on students' academic performance and the coping strategies.

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**Keywords:** Stress, Student, academic performance, coping strategies

### **Introduction**

Students especially freshers are prone to stress due to the transitional nature of school, their unavoidable adaptation to the norms ethics and conventions characterizing a higher school setting is also a stressor.

Students irrespective of level in school always face pressure but this pressure do not cause stress by themselves, rather stress result from the interaction between stressors and the individual's perception and reaction to the stressors.

Stress is as old as mankind. It has no respect for age, that is why it is experienced by everybody no matter the position, age, sex or background. No wonder Selye a renowned authority in stress noted that "complete freedom from stress simply means death". Students in their bid to meet up their daily demands experience stress in and out of school. Sometimes stress may come from parents, friends, teachers or climate of the school environment and the perception of their academic work (Jeanne, Milinda, Robert and Lawrence 2015).

However, Terry (2012) sees stress as a state of psychological and physiological imbalance resulting from the disparity between situational demands and the individual's ability or motivation to meet those demands. Stress is a normal physical response to events that makes one feel threatened or upset one's balance in some ways. He also opines that stress is a general term that applies to mental and physiological pressures experienced by people. As students move up and down each day to meet their academic task, they experience fatigue, hunger and disappointments which finally result in stress.

This paper seeks to discuss the impact of stress on student's academic performance and coping strategies. The discussion will be carried out under the following sub-headings.

- Concept of stress
- What are stressors, causes of student's stress
- Impact of stress on students' academic performance students
- Coping strategies

### **Concept of Stress**

Virtually every aspect of life produces stress. When a student tries to eliminate all stress, the only thing he/she accomplishes is to become more stressed. Chris (2015) avers that stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure. The only intelligent and positive response to stress is to control it and to channel it in a constructive way. Stress is a difficult life situation that requires physiological, cognitive or behavioural adaptation. Stress is also defined as the way individual perceive a challenging life event. Example, an impending examination causes stress when the student has inadequate knowledge, but not when he feels confident about the subject matter. The student's primary appraisal is the evaluation of the challenge, threat and harm posed by the particular event. Jeanne, Melinda, Robert and Jeanne (2014) defined stress as the body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. His secondary appraisal is the assessment of his abilities and resources for coping with that event.

However, stress is part of our life no matter how wealthy, powerful, attractive or happy you might be stress happens. It comes in different forms, example; a difficult examination, a slight difference with a friend, a bully from parent, standing in a long line and bulk of assignment to do.

### **What are Stressors?**

There are certain agents or factors known as stressors. They are responsible for or cause stress in an individual's life. A stressor is any event, influence, responsibility or experience that causes stress. These events or experiences are perceived as threats or challenges to the individual and can be either physical or psychological. It was found that stressors can make individuals more prone to both physical and psychological problems including heart diseases and anxiety. Stressors are more likely to affect an individual's health when they are "chronic, highly disruptive, or perceived as uncontrollable" (Damiller 2014).

### **Classification of Stressors**

Cohen and Deverts (2007) classified stressors into four major categories;

- § Crises/catastrophes
- § Major life event
- § Daily hassles/micro stressors
- § Ambient stressors

**Crises/Catastrophes:** These are unforeseen and unpredictable events as such, are out of control of the individual. Examples are devastating natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and wars.

**Major Life Event:** They are not major causes of stress example: marriage, death of a loved one and birth of a child.

**Daily Hassles/Micro Stressors:** This is the most commonly occurring type of stressor in an individual's every day life. This includes minor hassles like making decisions, meeting deadline at work or school, encounters with irritating personalities. It also includes conflict with other people.

**Ambient Stressors:** Are stressors that are chronic in nature example noise and crowding.

### Signs of Stress

Michael and Brad (2014) states that common signs of stress include sleeping problems, sweating, lose of appetite and difficulty in concentration. You may feel anxious, irritable or low self-esteem and may have racing thought; worry constantly or go over things in your head. You may notice that you lose your temper more easily, drink more or act unreasonably. One may equally experience headaches, muscle tension or pain including dizziness. Stress is not an illness per se but can cause serious illness if not quickly addressed. Spotting the early signs of stress will also help prevent it from getting worse and causing serious complications.

### Impact of Stress

The following are some effects of stress as enumerated by Zeyad (2013,).

Back pain, tendency to sweat and chest pain. Impact of stress on one's thoughts and feelings are anger, anxiety, depression, forgetfulness and irritability. Impact of stress on one's behaviour includes sudden outburst of anger outburst, social withdrawal, relationship problems, drug abuse and food craving.

### Causes of Students Stress

Rose, Nubling and Heckert (2008) enumerate the following as causes of stress.

**1. Finance:** Research has shown recently that finance is one of the leading causes of stress in people's life. It is discovered in an online poll conducted in 2005 by "life care Inc" that 23 percent of respondents named finance as the leading causes of stress in their lives. Those who named finance as a cause of stress cited major purchases they have to make, such as a home, car and cloths. Others are stressed by a loss of income or mounting debt.

Finance causes stress to students in the sense that they may want to purchase certain things for their up keeps and the money may not be there, which may result in worry and restlessness. Some students rather than concentrating on their academic work will go about hunting for money in order to meet their needs. Most students in recent time relinquish their academics, chasing money to buy the best of cloths, shoes, electronics and the likes which eventually will lead to stress.

**2. Family:** As wonderful as each member of the family may be, may as well be also one of the causes of stress. Argument may erupt with a family member, a sick family member, relocation, lose of job or job changes for just one family member can cause stress for all.

**3. Death:** The most destroying cause of stress is death of a loved one or close friend. When a student loser a parent, sister or brother, it destabilizes the student to the extent that it may result in poor academic performance.

**4. Academic Pressure:** When students are faced with much academic work, limited time for a task and module up of work, no doubt, there must be feelings of fatigue, anxiety, and agitation.

**5. Relationship:** So many relationships are sources of stress to some individuals. When it seems that people can not do what they want to do, take their own decisions, it can result in stress. Students who are in such relationship, where they can not express their emotions are not balanced; they are prone to face academic challenges.

## Major Causes of Student Stress

### 1. Emotional Stressors

Emotional stress is when you have reached your limit and you do not feel like you can take anymore. It is equally a condition which occurs when a person is in a troubled state that affects the emotion (McLeod 2009).

#### Signs of Emotional Stress

The signs of emotional stress as mentioned by McLeod (2009) include;

Anxiety, fear, irritability, hopelessness, guilt, helplessness, impatience, depression and nervousness.

#### Emotional Stress Coping Strategies

Elizabeth (2015) outlined the following ways of handling emotional stress:

(a) **Meditation:** Meditation can help you separate yourself from your thoughts, as you react to stress, so you can stand back and choose a response rather than reacting out of fear or panic.

(b) **Reframing:** This allows you to shift the way you see problems, which can actually make the difference between whether or not you feel stressed by facing it. It is not about pretending as though stressors do not exist but is more about seeing solutions, benefits and new perspectives. This entails viewing the stressors from positive perspective.

McLeod (2009) states that there are many ways of coping with emotional stress by that the effectiveness depends on the individual, stressors and the circumstances.

#### Coping Strategies

Emotional stress coping strategies include;

§ Keep yourself busy to take your mind off the issue.

§ Pray for guidance and strength.

§ Ignore the problems in the hope that they will go.

§ Distract yourself by watching television and eating.

§ Build yourself up to expect the worse.

#### Psychological Stressors

Psychological stressors are events and stimuli that cause us to experience stress. Psychological stress is what we feel when we are under pressure or having difficulty in coping with a challenge. Any situation that produces an emotional response, whether it is a real experience or mere perception, can become a source of psychological stress. For example, if you are invited to the police station you may feel that you will be detained which will cause psychological stress (Stacy 2015).

Kathy (2014) states that psychological stress is created when a person feels unequipped to handle a situation or thinks in a negative way or exaggerated way about the past present or perceived future. Psychological stress also refers to the emotional and psychological reaction experienced when an individual goes beyond their coping resources.

#### Example of Psychological Stress

Ø Mental problems

Ø Death of loved one

Ø Health problems

Ø Financial crises

#### Signs of Psychological Stress

Carthage (2015) outlines the following as signs of psychological stress and their coping strategies;

- (a) **Isolation:** Occurs when people keep to themselves, not associating with others, doing everything almost all alone.
- (b) **Insecurity:** People who are stressed always have the feeling of insecurity in themselves, job and relationship.
- (c) **Depression:** Those who are depressed feel empty, helpless and hopeless. They resign to fate with a life full of unhappiness.
- (d) **Anxiety:** Occurs when there is a feeling of incapability of coping with problems.
- (e) **Tension:** People experience tension when they are faced with difficult situation that may make them to agitate.
- (f) **Boredom:** When there is nothing to make people laugh and be happy, boredom sets in.

### **Psychological Stress Coping Strategies**

Sanni, Redhwan and Mustafa (2011) came up with the underlisted coping strategies.

- v Avoid situations that stress you up
- v Set goals that you can meet
- v Manage your stress rightly
- v Have enough rest
- v Try to handle or control every situation properly
- v Make sure you set priorities
- v Change the way you react to stress

**Environmental Stressors:** Are stressors found around our surrounding. They cause minor irritations. Example, if you set an alarm clock to wake up, the loud noise from the alarm is an environmental stressor. Excessive heat is also an environmental stressor because it can lead to discomfort (Patrick, 2015).

### **Examples of Environmental Stressors**

Examples of environmental stressors include;

- v Noise, colours, natural disasters, crowding, light and insects and extreme temperature.

### **Impact of Stress on Students Academic Performance**

Milinda, Roberts and Jeanne (2014) assert that a stressed person is an unhealthy person. When a student is stressed up and do not know how to eliminate stress, he is bound to be discouraged, frustrated and helpless. They went further to say that stress can:

- v affect the performance by lowering the grade
- v makes student lose concentration
- v makes them resign to fate
- v makes them substitute academics for dating
- v make students to drop out of school
- v make students Instead of reading some will prefer lobbing to pass their examination
- v make students to lose confidence in themselves

### **How Students can Cope with Stress**

Patrick (2015) also averse the following ways students can cope with stress;

- v In your leisure time make sure that all reminders of work e.g., textbooks notes are out of site.
- v All at least 30 minutes for each meal
- v Have one and half days each week completely free from work

- v Do not set for your self unrealistic deadlines.
- v Always finish one work before the other
- v If you are unhappy in your stand back, take fresh look at your options and the goals towards which you are striving.
- v Practice how to express your feeling openly.

Stacy (2015) outlined the following ways students can cope with stress.

- v Exercise your body: Health and vitality depend on one's ability to use oxygen and food effectively and it can be achieved through exercise.
- v Enjoy your self: This life is so precious and short. As much as you can, try to maximize it to the fullest. Never allow anything to weigh you down or distract you, let every moment of your life count and more so, look out for the good, sweet, fun and joyous moment in every situation even when life tends to be less fair.
- v Be good to yourself: Appreciate yourself for the good you do. When things do not go as you may have wanted them, love yourself for who you are.

### **Recommendations**

For students to be able to cope with stress, the following steps should be adhered to; -

- Ø Students should avoid accumulation of work.
- Ø They should do their assignments as promptly as possible to reduce stress.
- Ø Lecturers should be considerate in fixing their lectures and government should stop crash programmes in schools.

### **Conclusion**

Stress is a physical and psychological pressure experienced by people. Student in the process of undergoing their studies experience stress because, stress is weaved into the fabrics of life.

For anyone, especially students to overcome stress, he/she has to first, of all, understand what stress is, identify the things that cause them stress and apply the right coping strategies.

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