



## Source of Academic Stress: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

Stress is a natural and common reaction experienced by people in response to a perceived threat or challenge. Stress is experienced by all people in different occupations and stages of their lives. There has been a concerning increase in stress experienced by students in the past decades in their academic life also termed Academic stress. Academic stress can be said as the pressure experienced in the academic setting by students due to demands and expectations placed upon them in their educational environment. Academic stress can have a significant impact on the physical as well as mental health of the students. The physical impact of stress on students can manifest as headache, fatigue, loss of appetite, etc. and the mental impact of stress on students can cause anxiety, depression, etc. on students. Academic stress can also negatively impact students' performance and lead to poor academic results. Thereby it becomes very important to identify sources of academic stress amongst students. This paper aims to give a theoretical view of academic stress and insightful overview of the literature on academic stress and the sources which contribute to students' academic stress. This paper summarizes the main aspects of academic stress.

**Keywords:** Stress, Academic Stress, Students, Sources of Stress.

### Introduction

The Latin term "Stringere," which conjures up images of suffering, hardship, or affliction, and the term "strictus," which means tight or narrow is where the word "stress" first appeared. Stress is characterized as a condition of anxiety or mental tension brought in by a challenging circumstance. Stress is a normal human reaction that motivates us to deal with problems and dangers in our lives. Everyone goes through periods of worry. However, how we handle stress has a significant impact on how we feel generally. Studies show that too much stress leads to severe mental and physical health problems. Education is an important part of life and plays a crucial role in a person's life and can mark a turning moment in his/her academic career. A student's academic success is extremely important in determining the next level of their education, which in turn shapes their future. As a result, the academic life of students can cause a lot of stress for the students.

According to Adom *et al.* (2020) <sup>[3]</sup>, academic stress refers to a wide range of stressors; things that cause strain and obstruct academic development in educational institutions that can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, health or environment related. For a long time, it was assumed by people that students faced the least amount of stress or problems. Studying was the only responsibility placed upon students, and it was never thought of as stressful (Reddy *et al.*, 2018)

<sup>[57]</sup>. Several studies have shown that it is simply not the case. Nearly half of the American college students, according to data on stress from the American College Health Association (ACHA) study, are under moderate stress. Additionally, 29.5% of students say they experience high stress, while 19.7% say they experience moderate stress, and nearly 35% believed stress is a reason for negatively affecting their academic performance.

In India, around 8.2% of students die by suicide according to National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), accidental deaths and suicide, Report 2020. Failure in the examination is one of the causes of these suicides. The stress experienced by students from their academic environment not only impact their performance but have serious consequence on their mental and physical health and led to severe symptoms such as depression, anxiety, insomnia, frequent headache, stomach problems (Vlisides *et al.*, 1994, Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012, Coiro *et al.*, 2017) <sup>[71, 69, 21]</sup>. The main aim of this paper is to give a theoretical view of academic stress and to give an overview of the literature on the definition of academic stress and the sources which contribute to students' academic stress.

### Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

- i). To explore the concept of academic stress

- ii). To find the sources of academic stress among students by reviewing related literature

### Key Concepts

**Stress:** Stress is the body's reaction to obligations, restrictions, or opportunities, and a stressor is a stimulus that causes a stress response (Bryce, 2001) <sup>[15]</sup>. The ideas surrounding stress have changed and grown considerably over the last few decades. Stress now includes both positive aspects, such as adjusting to the current environment and foreseeing future challenges, as well as negative aspects, such as the "general adaptation syndrome (GAS)" described by Selye. Selye (1975) <sup>[63]</sup>, proposes that it would be preferable to divide stress into "eustress," which stands for good stress, and "distress," which stands for bad stress. However, a lot of experts still refer to stress as a health risk by using Selye's "GAS" definition (Lu *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[48]</sup>. The alarm stage, the adaptive/resistance stage, and the exhaustion stage are the three stages of the body's physiological responses that make up the stress response, according to research pioneered by Hans Selye. Not every person goes through all three phases. Only when an individual experiences the alarm and resistance stages too frequently will they enter the exhausted stage (Bryce, 2001) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Stress can affect anyone. Health research has a lengthy and fruitful history with the idea of stress. There are many ways to define stress, but they have all generally been linked to worsening mental and bodily health (Segerstrom & O'Connor, 2012) <sup>[62]</sup>. The likelihood of developing both physical and mental health issues rises when worry becomes overwhelming and persistent. Long-term stress raises the chance of physical complaints like muscle tension as well as mental health issues like anxiety and depression, drug use issues, sleep disorders, and pain (Center for addiction and Mental health, n.d.).

**Academic Stress:** Academic stress is the term used to describe the uncomfortable psychological situations that arise as a result of educational expectations from parents, teachers, peers, and family members; parental pressure for academic achievement; the current educational and examination system; the burden of Homework, etc. (Sarita, 2015) <sup>[60]</sup>. It includes the student's perception of a demanding program and not having enough time to complete it (Carveth *et al.*, 1996) <sup>[17]</sup>. Wilks (2008) <sup>[73]</sup>, defines academic stress as a situation where demands related to academic is beyond the student's capability. Responses to academic stress can be physical, mental, or emotional, and demands can include any mix of frustration, conflict, pressure, change, and self-imposed academic stress (Misra *et al.*, 2000) <sup>[50]</sup>.

Huan *et al.* (2008) <sup>[33]</sup>, in their research stated that academic stress can create helplessness in students as well as make adaption and self-actualization difficult for the students. Students frequently experience self-confidence issues when attempting to forge new social connections while also juggling the mounting academic demands (Tao *et al.*, 2000; Dwyer & Cummings, 2001) <sup>[68, 26]</sup>. Academic stress is a significant issue among secondary, high school, college, and university students (Zeidner, 1992, Ang & Huan, 2006, Bataineh, 2013, Thawabieh & Qaisy, 2012, Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015) <sup>[76, 8, 13, 14]</sup>. Numerous detrimental psychological and physical effects of academic stress have been documented by research. Linn and Zeppa (1984) <sup>[47]</sup>, and found that academic stress is linked to the inhibition of students' academic performance while extended academic stress impacts the depression level of the students (Deng *et al.*, 2020). Other studies conducted on the academic stress of student's shows that high level of stress cause physiological and psychological symptoms in students such as headache, tiredness, stomach problems, change in eating habits, and insomnia (Shankar & Park, 2016, Lal, 2014, Choi, 2020) <sup>[64, 41, 20]</sup>.

### Method

Literature on academic stress was searched using a combination of keywords like "stress", "stress in students", "academic stress", "sources of academic stress", and "factors of academic stress", etc in databases such as Google scholar, Research Gate, Jstor, Academia.edu, Mendeley, Proquest. Forty-five (45) pieces of Literature identifying sources of academic stress in students were taken up for the study.

### Sources of Academic Stress

Stress is a normal component of academic life and is prevalent among students (Khan *et al.*, 2013) <sup>[37]</sup>. When strain from both the inside and outside exceeds a person's ability to cope, academic stressor occurs. A stressor is a cause that makes people feel stressed. There are various sources causing stress in students in their academic life.

According to a study conducted by Kohn and Frazer (1986) <sup>[38]</sup>, the main source of stress in students was the academic environment, students' perception of things related to their academics, and the demand placed upon them for their academia. While sources like studying, examinations, transition to university, and financial issues were identified by Robotham (2008) <sup>[58]</sup> as the cause of stress in students.

The sources of academic stress are the situations or factors which cause stress for students in their academic pursuits. Various other stress sources identified through the literature review are presented in the table 1.

**Table 1:** Sources of Stress among Students

| Sources of stress             | Authors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Examination and Grade related | Kohn & Frazer (1986) <sup>[38]</sup> , Abouserie (1994) <sup>[2]</sup> , Sreeramreddy (2007) <sup>[65]</sup> , Kumar <i>et al.</i> (2009) <sup>[65]</sup> , Robotham (2008) <sup>[58]</sup> , Ab & Hassim (2009) <sup>[1]</sup> , Yusoff, Abdul-Rahim, & Yaacob (2010) <sup>[75]</sup> <sup>[75]</sup> , Nandamuri & Gowthami (2011) <sup>[52]</sup> , Elias, Ping, & Abdullah (2011) <sup>[27]</sup> , Kumari & Jain (2014) <sup>[40]</sup> , Verma & Verma (2020) <sup>[70]</sup>                                                                                            |
| Workload related              | Burnett & Fanshawe (1997) <sup>[16]</sup> , Yusoff <i>et al.</i> (2010) <sup>[75]</sup> , Sun, Dunne, Hou, & Xu (2011) <sup>[67]</sup> , Thawabieh & Qaisy (2012) <sup>[69]</sup> , Bataineh (2013) <sup>[13]</sup> , Al-Sowayh, Alfadley, Al-Saif, & Al-Wadei (2013) <sup>[6]</sup> , Nakalema & Ssenyonga (2013) <sup>[51]</sup> , Bedewy & Gabriel (2015) <sup>[14]</sup> , Salema-Aro & Read (2017) <sup>[59]</sup> , Hj Ramli, Alavi, Mehrinezhad, & Ahmadi (2018) <sup>[31]</sup> , Verma & Verma (2020) <sup>[70]</sup> , Leslie, Brown, & Aiken (2021) <sup>[43]</sup> |
| Time related                  | Heins, Fahey, & Leiden (1984) <sup>[30]</sup> , Nonis, Hudson, Logan, & Ford (1998) <sup>[54]</sup> , Lin & Chan (2009) <sup>[46]</sup> , Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalji, Michalowski, & Shaffer (2009) <sup>[66]</sup> , Amponsah (2010) <sup>[7]</sup> , Majumdar & Ray (2010) <sup>[49]</sup> , Al Khatib (2014) <sup>[5]</sup> , Bedewy & Gabriel (2015) <sup>[14]</sup> , Govenderet, Mkhabela, Hlongwane, Jalim, & Jetha (2015) <sup>[28]</sup>                                                                                                                                |
| Financial related             | Zeidner (1992) <sup>[76]</sup> , Robotham (2008) <sup>[58]</sup> , Joo, Durband, & Grable (2008) <sup>[34]</sup> , Ab & Hassim (2009) <sup>[1]</sup> , Aselton (2012) <sup>[11]</sup> , Bataineh (2013) <sup>[13]</sup> , Kamtsios & Karagiannopoulou (2015) <sup>[36]</sup> , Hosseinkhani <i>et al.</i> (2021) <sup>[32]</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Expectations related | Zeidner, (1992) <sup>[76]</sup> , DuongTran, Lee, & Khoi (1996) <sup>[25]</sup> , Ang & Huan (2006) <sup>[8]</sup> , Kai-wen (2009) <sup>[35]</sup> , Lin & Chan (2009) <sup>[46]</sup> , Yusoff <i>et al.</i> (2010) <sup>[75]</sup> , Sun <i>et al.</i> (2011) <sup>[67]</sup> , Backovic, Zivojinovic, Maksimovic, & Maksimovic (2012) <sup>[12]</sup> , Lin & Yusoff, (2013) <sup>[44]</sup> , Bataineh, (2013) <sup>[13]</sup> , Lin, Su, & McElwain (2019) <sup>[45]</sup> |
| Teacher related      | Burnett& Fanshawe (1997) <sup>[16]</sup> , Sreeramareddy (2007) <sup>[65]</sup> , Al-Sowygh <i>et al.</i> (2013) <sup>[6]</sup> , Kamtsios & Karagiannopoulou (2015) <sup>[36]</sup> , Akeela & Ashok (2018) <sup>[4]</sup> , Reddy Menon, & Thattil (2018) <sup>[57]</sup> , Phillips, Halder, & Hasib (2020) <sup>[55]</sup> , Verma & Verma (2020) <sup>[70]</sup> , Yousif, Arbab, & Youssef (2022) <sup>[74]</sup>                                                          |
| Peers related        | Ab & Hassim, (2009) <sup>[1]</sup> , Kai-Wen, (2009) <sup>[35]</sup> , Lin & Chan, (2009) <sup>[46]</sup> , Kamtsios & Karagiannopoulou, (2015) <sup>[36]</sup> , Lin <i>et al.</i> (2019) <sup>[45]</sup> , Hosseinkhani <i>et al.</i> (2021) <sup>[32]</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Self related         | Polychronopoulou & Divaris, (2005) <sup>[56]</sup> , Al-Sowygh, <i>et al.</i> (2013) <sup>[6]</sup> , Reddy, <i>et al.</i> (2018) <sup>[57]</sup> , Akeela & Ashok (2018) <sup>[4]</sup> , Phillips <i>et al.</i> (2020) <sup>[55]</sup> , Harahap, Badrujaman, & Hidayat (2022) <sup>[29]</sup> , Yousif <i>et al.</i> (2022) <sup>[74]</sup>                                                                                                                                   |

**Source:** Literature review

The studies carried out show that the most common sources of academic stress were examinations and grade related, workload related, time-related, family-related, financial-related, expectations related, teacher related, peers related, and self-related, etc.

Examinations are often the biggest cause of stress for students (Abouserie, 1994) <sup>[2]</sup>. Students show symptoms like irregular sleep patterns, feelings of fatigue or loneliness, body aches, stomach upset, restlessness, and conditions that make it difficult to remember what one has studied before and during the exam period (Kumari & Jain, 2014) <sup>[40]</sup>.

Bedewy & Gabriel, (2015) <sup>[14]</sup> stated in their research that the perception of extensive course load is a cause of test anxiety in students. Students' workload affects their experience in studying and wellbeing (Salmela- Aro & Read, 2017) <sup>[59]</sup>. The short amount of time allotted for classes, the inability to complete assignment in time, the challenge of catching if behind, and the short amount of time to wind down or unwind causes a lot of pressure on students (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015) <sup>[14]</sup>. Time management can therefore reduce academic stress while poor time management causes more stress in students (Majumdar & Ray, 2010) <sup>[49]</sup>.

Many researchers have identified has financial related problems as a source of academic stress for students (Zeidner, 1992, Robotham, 2008, Ab & Hassim, 2009, Aselton, 2012) <sup>[76, 58, 1, 11]</sup> and failure in academics has also been linked to financial hardship (Joo *et al.*, 2008) <sup>[34]</sup>.

The expectation of self and others i.e., Parents, teachers, etc in academic matters causes distress in students (Ang & Huan, 2006) <sup>[8]</sup>. Adolescents' stress levels can be impacted by parents' academic expectations. Studies also show that in contrast to their male counterparts, female students have higher expectations of themselves and experience more academic stress (DuongTran, *et al.*, 1996, Backovic *et al.*, 2012) <sup>[25, 12]</sup>.

A study conducted by Akeela & Ashok, (2018) <sup>[4]</sup>, on high school students, found that monotonous teaching techniques, unfriendly interactions with other students or teachers, and teachers who are less supportive of students' academic progress are responsible for increasing stress levels in students. Teacher contributes to the stress of students when student find the contents of exercises and reports too strict, too difficult, and excessive (Lin & Chan, 2009) <sup>[46]</sup>. Students may experience emotional stress and learning difficulties as a result of teachers' frequent focus on knowledge acquisition at the expense of their students' emotional needs during the teaching process.

The relationship students have with their peers/classmates is also one of the sources of academic stress amongst students. Pressure from peers to fit in, conflicts and competition contribute to stress in students (Ab & Hassim, 2009, Kai-Wen, 2009, Lin & Chan, 2009, Kamtsios &

Karagiannopoulou, 2015, Lin, *et al.* 2019, Hosseinkhani, *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[1, 35, 46, 36, 32]</sup>.

Another major source of academic stress is the self-related i.e., intrapersonal. The self-efficacy beliefs of the students can increase or decrease their stress levels of the students. When students lack confidence in themselves, are not motivated for their academic work, have low self-esteem, and put too much pressure on themselves to perform they find themselves more stressed (Polychronopoulou & Divaris, 2005, Al-Sowygh, *et al.*, 2013, Reddy, *et al.*, 2018, Akeela & Ashok, 2018, Phillips *et al.* 2020, Harahap *et al.*, 2022, Yousif *et al.*, 2022) <sup>[56, 6, 57, 4, 55, 74]</sup>.

## Conclusion

From the literature reviewed, Academic stress can be said as the term used to describe the mental and emotional strain that students may feel as a result of the requirements and standards of their academic setting. This can include the strain associated with completing academic requirements, such as writing reports, attending class, and getting excellent grades. The strain of juggling academic work with extracurricular activities, and interpersonal obligations is another aspect of this. The sources of academic stress identified from the literature review are manifold. It is very important to identify the sources of stress because Academic stress can have a significant impact on mental and physical health, as well as the overall academic performance of the students. Mentally, stress can cause anxiety and worry, and can exacerbate existing anxiety disorders. Chronic stress can also increase the risk of developing depression, and cause irritability, mood swings, and emotional reactivity. Physically, stress can weaken the immune system and increase the risk of illness and infection. It can cause insomnia and other sleep disorders, muscle tension, and headaches. Digestive problems such as nausea and constipation are also common symptoms of stress. By identifying the sources of academic stress, educators and parents can take steps to help students manage their stress levels and improve their academic performance. Not only that by identifying the sources of academic stress, students can be better equipped to manage their stress levels and focus on their academic goals, and improves their performance but also students can be referred to appropriate resources and support to address their mental health needs. The identification of sources of academic stress can also help educators and parents better understand a student's needs and concerns. This can improve communication and help build stronger relationships between students, parents, and educators and can also help students develop coping mechanisms and build resilience, which can help them throughout their lives. By understanding the root causes of academic stress, strategies can be implemented to prevent or reduce stress before it becomes a more significant issue.

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