

Coping Strategies among Secondary School Students Against Stress and Anxiety-A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

The objective of this phenomenological study was to discover the coping strategies developed by male students victimized by relational hostility. The experiences and coping strategies developed by secondary school male students studying from sixth to tenth grades are explored in this study. All the subject students studying at secondary school at the Shaheed Minhas road/Rashid Minhas Road. Ten students were randomly selected from all the students identified by their teachers who had either suffered relational aggression. The research tool was semi structured interviews for data collection. Primary data from the targeted research field was collected. The collected data was analyzed and described in accordance with the Moustakas' (1994) transcendental model.

The study covered stress and anxiety, interpersonal relationships, expectation of one's self and from others, stress from daily life challenges and stress of the time management vis a vis the coping strategies for the same. Students felt stressed because of the persistent fear and humiliation as a result of multifold relational complexities. The paper will present a portrayal of research account about parents, students and the system of school education so as to help adopt them some of the practices and priorities for a child to be nurtured and become healthy for their bright future to be strong future nation for tomorrow and to help them in reducing their stress levels to minimum.

Key words: Coping strategies, Secondary school, Stress etc.

Introduction

Stress and anxiety are crucial aspects of human society. It adds an intrinsic flavor full of challenges and opportunities in our life, although it gives our goals some constraints but in the real essence makes our life experiences relatively more exciting. Nonetheless, the benefits learned during stressful situations hardly last beyond a certain level of stress and anxiety (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980). When the sustained limit is crossed, stress and anxiety pose adverse threat to the physical and mental health and well-being of all in general and young students in particular (Bartlett, 1998). Consistent stress and lack of knowledge and skills of its self-management causes worry, anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue, disequilibrium in the body metabolism to such an extent that one has to compromise over natural embodied immunity. In recent times, shocking tendencies have been found in the in students due to stress and anxiety (Sax, 1997). Young people are reported to have been found with increasing rates of mental health problems. Students under stresses affect not only themselves but also their peers, siblings and other family members both in their home environment and the educational institutions (Britz & Pappas, 2010). Coping strategies are influenced by the strength and handling skills intrinsic in the overall personality characteristics of an individual (Bolger, 1990; Friedman et al., 1992).

According to Dyson & Renk (2006), Secondary school system can be a rewarding experience but at the same time it can also cause significant stressful situations for students. Ross, Niebling & Heckart (1999) identified daily struggles opposed to major occurrences in life account for greater level of stress and anxiety among students. Study-related stress and anxiety itself is one of the major sources of emotional distress (Stewart Brown et al., 2000). The Tyrell (1992) found in a study that the most intense reason of stress for the Irish students was due to examinations, grades, financial concerns, fear of failure on some specific assignments which students felt as difficult including future uncertainty and career decisions. Schools at the secondary level puts pressure over students in surviving to adjust to a new environment. The new starting session carries with itself new demands such as new curricula of the secondary schooling cadre which triggers deviation from true guided learning to finding new exploration and innovation. Such

students are often more committed amongst their peers, to have some times over ambitious career goals for which they are prone to high and unrealistic support expectations from their peers. In addition to this, new demands in interpersonal relationships, career choices and other daily stresses likely further contribute in stress. This affects their adjustment and productivity in the long run, unless there are some healthy coping mechanisms initiated to deal with the stress constructively (Holahan & Moos, 1987), the scale of guidance and support offered by teachers may also determine student stress and anxiety (Meijer, 2007; Abouserie, 1994). It has been found that the students feel it convenient for them to be in cooperative, noncompetitive and task-oriented schooling environment (Pressley & McCormick, 1995; Wood et al., 1991). There ought to be always well-defined stress and anxiety coping strategies in every school for students. Lazarus & Folkman (1984) refer to coping as the individual's evaluation of a situation that is used to deal with the stressor and anxiety. Stress and anxiety among the secondary school students (Chan Ching Ling, 2007; Azizi Yahya, 2010), the minimum attention has been given to the teachers working in Tamil schools (Vijayan Madhavannair 2010). Moreover, the relationship between the stress and the anxiety along with their coping strategies was found through studies around secondary school students' (Mail Vahanam 2009).

Statement of the Problem

As evidenced by the literature review to date, the identified lack of qualitative research examining the stress and anxiety experiences of coping strategies among high school students (Bartlett, 1998) is very low. The level of stress and anxiety has a direct impact on students' academic performance. To handle the increase in stress and anxiety levels related to academic needs, students from financially sound families often rely on coping strategies, including problem solving, task avoidance and trying to merely solve problems on their own (Suldo et al., 2008). Students who know coping skills help to desire the institute's environmental culture. Students need to explore as to what extent high achievers use different types of coping strategies in response to their intense academic needs, since research has shown that the use of coping behaviors by specific students has meaningful partnerships with academic outcomes and mental health (Suldo et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience and coping strategies of secondary school students. Through study the researchers have tried to explore the need to gain a better understanding of the experiences of stress, anxiety and coping strategies in secondary schools strengthened or not. An in-depth analysis of stress and anxiety will enhance awareness, particularly steered towards the academic performance of students.

Research Objectives

- a. To find out attitudes of secondary school students towards stress & anxiety.
- b. To find out reasons behind coping strategies during stress and anxiety among secondary school students.
- c. To investigate coping strategies in practice of secondary school students in managing stress and anxiety with their emerging academic challenges which may influence their success in terms of academic achievement and life satisfaction.

Research Questions

- a. What are the attitudes of secondary school students towards stress & anxiety?
- b. What are the reasons behind coping strategies during stress and anxiety among secondary school students?
- d. What are the coping strategies in practice of secondary school students in managing stress and anxiety with their emerging academic challenges which may influence their success in terms of academic achievement and life satisfaction?

Literature Review

The various definitions of stress, a topic of great interest in the last six decades, have constantly evolved over several hundred years, if not centuries (Cassidy, 1999). Selve (1951) conducted the first research on the biology of stress. After almost 40 years of research, Selve summarized the difficulty in defining stress and said: "Everyone knows what stress is and nobody knows what it is" (page 694). Selve empirically demonstrated the profound physiological consequences of stress and understood more than most the difficulty of finding a universal definition of "stress syndrome", which defined our body's "reaction reaction" to the requests that were made (p.). Selve published his theory of stress in 1956, distinguishing between the term "eustress", a

positive response to the environment and facilitated growth and the term "discomfort", a negative response to the environment with consequent physical and psychological characteristics as dysfunctional. However, the pioneering work of Selves established the first correlation between physiology and psychology in the stress response (Cooper and Dewe, 2004). Burnout, the human response to excessive pressure or a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stress at work, describe the response to chronic stress (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout research has focused on three main areas: burnout, cynicism and inefficiency (Maslach et al., 2001). Exhaustion or emotional exhaustion, referred to a state of exhaustion and fatigue. Emotional exhaustion is characterized by symptoms of physical and emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion describes the lack of empathy and the emotional distance of the clients you work with.

Individual stress studies included coping strategies, but also "genetic, biological and motivational differences" (Barlett, 1998, page 65). Cooper and Dewe (2004) have identified the following questions as important for understanding the individual response to stress: "How are individual differences in the development of psychological stress symptoms refer to how individual differences in stress perception are related to? Learning environment? Do these differences affect the way people cope with stress?" (P.56). To provide clarity, Wilkerson (2009) used a role questionnaire to study emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and the size of personal fulfillment with 198 professional school counselors. They found that physical fitness is an effective mechanism for dealing with a variety of types of stressors and stress triggering factors. In particular, the results showed that the prevalence of depression was lower in individuals with moderate or high exercise levels compared to individuals with low exercise levels (Ensel and Lin, 2004). In addition to physical fitness, relaxation techniques such as meditation help reduce the effects of stress (Van der et al., 2001). Relaxation techniques specifically focused on physical or mental relaxation are an effective way to cope up with the consequences of stress and further associated complexities. These techniques involve the reduction of muscle tension and the activity of the central nervous system to promote a relaxed state. Muscle tension is associated with e.g., Anxiety; (Van der Klink et al., 2001).

Research Design

Methodology and Methods

The methodology of the study is purely qualitative. Phenomenological approach is used to examine the experiences of coping strategies of students during stress and anxiety. The survey foreseen for this is of a transversal nature. The cross-sectional analysis provided information on changes within the students that occur between the transition years from the sixth to the tenth grade. Cross-cutting analysis provided information on stress and anxiety in the academic arena. The coping strategies of students enrolled in the sixth and tenth levels are focus in the study.

Population & Sampling

The targeted population of this study is selected as three secondary school in Shaheed Minhas road/Rashid Minhas Road Karachi. Students from sixth to tenth grades class were purposively selected for this survey study after being enlisted by their respective teachers.

The present sample included ten sixth to tenth grade students of the three secondary schools of Shaheed Minhas road/Rashid Minhas Road Karachi. Using selected purposive sampling method, ten students were randomly selected from each school for the data collection.

Data Collection

Data was collected through focus group interviews/ discussions; two focus group interviews/discussions were conducted at three the schools. These interviews consisted of three sections as follows; Section (A) aims to collect demographic information, Section (B) deals with determination of stress and anxiety level (C) provides insights on coping strategies adopted by the students.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with transcription details of the data followed by Moustakas (1994) Epoche and phenomenological approach. By using coding and identifying themes and sub-themes were done to gain clear understanding of the students' thoughts and their coping skills to overcome stress.

Discussion

Stress and anxiety are common symptoms that every individual lives with it. We have conducted this research study on the secondary school students to know their level of stress and anxiety. Specially, how they cope up with their stress and anxiety level? So that they may perform well academically and achieve higher grades in their academic life. We firstly wanted to know the

level of understanding that what they think, what is stress in their opinion? What happened to them when they are stressed? Why they feel stressed? How they deal with their stress levels or cope up with their stress levels? And what they think that either stress is a motivator for them or it demotivates them? It has a positive effect over them or negative, to know the better understanding of their living experience about stress and anxiety in their everyday life, to achieve better academic performance and what better coping strategies they adopt each day.

What is stress?

We are so amazed by the responses of our respondents. As they answer us in a more mannerly way to come up with something concrete and meaningful. According to them, they all think the meaning of stress is tension or irritation. Whereas they think that the factors of stress they faced in their everyday life is because of teacher's pressure, hurt to self-esteem, peer pressure, time management, sibling comparison and Assessment and Evaluation pressure.

Conclusion

FACTORS FOR BUILDING STRESS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Teachers' pressure

According to our student respondents, teachers play the vital role in their life and they feel stressed when they are not able to meet their teachers' desired expectation. They view it as stressed that their teacher might scold them or give them corporal punishment or will humiliate them in front of their peers, which creates a higher level of stress among them as they feel offended by the abusive words by their teachers who use to make them feel ashamed of their poor performance or any act in front of others.

Self-ego

Whereas, some of them were of the opinion that if they are humiliated publicly it will definitely hurt their self-ego which makes them think that they may never be successful in their lives and resultantly they may hardly hold a better position in society. This disheartened phenomenon creates high level of stress among them.

Typical Education System

They also added that the typical education system of rotting and copying answers from books including loads of homework also creates stress among them as they are not able to manage time

properly. This leads them to incomplete home tasks upon which they again feel levels of stress and anxiety increases.

Sibling and peer pressure or comparison

This also put them in a higher level of stress as they clearly stated that “if we will not perform well our parents will humiliate us and will compare us with our younger siblings and peers who are performing academically good” and it will not let them feel comfortable among their friends as it’s an old saying companionship counts.

Assessment and Evaluation

Lastly, they all talked about assessments and evaluation as a giant monster of all the stresses. This one of major reason of stress that what will be their status in future if they could not achieve good grades in their assessments which is like a matter of life and death for them. They share that to prove their worth and to have higher prestige in the society, to be respectful among their peers, siblings, and in the society, they move in they often keep on thinking. The students at the adolescent age at secondary school level pass through various developmental stages which are characterized by a number of physical and emotional developments and adapting to interpersonal changes (Arnett, 1999; Frydenberg, 2008). The majority of the students revealed that they are aware of stressful situations and the relevant coping strategies. There are both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies which may be called positive or negative coping strategies.

Description of stress and anxiety

The description of stress and anxiety are narrated by students to be in an uncomfortable state in which they undergo through tension and irritation, high palpitation, feel headache and nausea, they get easily annoyed and may like to scream or cry over small things, become short tempered and unsocial, they try to avoid the any situation and took procrastination to fizzle out the undesirable effects on their interest level which also decreases etc.

STRESS COPING STRATEGIES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

By reviewing the notes taken from interviews of focus group of 10 students of the two private schools, the following sub-themes for coping strategies evolved by clustering the key concepts and categorizing them which they shared are as following:

Cognitive coping strategies

Such as ideologies, rules, self-concept and identities. As they told us about how they help themselves and their self-esteem, better, by staying isolated from the people.

Emotional coping strategies

As a coping strategy, they also engage themselves in other emotional feelings so as to avoid to be stressed. e.g. avoidance of the situation, escape from the situation or person, take help by playing and using social media, denial of being present or faced the people, isolation, use of humor and taking laughter therapy as a best medication to cope up with their stress level, drinking water, going to washroom, less socialization and staying quiet are some of their emotional coping styles.

Being Rebellious coping strategy

Whereas some of the students taken stress as the threatening cause of their lives and they become rebellious to let that stress go out of their lives by bullying, arguing, mutilation/ self-harm, showing tantrums over use of technological gadgets or substance abuse easily annoyed cried out loud or feel like victim make them feel much better and they feel relax.

Sharing and Caring coping strategy

But, as it is said sharing is caring our respondent students also told us that by sharing their feelings & fears with people they trust they feel empathetic, warm and relaxed, they usually share with them to lessen their burden and their stress level with them like whom they think are their true friends, with their parents, student counselors, teachers etc.

Seek help from divine intervention

Turning towards God for assistance and help to overcome the hurdles which are difficult for them and face the challenges of their life or they seek help from God to overcome with their stress by praying and religious meditation.

Seeking refuge in different activities

Engage in different activities like listening music, playing different board games, outdoor sports such as swimming, cricket, football and any other games of interest, vocational training, reading books, reading Quran, gardening, or walking, jogging activities also help them to deal better with their stress levels.

Adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies

When we acquired from our student respondents that what they think that, does stress motivate them to work harder for achieving high grades or they think the stress has only a negative effect on their lives and the students have a mixed view like.

Some of them has even taken the stress as an adaptive and positive coping strategy itself. They told us that few factors like our parents, conflicts, to fight with our financial crisis, the death of the loved one, family separations or even for maintaining prestigious personality and to be an apple of an eye in front of everyone to cope up this which are stress indicators we work harder to overcome these stresses which results in great success. So, it is not like stress to have in itself only negative impact over the students, but it also has some positive effects on their lives.

If we conclude our whole piece of writing in a nut shell our topic is stress coping strategies among secondary school students which has 10 respondents and a focused group interview/discussion data collection technique was adopted whereas this is an exploratory research on the students who are high achievers with above 90% score. They face great level of stress and anxiety in their daily lives. To achieve better results, the responses were entered and analyzed with proper coding techniques and in-depth analysis so as to assess stress and anxiety among respondents as well their strategies by creating different themes sub themes.

Finding

What we have analyzed from the results of our respondents that students mostly feel stressed because of fear and humiliation. They hardly like to be compared with others. We would further like to recommend few desired actions to the parents, students and school admirations to adapt some of the practices or actions as tools to help students to be a free child, a nurtured and healthy child and a strong future nation for tomorrow and to help them in reducing their stress levels to minimum.

Recommendations

(1) It is inevitable that all those involved in designing school curriculum should be conscious of the diverse patterns of the students' responses to varied stressors in and outside their school environment to plan out assessment & examination in such a way that it is rather meaningful and least exhaustive in nature for students. The academic activities should address the individual needs and compatible with the local context.

- (2) Parents should encourage to make time for fun and relaxation through teaching learners. Ways to relax such as breathing, muscle relaxation, listening to music, reading & drawing.
- (3) School counselors should have an effective role in counseling, guiding students and giving opportunities to share their feelings and anxieties.
- (4) School leaders should give ample time to do work on students' engagements in productive work, assignments to channelize the energies and opening up choices to develop their coping skills. Awareness of physical and mental health through a school program should be made non-stigmatizing. School curriculum should involve awareness programs about activities which yield positive outcomes when students face difficulties. The activities may be sports, games, walking, yoga, meditation & school bulletin.
- (5) Teachers and parents' role to be extremely positive and fostering rather than dictating or demanding. The psychological aspect of child's behavior should be dealt at the priority level instead of forwarding only high expectations of students. Parents and teachers to have a healthy and very positive relationship with students where they have the confidence to seek help. They should emphasize on discouraging involvement in risky behavior. Comparison between students or siblings should be totally abolished.
- (6) Students should be groomed with morals and religious values to seek help from divine intervention such as praying, fasting and charity.
- (7) Social Support network: This is the task of the whole community involving school names, teachers, parents, neighborhood to design a network where youth can invest their energies to be directed towards bigger goals in life.

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