

# STUDENT WELLNESS – ADDRESSING STRESS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS

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## Abstract

*This paper highlights the data received by several studies on the level of stress a student endures in an educational setting. It also discusses the causes of stress, factors related to the stress and tools and techniques to mitigate the level of stress a student faces during his/her educational journey. It is important to acknowledge the causes and factors of stress in student's life so that we can equip them with tools and techniques to manage stress effectively. Schools can empower them to navigate challenges, build resilience, and thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Through a holistic and collaborative approach to addressing stress in schools, we can create environment where students feel supported, empowered, and equipped with the skills and resources needed to flourish academically and emotionally.*

**Keywords:** stress, school, wellness, techniques.

## OBJECTIVES

- To understand sources of stress in educational setting.
- To understand academic pressures, social challenges, and personal issues contributing to heightened levels of stress and its adverse effects on academic performance and well-being.
- To recognize the importance of promoting student's wellness.
- To assess the stressors and design policies that minimizes the effects of stressors on the student.
- To prioritize student's wellbeing and create a culture of care and compassion in school environment.

## INTRODUCTION

"Stress is a psychological and physiological state that occurs when an individual perceives a threat or challenge to their well-being, and experiences feelings of anxiety, tension, and overwhelm." (American Psychological Association)<sup>1</sup>

According to physiological definition, Stress is a normal physiological response to a perceived threat or pressure. It triggers the release of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, which prepare the body to "fight or flight." Stress can lead to feelings of anxiety, sadness, irritability, mood swings, fatigue etc. stress can disturb the sleep which than impacts the physical and mental health of the child. Chronic stress can result in development of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety disorders.

Stress levels among Indian students are a growing concern. A study published in the Journal of International Cooperation and Development found that a majority of students in higher educational institutions in India experience moderate to low levels of stress<sup>2</sup>. The main causes of stress were identified as job and career concerns, financial difficulties, academics, and workload.

Another study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that students in India experienced significant stress due to the pandemic, with females reporting higher stress levels than males<sup>3</sup>. The study highlighted the need for support systems to help students cope with stress and anxiety.

Academic pressure is a significant stressor for Indian students, particularly adolescent girls. A study published in the Journal of Education and Health Promotion found that 93-100% of school children in India reported medium to moderate stress levels, with academic pressure being a major contributor .

A study published in the Journal of Education and Health Promotion found that 93-100% of school children in India experienced medium to moderate stress levels, with 1.9% exhibiting severe stress<sup>4</sup>.

These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to address academic stress among students. Stress has emerged as a pressing issue, driven by a combination of academic pressures, social struggles, and personal problems, ultimately impacting academic success and overall well-being. Educators, administrators, and mental health professionals are increasingly seeking effective strategies to mitigate stress and foster resilience in

educational settings. All the stake holders need to prioritizing student's wellbeing by creating a culture of care and compassion. Schools must cultivate resilient, thriving communities where every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential. By understanding causes teachers, students and parents can work together and implement strategies that minimizes the stress level. Addressing stress effectively is crucial not only for the mental and emotional health of students but also for creating an optimal learning environment conducive to academic achievement and personal growth.

## SOURCES OF STRESS

School-related stress encompasses the emotional, psychological, and physical responses of students, educators, and administrators triggered by diverse demands within the academic setting. Key stressors in this environment include: academic pressure, school culture and environment, peer influence, institutional policies. Competitive academic environment and fear of failure increases the stress level. Students often struggle with anxiety and stress due to fears about social rejection, conformity, and peer influence. Moreover, adverse interactions with peers can leave a lasting imprint on students' mental health and overall well-being. The overall school environment like overcrowded classrooms, insufficient resources, and inadequate support for students with special needs exacerbate stress levels. Strict school policies such as zero-tolerance policies or harsh disciplinary actions can create a stressful atmosphere.

Socioeconomic disparities can lead to stress and anxiety. Aspects like parental expectations, familial conflicts or instability, financial pressures, divorce, or trauma intensify existing stress level, creating a more challenging and stressful atmosphere for students. Over committing to extracurricular activities or sports can lead to stress and burnout due to time constraints and performance pressures. This can result in emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, and a diminished overall well-being. Overindulgence in screen time and social media can lead students down a path of increased stress, anxiety, and disconnection from the real world, as they become mired in a virtual realm of unattainable standards and curated perfection.

Lack of social connections, leading to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Constant comparison of oneself to others over social media, leads to feelings of inadequacy and stress. Need of constant external validation on social media creates unrealistic goals and stress. Recognizing these lifestyle factors can help individuals identify areas for improvement and make positive changes to reduce stress and promote overall well-being.

## STRESS MANGEMENT TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

**MINDFULNESS PRACTICE:** Research suggests that regular mindfulness practice can lower levels of stress hormones and improve overall well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)<sup>5</sup>. Mindfulness practices encourage individuals to develop a non-judgmental awareness of their thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and environment. By focusing on the present moment, mindfulness meditation helps alleviate stress and anxiety, promoting a deeper sense of calm and well-being. Mindfulness practices can be integrated into school's curricular and co curricular activities. It can be integrated into daily routines through short, informal practices such as mindful walking, eating, or listening, nature observation, yoga, journaling etc, to increase self awareness and reduce stress. Having short breaks during the classroom session or before examination can help them reduce stress.

Encouraging mindfulness in everyday activities promotes self awareness and reduces habitual patterns of mind-wandering and rumination. Integration of mindfulness practices into the school curriculum can support social emotional learning, conflict resolution, and positive behavior management. (SchonertReichl & Lawlor, 2010)<sup>6</sup>

**PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:** Physical activity stimulates the production and release of endorphins, neurotransmitters in the brain known as "feel-good" chemicals. Endorphins act as natural painkillers and mood elevators, reducing feelings of stress and promoting a sense of well-being. Regular physical activity not only reduces acute stress levels but also provides long-term benefits for physical health and resilience. Exercise is associated with lower risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and diabetes, contributing to overall well-being and longevity (Booth, Roberts & Laye, 2012).

A study published in the Journal of Clinical Psychology found that exercise significantly reduced stress and improved mood in individuals with chronic stress. Physical activity includes a wide range of activities such as walking, jogging, swimming, cycling, dancing, and sports.

"2017 Stress in America: Coping with Change", shows 63% of respondents reported exercise as an effective stress management technique. American Psychological Association (2017).

**COGNITIVE BEHAVIOUR TECHNIQUE:** Cognitive behaviour therapy is an action oriented psychotherapy that helps students understand and change negative thought pattern of an individual. It recognizes and challenge the distorted thinking pattern of the student that contributes to stress. It helps develop coping mechanism among students through skills such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or visualization. It promotes self care activities which help in managing stress effectively. It focuses on practicing gratitude through reflection on daily basis. Reframe students' perspective to see challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. CBT is a helpful approach for managing stress, and its techniques can be learned and practiced with the guidance of a mental health professional.

**HEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES:** A well-balanced diet, adequate sleep, and regular exercise are key to maintaining mental and physical well-being. Students should avoid neglecting these aspects, as poor health can exacerbate stress and anxiety. With current trends of technology and its inappropriate use is adding onto the unhealthy lifestyle and its adverse effects are seen at very young age in the form of physical and psychological disorders. Disrupting body's natural sleep cycle with late night bingeing online series results in fatigue and stress. Consuming high amounts of processed foods, sugar, and caffeine increases stress.

**PARENTAL SUPPORT:** Parents are pivotal in nurturing their child's mental well-being. Encouraging open communication between parents and students can help reduce pressure. Parents should focus on supporting their children's efforts rather than just the outcomes, fostering a healthier approach to learning. Praising the efforts, persistence and hardwork of the child and celebrating small achievements will give a stress free atmosphere to the child. Allowing children to express their fears and concerns can help alleviate stress. Creating a safe space where students can share their struggles without judgment can promote emotional well-being.

## CONCLUSION

Stress-free education is a holistic approach that prioritizes student's well-being, autonomy, and academic success. By implementing strategies such as personalized learning, reduced emphasis on standardized testing, and emphasis on well-being and self-care, educational institutions can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Recognizing and celebrating small victories and improvements. Helping children view challenges as opportunities for growth and development. adopting supportive and holistic approach towards learning. Redefining success by emphasizing hard work, progress, and resilience over grades and results. Promote time management and organization. Teach students to set realistic goals and priorities and breaking down larger tasks into manageable chunks. Encourage use of calendars and planners develop a system for keeping track of assignments, deadlines, and appointments. By integrating these approaches into the curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school culture, we can empower students to develop the resilience, coping skills, and self-awareness necessary to navigate life's challenges effectively. It is essential to recognize that addressing stress in schools requires a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders, including educators, parents, community members, and policymakers. By fostering partnerships and creating a shared commitment to student wellness, we can create a more holistic and sustainable approach to addressing stress in educational settings.

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