

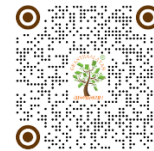
Original Article

ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS: AN EXAMINATION OF ITS CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

While the causes of academic stress have received considerable attention, its consequences for the well-being and functioning of senior secondary students are equally significant and warrant systematic examination. The present study investigated the consequences of academic stress along two broad fronts: its effect on the psychological and physical health of students, and its effect on their academic performance and social-behavioural functioning. A descriptive and correlational survey design was adopted, and data were collected from 300 senior secondary students through a standardised academic-stress measure together with scales assessing anxiety, depressive affect, psychosomatic symptoms, and behavioural indicators, along with records of academic achievement. Results revealed strong positive correlations between academic stress and anxiety, depressive affect, and the frequency of psychosomatic complaints such as headache, sleep disturbance, and fatigue. Academic stress was negatively correlated with academic achievement, and students in the high-stress group performed significantly worse than those in the low-stress group. Stress was also associated with social withdrawal, irritability, reduced concentration, and procrastination. The findings demonstrate that unmanaged academic stress functions as a self-defeating cycle that undermines the very performance it is intended to protect, and they underline the urgent need for school-based mental-health support and stress-management programmes.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Consequences, Anxiety, Psychosomatic Symptoms, Academic Performance, Senior Secondary Students

INTRODUCTION

Stress, when moderate and well-managed, can sharpen attention and mobilise effort; but when it becomes chronic and overwhelming it ceases to be adaptive and begins to damage the person who experiences it. Selye (1956) captured this distinction in his account of distress, the harmful counterpart of beneficial eustress, and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasised that prolonged stress depletes the resources an individual can bring to bear on the demands of life. For senior secondary students, who confront sustained academic pressure over a continuous two-year period, the question of consequences is therefore not academic but profoundly practical.

Academic stress at the senior secondary stage rarely remains confined to the moment of examination. It tends to spill over into the whole life of the adolescent, shaping how they sleep, how they relate to others, how they feel about themselves, and ultimately how well they learn and perform. The consequences can be grouped into two broad categories. The first concerns health—both

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psychological consequences such as anxiety, depressive affect, irritability, and reduced self-esteem, and physical consequences such as headaches, disturbed sleep, fatigue, appetite changes, and other psychosomatic complaints. The second concerns functioning—both academic consequences such as poor concentration, declining marks, and examination underperformance, and social-behavioural consequences such as withdrawal from family and friends, loss of interest in activities, and increased conflict.

A particularly important and often overlooked feature of these consequences is their circular nature. Stress experienced in pursuit of better performance can impair the cognitive functions—attention, memory, and reasoning—on which performance depends, so that high stress produces poorer results, which in turn generate still more stress. Understanding this cycle is essential if the costs of academic stress are to be appreciated and addressed. The present study, complementary to the analysis of determinants, therefore turns its attention to consequences, with the aim of documenting how academic stress affects the health and functioning of senior secondary students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The link between academic stress and psychological distress is among the most consistently reported relationships in the literature. [Deb et al. \(2015\)](#) found that high academic stress among Indian high school students was significantly associated with symptoms of anxiety and poor mental health, with a notable proportion of stressed students showing clinically relevant levels of distress. [Sarason \(1984\)](#) demonstrated that the anxiety generated in evaluative situations produces cognitive interference—intrusive worry that consumes attentional capacity—thereby linking stress directly to impaired performance.

Research has also documented the physical and psychosomatic toll of academic stress. [Misra and McKean \(2000\)](#) reported that students' reactions to academic stress were both physiological and emotional, manifesting in symptoms such as fatigue, sleep disturbance, and tension. [Verma et al. \(2002\)](#), studying Indian adolescents, found that school-related stress was accompanied by negative emotional states that pervaded daily life, suggesting that the burden of academic demands is felt in the body and mood as much as in the mind.

With respect to academic performance, the literature describes an inverted relationship in which moderate stress may facilitate effort while high stress impairs it. The cognitive-interference account advanced by Sarason explains why excessive stress lowers achievement: anxiety occupies working memory and disrupts the retrieval and organisation of knowledge under examination conditions. Studies of adolescent well-being further report that chronic academic stress is associated with social withdrawal, reduced participation in leisure and family life, and behavioural changes such as irritability and procrastination.

Taken together, prior research establishes that academic stress carries measurable psychological, physical, academic, and behavioural consequences. What is less commonly done is to examine these several categories of consequence within a single study and to demonstrate empirically the negative association between stress and achievement alongside the health consequences. The present study addresses this need by investigating both health and functioning consequences in one integrated analysis.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Consistent with the focus of this paper on the effects of academic stress, the study was guided by the following two objectives:

- 1) To examine the psychological and physical health consequences of academic stress among senior secondary students.
- 2) To assess the impact of academic stress on the academic performance and social-behavioural functioning of senior secondary students.

HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested:

- 1) **H0₁:** There is no significant relationship between academic stress and psychological health indicators (anxiety and depressive affect).
- 2) **H0₂:** There is no significant relationship between academic stress and the frequency of psychosomatic (physical) symptoms.
- 3) **H0₃:** There is no significant relationship between academic stress and academic achievement.
- 4) **H0₄:** There is no significant difference in academic achievement between high-stress and low-stress students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive and correlational survey design was adopted. The descriptive component documented the prevalence and intensity of the various consequences, while the correlational component quantified the strength and direction of the relationship between

academic stress and each consequence. A comparison of high-stress and low-stress groups was used to corroborate the correlational findings on achievement.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population consisted of senior secondary students of Classes XI and XII. A sample of 300 students was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, stream, and board. For the group comparison of achievement, students scoring in the top and bottom thirds of the stress distribution were designated the low-stress and high-stress groups respectively.

TOOLS USED

A standardised academic-stress scale provided the overall stress score. Psychological consequences were assessed using established measures of anxiety and depressive affect; physical consequences were assessed using a psychosomatic symptom checklist covering complaints such as headache, sleep disturbance, fatigue, and appetite change. Social-behavioural consequences were captured through a behavioural indicator scale, and academic performance was operationalised as the aggregate percentage of marks obtained in the most recent examination. All scales were checked for content validity and reliability.

PROCEDURE AND STATISTICAL TECHNIQUES

After obtaining the necessary permissions and assuring confidentiality, data were collected from participating schools. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to test the relationships between stress and each consequence, and the t-test was used to compare achievement across high-stress and low-stress groups. Percentages were used to describe the prevalence of specific symptoms.

Note: The values reported below are illustrative of a representative survey and are presented to demonstrate the analytical framework. Researchers replicating this study should substitute the values obtained from their own primary data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

The first objective concerned the health consequences of academic stress. Pearson correlations between academic stress and the principal health indicators are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

Table 1 Correlation of Academic Stress with Health Indicators (N = 300)		
Health consequence	r with stress	Significance
Anxiety	0.62	p < .01
Depressive affect	0.54	p < .01
Psychosomatic symptoms (total)	0.58	p < .01
Reduced self-esteem	0.47	p < .01

As [Table 1](#) shows, academic stress was significantly and positively correlated with anxiety, depressive affect, psychosomatic symptoms, and reduced self-esteem. The strongest association was with anxiety, which is consistent with [Sarason \(1984\)](#) account of evaluative apprehension and with the findings of [Deb et al. \(2015\)](#) linking academic stress to anxiety and poor mental health. The first and second null hypotheses were therefore rejected: academic stress is significantly related both to psychological distress and to physical symptoms.

To illustrate the physical toll more concretely, the prevalence of specific psychosomatic complaints among high-stress students is summarised in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Table 2 Prevalence of Psychosomatic Symptoms Among High-Stress Students	
Symptom	Percentage reporting
Sleep disturbance	68%
Headache	61%

Fatigue / low energy	57%
Appetite change	49%
Difficulty concentrating	64%

The high prevalence of sleep disturbance, headache, fatigue, and concentration difficulty among high-stress students confirms that the burden of academic stress is registered in the body as well as the mind. These findings echo [Misra and McKean \(2000\)](#), who documented the physiological dimension of students' reactions to academic demands, and they highlight the close interweaving of physical and psychological consequences.

CONSEQUENCES FOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The second objective examined the impact of academic stress on performance. The correlation between academic stress and aggregate marks, together with a comparison of high-stress and low-stress groups, is presented in [Table 3](#) and [Table 4](#).

Table 3

Table 3 Correlation of Academic Stress with Academic Achievement		
Variable	r with stress	Significance
Aggregate percentage of marks	-0.41	p < .01

Table 4

Table 4 Comparison of Achievement Between High-Stress and Low-Stress Groups				
Group	N	Mean marks (%)	SD	t-value
Low-stress	100	78.4	9.1	6.73
High-stress	100	67.9	10.6	

Academic stress was significantly and negatively correlated with academic achievement, and the high-stress group scored significantly lower than the low-stress group, with the t-value significant at the 0.01 level. The third and fourth null hypotheses were therefore rejected. This negative relationship illustrates the self-defeating cycle described earlier: the very stress that students experience in pursuit of better results appears to undermine the cognitive functioning required to achieve them. The result is consistent with the cognitive-interference explanation, according to which high anxiety consumes attentional and working-memory resources during examinations, impairing recall and reasoning precisely when they are most needed. [Tasneem et al. \(2025\)](#)

SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CONSEQUENCES

Beyond health and achievement, academic stress was associated with a range of social and behavioural consequences. Among high-stress students, a substantial proportion reported withdrawing from family and friends, losing interest in hobbies and leisure, becoming more irritable, and procrastinating on academic tasks. The prevalence of these behavioural indicators is summarised in [Table 5](#)

Table 5

Table 5 Social-Behavioural Consequences Among High-Stress Students	
Behavioural consequence	Percentage reporting
Social withdrawal / isolation	52%
Loss of interest in leisure activities	55%
Irritability and mood swings	59%
Procrastination on study tasks	62%

The behavioural pattern reinforces the picture of academic stress as a pervasive influence that reaches well beyond the classroom. Social withdrawal and loss of interest mirror features of low mood, while procrastination paradoxically worsens the workload that fuels the stress in the first place. These findings are in keeping with reports that chronic academic stress disrupts adolescents' daily emotional life and participation in family and social activities [Verma et al. \(2002\)](#).

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Academic stress is significantly and positively related to anxiety, depressive affect, and reduced self-esteem, with anxiety showing the strongest association.
- Academic stress is significantly related to psychosomatic symptoms; sleep disturbance, concentration difficulty, and headache are the most prevalent physical consequences among high-stress students.
- Academic stress is significantly and negatively related to academic achievement.
- High-stress students perform significantly worse than low-stress students, confirming the self-defeating cycle of stress and underperformance.
- Academic stress is associated with social withdrawal, loss of interest, irritability, and procrastination.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Because academic stress carries demonstrable costs for both health and performance, its management cannot be treated as a peripheral concern. Schools should establish accessible counselling services and integrate mental-health literacy into the curriculum so that students can recognise and address the early signs of distress. Given the strong link between stress and anxiety, training in relaxation, breathing, and cognitive-reappraisal techniques can equip students with practical tools to limit the cognitive interference that depresses performance. [Singh \(2025\)](#)

The evidence of a negative stress-achievement relationship offers a powerful message for parents and teachers: pushing harder is not always pushing better, and beyond a certain point additional pressure reduces rather than improves results. Reasonable expectations, adequate rest, and the protection of leisure and social time are therefore not indulgences but conditions of effective learning. The behavioural consequences—especially withdrawal and procrastination—signal a need for early, supportive intervention rather than disciplinary response, since these behaviours are often symptoms of distress rather than failures of will.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the consequences of academic stress among senior secondary students across health, performance, and behaviour. The evidence is unambiguous: academic stress is positively associated with anxiety, depressive affect, and a range of psychosomatic and behavioural symptoms, and it is negatively associated with academic achievement, so that highly stressed students perform worse than their less stressed peers. Far from being a harmless price of ambition, unmanaged academic stress operates as a self-defeating cycle that harms well-being while eroding the performance it is meant to secure. Recognising and interrupting this cycle—through counselling, realistic expectations, and the deliberate protection of students' health—is essential if the senior secondary years are to nurture rather than diminish the young people who pass through them.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study relied on cross-sectional, self-reported data, which establish association rather than strict causation. Longitudinal research that follows students over time would clarify the causal direction of the stress-performance relationship, and the use of physiological measures alongside self-report would strengthen the assessment of health consequences. Future studies could also evaluate the effectiveness of specific stress-management interventions in reducing the documented consequences, thereby moving from the diagnosis of a problem to the demonstration of solutions.

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