



# An analysis of business students' stressors and their coping strategies in the post-pandemic era

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**Abstract** The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a dramatic change in teaching–learning practices in higher education across the world. The post-pandemic era with a new shift of teaching–learning phase raises the concern of students' psychological well-being, especially the novice, i.e., first-year undergraduate students, as first-year students often struggle to adjust to the new environment of higher institutions, thereby depressive symptoms are more prevalent among them. In this regard, a qualitative study was conducted followed by a dyadic approach to explore the symptoms of students' psychological stressors, their causes, and provide essential remedies for coping with such behaviors in the post-pandemic era. The findings show that students' stressors were commonly reported due to the academic workload, institutional regulations, lack of resources, and financial constraints. Regarding indications, unusual behavior, lack of confidence, improper sleep, and lack of motivation were identified as the primary symptoms of students' stress. However,

participants reported a lack of understanding regarding stress-related matters. Yet, students and faculty members try to adopt several strategies for reducing such stressors. By examining the perceived psychological stress, indications, and coping behaviors, this study enriches the literature by bridging pragmatic and theoretical gaps regarding students' stressors of business management. Furthermore, the study mainly suggests that adequate institutional support should be provided to deal with students' problems that cause stress. Also, universities should organize workshops or seminars to cultivate psychological health awareness among students and faculty members.

**Keywords** Stress · Stress creators · Stress indicators · Coping strategies · Undergraduate business students · Qualitative analysis · Ecological model

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant interruption in all the domains of human life (Kalwani 2021), which also interrupted educational activities, and students encountered several learning challenges worldwide (Akram et al. 2021a; Baloran 2020). At the same time, this transition has given an opportunity for reconsidering and reshaping the assumptions about education in general and higher education in particular

(Akram et al. 2021b). Though higher education's visions and educational objectives may vary, and are questioned across nations, there is a growing consensus that the updated version of the education system is much better than the previous one (Rapanta et al. 2021). Therefore, it has become crucial for teachers and students to update their skills and knowledge to embrace the new horizons of the education system in this globalized era. However, the educational sector encountered several challenges in the preliminary phase of the pandemic in adopting new modes of instructional practices, and about half of the student population was affected globally (UNESCO 2020). For instance, the primary online teaching and learning challenges may involve the lack of support and resources, technological incompetency, time constraints, and lack of interaction with peers and teachers (Akram et al. 2021a; Adedoyin and Soykan 2020). Online learning is also associated with the students' psychological well-being; as McCluskey et al. (2021) reported that students feel less connected with their peers and teachers due to a lack of face-to-face interaction in e-learning programs, which causes mental health problems among them. Furthermore, the distractive workspace conditions, limited access to devices, and Internet connection, have also been reported as other constraints that cause concern for students' academic performance and psychological well-being during distance learning programs (Shin and Hickey 2021).

Under the nose of several challenges, battling the pandemic for more than a year is the story of a struggle of individuals in educational practices that have revealed the overall picture and provided an openness towards new learning opportunities that were not as evident before. However, teachers and students learned a lot in their new roles of teaching and learning; this transition requires adopting all new requirements, not only for students but also for teachers. As intelligently stated by Hollander (2021), 'the pandemic crisis is taking higher education back to the school.' On the one hand, the temporary shift towards online education tried to support teaching and learning activities (Akram et al. 2021c). On the other hand, online teaching and learning also provided a flexible approach and better access to learning opportunities as a substitute for face-to-face instruction (Rapanta et al. 2021); it also improved the digital skills of teachers and students. After taking vaccinations,

teaching activities came to their regular routine, and some universities followed the previous traditional approach. In contrast, few universities integrated new technological approaches in their teaching practices to assist students' learning (Wang et al. 2021). The situation thus raises the concern to explore the experiences and challenges being faced by higher education students in a new shift of learning phase.

Students from diverse educational fields endeavor different experiences. Still, it has been noticed that students from social sciences, especially from the business departments, experience more stress due to several reasons (Singh et al. 2020). Business management education aims to train students to become competent, knowledgeable, and produce professional competencies to work efficiently to accomplish organizational goals. However, business students are undertaken through rigorous selection and interviews to identify intellectual and entrepreneurial mindset individuals with a solid commitment to achieving these goals (Zreen et al. 2019). Students then spend 4 years on becoming business professionals, and once enrolled, students and business institutes make a mutual commitment envisioned to prepare students useful for national (public or private) interests and fulfilling their career individually (Arif et al. 2019). Besides, despite facing the challenging environment of the university, students remain optimistic and observe that the university is a time of personal development, knowledge-enhancement, and well-being. As a result of their positive attitudes and behaviors, students can easily achieve their learning objectives (Luthans et al. 2012). Unfortunately, many studies report that academic pressure might negatively influence some students' mental health and cause stress and depression in the university environment (Rehmani et al. 2018; Tang et al. 2020). Such depressed conditions among students often adversely affect their academic achievement and satisfaction (Mirhosseini et al. 2020). Moreover, these potential stressors also negatively affect the education providers and teachers' instructional practices (Health Education England 2019).

Regarding age, the undergraduate students' ages range from adolescence to adulthood, and this is identified as the most sensitive stage in their lives (Cohen and Cohen 2013). The intensive biological, psychological, and social changes occur during this phase, and individuals experience their developmental

track (Dahl et al. 2018). This stage also raises concern for several kinds of risk behaviors among them, such as nervousness, depression, and other emotional issues (Essau 2020). Thus, the individuals from this age group are more prone to be affected by mental stress due to the academic pressure they receive during a new transitioning phase of teaching–learning practices.

In light of Yikealo et al. (2018), academic and environmental pressures can generate stress among students in these five domains (social, physical, psychological, ecological, and educational). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has also raised concerns about the psychological well-being of students across the globe, which was more vulnerable for younger people (Varma et al. 2021). The major factors that were observed to be responsible for psychological stress among people involve meager sleep quality, resilience, loneliness, and younger age (Varma et al. 2021), socio-emotional challenges (Shin and Hickey 2021), online learning uncertainties (Shafiq et al. 2021), fear of COVID-19 infection (Sultana et al. 2021), and employment and financial stressors (Noman et al. 2021). Their exposure to various educational impediments and physical threats led them to depression and anxiety during the pandemic (McCluskey et al. 2021), negatively affecting their academic performance. Therefore, it signifies that mental health plays a significant role in students' academic accomplishments. Without having sound mental health, it is difficult for them to acquire their educational objectives efficiently (Lipson and Eisenberg 2018).

Moreover, depressive symptoms are more prevalent among first-year students due to several factors such as heavy academic workload, lack of social support, financial stressors, and socio-emotional and personal challenges (Pit et al. 2018; Cage et al. 2021). These challenges negatively affect students' psychological well-being, which further inhibits their overall university adjustment (Sanagavarapu and Abraham 2021). The primary reason for facing many issues is the unfamiliarity with the new environment (Fernando et al. 2020), non-native English language programs (Jung et al. 2021), financial constraints (Butler-Rees and Nick Robinson 2020), and fear of failure (Whittle et al. 2020). Given such challenges, university authorities should provide practical and emotional support to students by understanding their expectations and facilitating their transition to university

education (Cage et al. 2021). Unpredictably, after coming to the regular routine, some strange actions of some students from business departments were noticed in the universities of Sukkur city by the teachers. These behaviors include sudden sickness, frequent contacts/visits to teachers' staff room, breaking their pencil/pen or tearing notebooks, precipitous quitting semester examinations, and poor performance of good students. Such behaviors are essential to understand, and remedial solutions should be suggested for those students who have been suffering from such situations either at class, hostel, or home.

Furthermore, very few studies exist regarding investigating the stressors of business students, especially in the post-pandemic phase. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the symptoms of students' unusual practices and their causes and provide essential remedies for coping with such behaviors. The study would be helpful to offer solutions to adjusting to the new phase of the learning environment guided by the following objectives:

- (1) To investigate the experiences, causes, and indications of the stress of business management students in the universities of Sukkur city.
- (2) To investigate the strategies the students and faculty members use to deal with this stress.

## Literature review

Stress is defined as a “non-specific physiological reaction to external and internal demands where individuals feel pressure and threats in their environments” (Myers 2005). In other words, it is referred to the perception of people lacking resources to cope with the current or future course of consequences. A distressful circumstances arising out of responses to critical situation cause disruptions (Pilania et al. 2013). However, the same situation may not cause mental disturbance to all, as everyone experiences situations differently (Wahed and Hassan 2017).

Moreover, stress or depression is reported as a severe problem in young adults. It is commonly experienced by almost 350 million people worldwide (Pilania et al. 2013), ranging from 5 to 70% among adolescents and young adults. The situation worsens when dealing with the students because it adversely affects students' academic performance by negatively

affecting their motivation, concentration, and perception (Pascoe et al. 2020). Regarding factors, Omar et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the level of academic stress among students at University Technology Malaysia (UTM) and found a high level of academic stress commonly due to tests, scores, peer influence, and self-induced stress. At the same time, results from the study of Hasan and Bao (2020) indicate that the fear of losing the academic year and unfamiliarity with the new technological e-learning platforms (Crooks et al. 2020) has been specified as chief factor of psychological distress among undergraduate students during COVID-19.

The ‘American Freshmen National Norms Study’ reports that first-year students experience more stress than more experienced ones (Pryor et al. 2010). Regarding gender differences, several studies report that male students experience less stress than female students because of academic responsibilities (Naz et al. 2017). Furthermore, unmanaged problems may lead to various psychological issues, and these problems are thus considered the contributors or factors that affect the mental health of individuals (Oliver et al. 2014). The most prevalent mental health-related problems during the age of adolescence are anxiety disorders, including depression (Forman-Hoffman et al. 2016). These can have adverse effects on personal relationships (Omar et al. 2020), cause academic burnout (Singh et al. 2020), lead to a lack of sleep (Campbell et al. 2018), hinder academic performance (Langtree et al. 2018), cause avoidant behavior (Mitchell, 2020), and cause difficulty in adjusting to the university (Akram et al. 2020). Furthermore, teachers also find it challenging to teach students with social or emotional behavioral challenges, which affects the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom (Hoogendijk et al. 2020).

In addition, Saeed et al. (2018) reported that stress is the result of students’ negative behavior causing poor health and low grades, increased alcohol use (Bugaj et al. 2016), depression levels (Abu-Ghazaleh et al. 2016), suicidal thoughts (Eva et al. 2015), reduced self-esteem, and procrastination (Erschens et al. 2018).

On the other hand, the students who find themselves capable of managing stressors better might slow down depression levels, improve their mood and academic performance, and adopt healthy eating habits (Baloran

2020). Prior studies have proposed several strategies to manage stressors and anxiety among students. Garrett et al. (2017) specified that adopting time-management skills may reduce stress among students. Therefore, they should learn to manage their time efficiently in order to prevent heavy workload burdens. Similarly, to reduce the feeling of loneliness and homesickness among students, Selwyn (2008) advocated that the use of social media and Internet browsing helps students stay relaxed—about 50% greater than meeting and spending time with friends and family. In addition, the longitudinal study of Garrett et al. (2017) found academic burden as the major predictor of stress among students at California University. The students adopted three main strategies to reduce stress, including reading books, listening to music, and talking to friends. Thus, extra-curricular work enhances students’ psychological well-being, leading to increased academic self-efficacy (Griffiths et al. 2021). However, there are many extra-curricular approaches, but the most effective complementary ways to manage and reduce stress/anxiety among individuals includes physical exercise (Nanthakumar 2020), mindfulness, compassion-based interventions (Gonzalez-Garcia et al. 2021), and yoga practices (West et al. 2021).

### **The role of teachers in students’ mental well-being**

Student anxiety is one of the most common occurrences in today’s classrooms, affecting their mental health negatively impacting their learning and performance (Kassymova et al. 2018). A student suffering from anxiety may find it challenging to participate actively in the class. The teacher plays a crucial role in identifying symptoms of different mental and physical disorders like anxiety, irritability, mood disorder, and eating disorders in students and finding solutions to resolve these (Willis et al. 2020). A teacher is that important person who can contribute as a counselor, tutor, and parent by adopting several strategies to cope with students’ problems according to their needs, as teachers spend a large amount of time in contact with their students (Willis et al. 2019). Previous studies also show that emotional support provided to the students by their teachers is associated with a reduction in students’ behavioral problems and depressive symptoms (Joyce and Early 2014). The students who

receive support from their teachers endure less psychological and academic concerns than those who do not receive remedial assistance from their teachers (Noman et al. 2021).

Furthermore, teachers have also observed the outcome of several universal mental health intervention programs within the school setting. Regarding the extent, teacher involvement has been seen in 40.8% of the interventions, and 18.4% of the interventions were delivered solely by the teachers (Franklin et al. 2012) and have been engaged in an intensified pedagogy of care (Huber 2010). Teachers often adopt the strategies and techniques that help students to accomplish their academic objectives (Edmondson et al. 2016). The educational objectives primarily include students' grades or scores. They also extend their efforts to support students with depressive symptoms but often find themselves unprepared and incapable of doing so (Ekornes 2017). The reasons behind the incompetence of teachers in coping with the students' stressors are associated with several underlying factors—the main reasons being the lack of initial training (Shepherd et al. 2016) and in-service programs (Shelemy et al. 2019) that may prepare teachers to deal with the depressive symptoms of students. Teachers also possess a limited understanding of the association between school segregation and mental health difficulties (Tiernan et al. 2020). Around 30% of children with mental health problems have not been assisted by any input from teachers in educational institutions (Meltzer et al. 2000) in underdeveloped countries. Moreover, teachers are not provided with adequate support and supervision from professionals with expertise in mental well-being (Sharpe et al. 2016). They often face trouble in identifying and classifying students with stress-related issues before major occurrences of problem behavior (Smith and Yang, 2017). The situation thus raises concerns to enhance teachers' competencies to identify and deal with such issues of students.

### Theoretical framework

Considering the fact that man is a social animal, he/she cannot escape from the influence of his/her environment and behave accordingly (Lin 2012). Bronfenbrenner (1979) also describes the association between an individual and his/her environment in his

systematic ecological theory. He further argues that with an individual's development, their interaction also grows with the environment and becomes multifarious. Thereby, with the change in the environment, a transition of the individual's behavior also occurs. Each individual has different needs; therefore, specific attention should be provided to understand and facilitate these needs to adjust to a new environment. The concept of environmental influence is divided up into various realms based upon their proximity or remoteness. Bronfenbrenner (1979) splits them into four different systems that influence individual behavior (as shown in Fig. 1), namely: micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems:

- (1) *Microsystems* The microsystem involves the experiences and behaviors of the individuals in a setting where they come into direct contact. An example of microsystem influence would be the student's relationship with those whom they have direct interactions with, i.e., their family, peers, and teachers.
- (2) *Mesosystems* The mesosystem consists of the interconnections of two or more systems in which a developing person actively participates. In the case of students in the post-pandemic era, they may have indirect interactions with academic heads, neighborhood peer groups, or teachers.
- (3) *Exosystems* The exosystem involves an interaction with a setting where an individual is not directly involved, such as teachers' working relations and university board activities. Although these activities are completely unrelated to the students, they may have some impact on them.
- (4) *Macrosystems* Lastly, the macrosystem involves all the components mentioned above, but also includes norms and values in a culture or subculture that an individual encounters. Based on that culture, an individual's family holds certain beliefs regarding community or religion. Students' beliefs and assumptions about learning in the post-pandemic era are examples of macrosystem influence.

Similarly, when students enter a new university environment, their interactions with academic, social, administrative, and other institutional aspects occur, which defines their psychological responses based on



their self-efficacy and attributes. These responses further describe students' attitudes regarding their adjustment to the institution. Some students show positive attitudes, and easily adjust to the new environment, whereas some may encounter challenges and undergo particular behavioral problems, which create stressors. Thereby, the theory suggests that students' particular attributes are essential for their effective academic and social integration, including control over feelings and coping skills to deal with certain difficulties and adjust to a new environment. Various studies have adopted the ecological theory to investigate the behavioral, emotional, and social problems of students in a classroom (McPhee and Craig 2009; Cosma and Soni 2019). Therefore, the present study is also supported by the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) because it is the most applicable to the current study.

## Methodology

The study was followed by employing a qualitative design with the help of semi-structured interviews, as semi-structured interviews involve a blend of closed- and open-ended questions and are led by the follow-up (why or how) questions. Therefore, semi-structured interviews help in acquiring comprehensive data (Whiting 2008) and were considered the most appropriate approach for investigating students' stressors in depth. The interview questions were structured by following the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and prior literature regarding students' anxiety, strange behavior, reasons behind problems, and suggested solutions.

Along with students, the views of faculty members, are critical in strengthening the understanding of causes and indications of stress among students. In this regard, a dyadic approach was adopted, where two participants (students and faculty members) interacted and responded to the interview questions simultaneously. The dyadic interaction allows one interviewee to trigger ideas from the other participant, which helps them explore a topic through mutual understanding, where participants share their experiences and reflections easily in a comfortable environment (Morgan et al. 2013). The interviewer may choose to be part of the discussion by asking semi-structured or follow-up questions or simply listening to the ongoing

conversation. In this way, the dyadic discussion helps an interviewer to collect additional disclosures from each participant (Morgan et al. 2013).

Regarding the trustworthiness of the content of the questions, they were sent to the experts of a similar field to check the quality of the research questions. After receiving their feedback, only the questions that were most relevant to achieve the study's objectives were included in the interview protocol. The researcher conducted all the interviews via direct face-to-face communication, which lasted for 20–35 min, and audio was recorded after getting permission from the participants. In addition, the researcher also followed all the ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of the participants of the study, which includes keeping their information private and getting their consent before proceeding. Furthermore, to keep the identities of the participants confidential, their names were changed to pseudo names.

## Sampling

Since it is difficult and time-consuming to assess the entire population, researchers choose a few parts of the population, termed as samples, which exhibit similar characteristics and are the true representatives of the whole population; this process is known as sampling (Ott and Longnecker 2015). The sampling technique was guided by convenient sampling, a nonprobability sampling type where the researcher can easily assess the target population. Since a qualitative sample size of ten participants is considered adequate for a homogenous population (Marshall et al., 2013), 20 (ten faculty members and ten undergraduate students of business discipline) participants were recruited from different universities in Sukkur city. Table 1 demonstrates the demographic information of the study's participants, which includes six males and four female faculty members from age 35 to 50. Students' demographics indicate five males and five female students from age 18 to 20.

## Data analysis

The recorded interviews were first transcribed and then shown to another researcher for inspection to ensure the results' reliability. Subsequently, the

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics

Dyads	Gender		Pseudo names		Age	
	Faculty members	Students	Faculty members	Students	Faculty members	Students
1	M	M	SN	PI	35	19
2	M	M	KU	SK	41	20
3	F	M	ST	YU	44	18
4	F	M	NS	RT	42	18
5	M	F	AS	FL	50	20
6	F	F	HM	SZ	34	19
7	M	M	HS	RS	38	18
8	F	F	LI	VB	39	19
9	M	F	LV	NS	42	20
10	M	F	MQ	WP	33	19

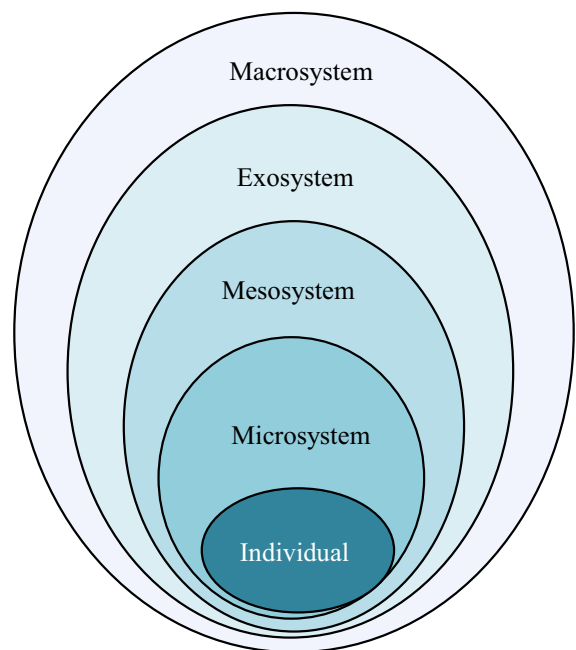
transcribed data were analyzed by following the thematic approach of Miles et al. (2013), which took place in several steps. Firstly, the researcher got familiar with the data by reading the transcribed interviews several times. After familiarizing with the data, each item of information was labeled with its respective initial codes, which are considered the building blocks of data analysis. In the next phase, the coded data were reviewed and repeated several times to refine and identify areas of similarity between codes. Subsequently, the codes were grouped in the respected categories, known as themes. A theme apprehends important information regarding the study's objectives based on the participants' responses (Braun and Clarke 2013). After generating themes, they were reviewed with regards to the coded and entire data to ensure its authenticity, and finally, a particular theme was defined.

## Results

Guided by the research questions of the study, the participants' responses revealed useful insights regarding the causes, indications, and coping strategies of students' stress, which are summarized below.

### Stress creators

The most-reported stress-causing factors among students were the inadequacy of time and heavy academic

**Fig. 1** Ecological model by Bronfenbrenner (1979)

workload (shown in Fig. 2). They have to work hard in a limited time, causing stress, and are often unable to complete given tasks on time. Furthermore, according to the institutional policy, the students have to maintain a cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 3.0 to retain their university admission. Students may receive a scholarship if they obtain a CPGA of 3.5 or above. Therefore, to fulfill this policy, they are compelled to work hard, particularly by taking part in



**Fig. 2** Stress creators

daily assignments, quizzes, online and offline class participation, attendance, and presentations daily or weekly. One of the students, PI, reported:

“We often feel that it is difficult to accomplish all tasks promptly, which makes me feel depressed.”

Some students complained about the lack of resources to attend online classes. Due to several constraints, students find it hard to take synchronous online sessions and assess the instructional content adequately. This situation makes them feel depressed. One student, YU, reported:

“I feel difficulty in attending online sessions because our Internet speed is very slow, and sometimes, due to the unavailability of electricity, I can’t attend the sessions.”

Besides, students also feel pressured due to the classroom’s competitive environment, and they want to get better grades than their classmates. However, a competitive environment encourages students to work hard; on the other hand, the situation generates stress, leading to academic regression. One of the faculty members, SN, reported:

“Some students seem worried regarding their low grades and cannot progress well due to this stressor.”

The other identified stress-causing factors among students include financial constraints and

homesickness. As most students belong to low socioeconomic status families, some of the students also have to support their families. Because of this reason, students have to face several financial difficulties, which can make them feel additional stress. One of the students, YU, reported:

“I belong to a middle-class family due to which I often encounter financial problems which hinder me from studying well, and this makes me feel stressed.”

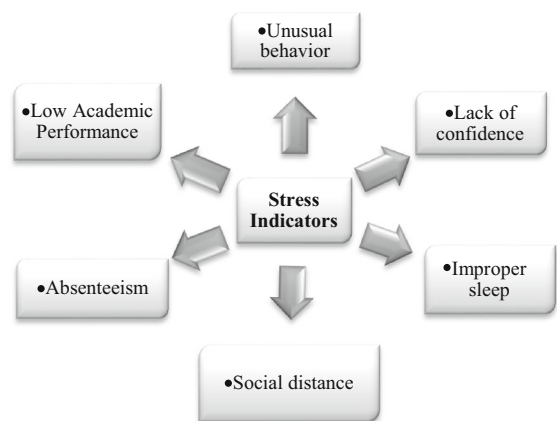
**Stress indicators**

Participants’ responses revealed several critical factors to be the symptoms of stress among students (shown in Fig. 3). The most-reported exposing symptoms of stress were unusual behavior and improper sleep of students. One of the faculty members, ST, reported:

“The weaker students behave differently in the classroom, having low confidence and poor communication.”

As mentioned above, the heavy academic workload makes students very busy, and they used to work continuously for a more extended period. This situation keeps them deprived of the sufficient sleep they require to stay fresh and active. Consequently, they undergo mental stress.

The other identified symptom of stress among students was a lack of motivation in academic matters, which led them to stay absent from the classroom.



**Fig. 3** Stress indicators



Consequently, students' performance gets affected negatively. As reported by a faculty member AS:

“I have noticed that the students who remain absent from the class lack interest in their academic performance due to which they get pressurized and cannot perform well.”

### Stress-coping strategies

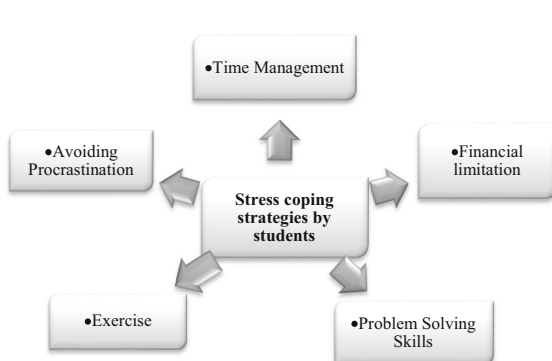
Students suffering from stress-related problems are prone to encounter social, academic, and emotional issues; consequently, they may burn out from the academic session. Therefore, students and teachers should try to resolve such issues to meet their needs by reducing stress. However, a lack of understanding was reported among participants; despite that, participants' responses identified several strategies to cope with the stress-related problems in students, which are represented below.

#### *Stress-coping mechanism of students*

The most-reported stress-causing factors among students were limited and improper time management, due to which they find it hard to complete the given tasks on time. In this regard, few students identified the strategy of appropriate management of time to cope with this issue (shown in Fig. 4). One of the students, SZ, reported:

“To accomplish the assignments timely, I try not to waste my time and work on a daily basis.”

To reduce financial constraints, the student, WP, reported:



**Fig. 4** Stress-coping strategies of students

“I try to limit my personal expenses to fulfill my academic and financial needs and prevent stress due to financial constraints.”

Plenty of assignments on a daily and weekly basis increases students' workload. Learning to manage their tasks may reduce their work burden and stress level. In this regard, a student, RS, reported:

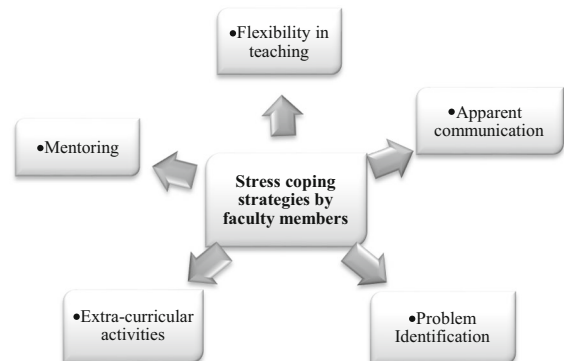
“I try to stay regular and punctual in all classes to prevent extra workload.”

#### *Stress-coping mechanism by faculty members*

A teacher plays a crucial role in identifying anxiety symptoms and exploring their causes to resolve students' stressors. However, faculty members reported a lack of support and training from their departments; nevertheless, they adopted several strategies to cope with the stress-related problems in students (shown in Fig. 5). The frequently reported technique was 'flexible teaching,' allowing teachers to understand students' concerns and show flexibility. One of the faculty members, RS, reported:

“Taking into consideration students' burdens, I give them the relaxation of time to reduce their stress.”

Furthermore, clear communication and identification of problems also emerged as another stress-coping strategy. Accordingly, if issues of students that make them stressed get identified by the teachers, they can be resolved easily. For better identification of a problem, clear communication between students and teachers contributes significantly. In this regard, a faculty member HM, identified:



**Fig. 5** Stress-coping strategies of faculty members

“We try our best to know and understand the problems of my students so that I may help them to reduce their stress somehow.”

The other coping strategies include doing exercise, performing extra-curricular activities, and assisting students like friends. One of the faculty members, SI, reported:

“To keep students mentally fresh, I engage them in extra-curricular activities or suggest them to do exercise.”

## Discussion

To achieve sustainability in higher education, it has become necessary to understand the factors affecting students' retention and provide them with the conditions that foster their success worldwide. However, this area has captured significant attention, as reflected by the previous decades' empirical and theoretical past literature. Nevertheless, the role of mental health in students' success has received little attention, specifically, the mental health problems of university students in the post-pandemic phase. In this regard, the present study attempted to explore the factors causing stress and their indications among first-year undergraduate students from the business department of different universities of Sukkur city, Pakistan.

The findings indicate that academic workload and institutional policies are the most dominant factors that increase pressure among students. Most students are found anxious due to the long working hours; consequently, they cannot find sufficient time to complete the assigned tasks on time. The same factor has been reported by Langtree et al. (2018), where academic workload contributes significantly to generating stress among students and is a major challenge for undergraduate business students in Chinese universities (Tang et al. 2020). Therefore, it is suggested that concerned educational authorities set policies that do not exceed students' academic load and they should be given adequate time to complete tasks. In this regard, the universities should organize time-management workshops, particularly for first-year students, to learn to manage their time sufficiently. According to a few studies, group work allows students to manage time efficiently and reduce stress (Van et al. 2017).

Therefore, students should be assigned group tasks to learn to manage time.

The other reported major stressor among students was financial constraints, and most of the students belong to low socioeconomic status families. Therefore, they have to encounter several challenges in their personal and academic lives to fulfill their basic needs. The same kind of stress has also been identified as a significant cause of stress (Ramachandiran and Dhana-pal 2018). To cope with this challenge, concerned authorities must take care of such students by offering specific need-based scholarships to fulfill their educational expenses adequately.

Regarding indications of stress, unusual behavior and lack of confidence were identified as the primary symptoms of students' stress. A similar indication has also been recognized as a major symptom of stress by Erschens et al. (2018). In this regard, students should be provided with adequate social support from the institution; this will help them adjust in their personal and academic lives and correlate with academic success (Coiro et al. 2017). Furthermore, sleep deprivation was identified as another indicator reported by both of the study participants. This finding reflects the findings of Campbell et al. (2018); accordingly, improper sleep was one of the major stress indicators and the stress-causing agent among students. Furthermore, Zhou et al. (2020) also found sleep problems among adolescents, especially in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further investigated that sleep problems mediate the impact of the pandemic on mental health. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to sleeplessness, and students should be encouraged to draw attention to their sleep to elevate stress and stay healthy. Besides, institutions should encourage a healthy lifestyle to be adopted by the students, including daily exercise. The other identified stress indicator was lack of interest and motivation among students, due to which they often remain absent from the classroom. A similar problem was identified as the indicator of students' stress, which signified that the students' low mental well-being was the significant predictor of their poor attendance (Pascoe et al. 2020).

In order to explore the strategies being used in universities, however, faculty members and students reported a lack of understanding regarding stress-related matters among students. Besides, faculty members are not provided with adequate support and

training from their departments. Shelemy et al. (2019) addressed a similar barrier. Moreover, the views from both participants revealed different coping strategies they use to deal with stress. The primary coping strategy identified is the flexibility adopted by faculty members in teaching. This strategy is also suggested by Bonanno and Burton (2013). The other identified stress-coping technique was engaging students in extra-curricular activities or exercising. This technique is also approved by Garber (2017), where the inclusion of physical exercises, such as yoga (Nanthakumar 2020) and mindfulness-based programs (Strohmaier et al. 2021), is beneficial for students to reduce stress. These identifications indicate that faculty members and students both make efforts in several ways to reduce stress. If they show consistency and learn stress-management skills properly, they will be able to reduce stress and boost their academic performance in the post-pandemic era.

## Conclusions

This study has identified the major sources of stress in the post-pandemic phase, based on the unusual behavior of students from business management departments from different universities of Sukkur city, Pakistan. The study participants (faculty members and students) shared their insights regarding problems and strategies to handle such issues. According to the findings, the most dominant stress causes were academic workload, institutional policies, and financial constraints. However, faculty members try to play a supportive role in reducing the stress level of students. Yet, institutional support is needed to help the faculty members to accomplish their motives. In this regard, universities should organize workshops or seminars to cultivate psychological health awareness among students and faculty members, especially the interventions should be aligned with the clinical field of the health system. It has also been ascertained that psychological health training programs effectively manage mental health-related matters (Simola 2019). The findings also provide informative theoretical and practical implications for concerned educational authorities in considering how students' challenges may resolve to acquire positive student achievements.

## Limitations

This study aimed to analyze perceived students' stressors and their coping strategies amid the post-pandemic era; due to resource constraints, the study was conducted qualitatively. Other means of examination should also be employed to broaden understanding. Studies in the future may investigate the academic and clinical outcomes and students' mental well-being. Due to limited resources, this study was conducted only in the universities of one city of Pakistan. Future longitudinal studies may run at the national and provincial levels, including all public and private universities.

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