

Stress and Social Support

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ABSTRACT

Background: This is an experimental study and it discusses the effectiveness of social support in managing academic stress among students. **Aim:** The purpose of this study is to understand the importance of social support in managing stress. **Materials and Methods:** Simple random sampling was assigned to a number of 120 students, equally divided into an experimental and a control group. Classes on social support as coping mechanisms were given to the experimental group only. The accumulated data were then analyzed, descriptive statistics were used to interpret and evaluate the prevalence of academic stress, and social support. Correlation analysis was employed in the examination of the relationship between stress and social support. **Results:** The findings of this study indicate that there are significant differences between the experimental group and the control group in relation to stress and social support. Eventually, the experimental group proved to cope with academic stress better than the control group, and they were satisfied with their academic performance during the experimentation. **Conclusion:** Hence, it is highly advisable to encourage the students to use social support as coping mechanisms.

Key words: *Coping mechanisms, social support, stress management*

INTRODUCTION

During college years, students experience constant challenge and demand for adjustment and change. Along with academic pressures, students are seeking independence and autonomy from their parents and responsibility for themselves, acceptance from their peers in a world of mixed values, and more intimate relationships. All these changes affect students' ability to perform well in their study. It will lead the students feel stress, and it will lead them seek for ways to handle these changes. This study will help students to find out

the importance of social support in managing academic stress.

It is true that everybody talk about stress, but usually when they talk, they use the term of pressure they are feeling from something happening around them or to them. For example, students talk about being under stress because of poor exam performance or an impending deadline for a major paper. Parents talk about the strain of raising teenagers, and the financial burdens of running a house-hold. Teachers talk about the pressure of maintaining professional currency and research while still managing to keep up with teaching and advising. Doctors, nurses, and lawyers talk about meeting the endless demands of their patients and clients.^[1] But what is the exact meaning of this word 'stress'?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Hans Selye, the prolific writer on the topic of stress over the last 50 years, stress is the non-specific

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response of the body to any demand made upon it.^[2] By this, there is a common response to different types of stressors, and he named this set of responses the general adaptation syndrome (GAS). The term nonspecific refers to the fact that a wide variety of demands or stressors bring forth a common response. He identified three stages in the GAS each associated with changes in nervous and endocrine functioning: the alarm reaction, the stage of resistance, and the stage of exhaustion.^[3]

In psychology books stress has been defined as an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. Moreover, the word stress means different things to different people. Some people define stress as events or situations that cause them to feel tension, pressure, or negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others view stress as the response to these situations. This response includes physiological changes—such as increased heart rate and muscle tension—as well as emotional and behavioral changes. However, most psychologists regard stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening event (Microsoft Corporation).

Since our study is about academic stress we have to rise up the question that is they are anybody here today who has been studying and never suffered from academic stress? Of course, at this point we all probably realize that the subject of 'academic stress' is not straightforward. Too often, we may counsel students who believe that they are suffering from "academic stress" when, in fact, most of the stress is caused by their own internal perfectionist demands and the external demand. Therefore, from that we can come out with the definition of academic stress as being defined by Mechanic^[4] that a classic study of stress among students defines stress as discomforting responses of persons in particular situation. This definition de-emphasizes stress in terms of the nature of the event and emphasizes it according to the meaning individuals give to it.

Individuals cannot remain in a continuous state of tension and emotional strain. Even if a deliberate and conscious strategy is not adopted to deal with stress, some strategy is adopted; for example, to leave the conflicts and stress to take care of themselves. The concepts of stress and coping are neutral. Although people commonly see stress as negative and coping as positive, the relationship is not that simple. Stress can be psychologically positive or negative, and the means of coping can be effective or ineffective in meeting the challenge presented by the stressful situation.

Social support is considered as one of the most

important way of coping with academic stress. There is some evidence, however, that explained the main effect of support on major health outcomes for the contrast between persons who are essentially social isolates (i.e., those with very few or no social contacts) and persons with moderate or high level of support.^[5] Although the evidence is not conclusive, the suggestion is that there may be a minimum threshold of social contract required for an effect on mortality to be observed, with little improvement in health outcomes for levels of support above the threshold.

THEORETICAL MODEL

The person-environment model is useful in understanding stress among students. According to one variation of this model, an individual can appraise stressful events as "challenging" or "threatening".^[6] When students judge their education as a challenge, stress can bring them a sense of competence and an increased capacity to learn. When education is seen as a threat, however, stress can elicit feelings of helplessness and a foreboding sense of loss.

College life can be very stressful in one way or the other. Generally, we idealize the college experience and remember it as that idyllic time when we had few worries or responsibilities. To students currently attending college, however, the process is often stressful and frustrating. The competition for grades, the need to perform, peer relationships, fear of failure, career choice, and many other aspects of the college environments are real life challenges that manifest as mental stress.

A recent study done by Minzi and Sacchi^[7] indicated that coping includes behavior and thoughts employed by the individual to manage the stressing situation. Moreover, according to him, Folkman and Lazarus' theory defines two coping principles: the first category, being problem focused coping, refers to strategies employed to alter or manage source of stress. The second category, emotion focused coping, has to do with the strategies used to manage emotions.

Social support may play a role at two different points in the causal chain linking stress to illness.^[8] First, support may intervene between the stressful event (and expectation of that event) and stress reaction by attenuating or preventing a stress appraisal response. That is, the perception that others can and will provide necessary resources may redefine the potential for harm posed by a situation and/or bolster one's perceived ability to cope with imposed demands, and hence prevent a particular situation from being appraised as highly stressful. Second, adequate support may intervene between the experience of stress and the

onset of the pathological outcome by reducing or eliminating the stress reaction or by directly influencing physiological processes. Support may alleviate the impact of stress appraisal by providing a solution to the problem, by reducing the perceived importance of the problem, by tranquilizing the neuro-endocrine system so that people are less reactive to perceived stress, or by facilitating healthful behaviors.^[9]

Since this study focuses on the stress, and social support among students, it aims to test the applicable way to cope with academic stress. As stated earlier, the study will examine the effectiveness of social support in managing academic stress by the research subjects.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present inquiry is designed to examine the existing relationship between stress and social support in matriculation students. The study is exploratory in nature, it is used to determine and describe, in descriptive and quantitative terms the degree of relationships between dependent and independent variables, in addition to the experimental group and the control group. Furthermore, the strength and magnitude of the relationships will also be investigated. As it was pointed by Vockell and Asher,^[10] they highlighted that a correctional study is a useful strategy in situations where experimental research is difficult.

Moreover, the evaluation utilized a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design. The quasi-experimental design has been chosen because of two things, one is that, difficulty to have the control group outside the laboratory as it was pointed by Leary^[11] that it would be impossible to conduct a true experiment because of the difficulty to use control techniques outside the laboratory, so that we had to settle for a design that would not provide maximum assurance that the experimental and control groups were equated. The second reason was a random assignment, as in^[12], when a random assignment is difficult, it is often possible to use a quasi-experimental design pointed it.

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

Hypothesis

1. There is a statistically significant relationship between stress and social support.
2. There is a statistically significant difference in the level of stress among students before and after treatment.
3. There is a statistically significant difference getting in touch with social support before and after treatment.
4. There is a statistically significant difference in

stress and social support between experimental and control groups.

Population

The ideal population in this study was all students studying at matriculation of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The respondents were encompassing only first year students. Male and female students were randomly selected from those students.

Sample

The sample of the students was randomly selected with the help of Admission and Record (A and R) authority. First year students' name and room numbers in relation to their programs were taken from the (A and R) computer. In this procedure, every student in the population had an equal and independent chance of being selected for the sample.^[13]

Instruments

The experiment of this study was done within one semester (4 months) instruments. During that semester, classes were given only to the experiment group on how to use social support in order to cope with academic stress. Then the instruments were tested to find out their reliability and validity in previous studies. These instruments were as follows: stressful situation questionnaire and coping inventory (social support items were selected from this measurement), and lastly, student problem questionnaire.

The questionnaire

This questionnaire consists of four sections. Section one seeks demographic information of the respondents, section two measures academic stress, section three measures students problem, section four measures social support as follows:

Demographic information

In this section, the students were requested to provide demographic information regarding age, gender (sex), nationality, and year of study.

Academic stress

The important section of these instruments comprised 20 items related to academic stress (apprehension in classroom and speech situations (ACSS-13 items) and apprehension of social and academic failure (ASAF-7 items)).

Student problem questionnaire

This section dealt with the causes of stress (stressors), this helped the researcher to grasp all causes of stress and implement ways to eliminate them during the experiment.

Coping inventory

This scale was a 60-item inventory that was developed by Carver *et al.*^[14] This scale measures a wide range of dispositional coping tendencies such as Active Coping, Planning, Seeking Instrumental Social Support, Seeking Emotional Social Support, Suppression of Competing Activities, Religion, Positive Reinterpretation and Growth, Restraint Coping, Resignation/Acceptance, Focus on and Venting of Emotions, Denial, Mental Disengagement, Behavioral Disengagement, Alcohol/Drug Use, and Humor. However, this study employed only Seeking Instrumental Social Support and Seeking Emotional Social Support.

Procedures

All the 120 first year students were requested to complete the research questionnaire, whose results were grouped into experimental and control groups of 60 students each. Pre-test and post-test (quasi-experiment) was administered to both groups. The experimental group was given classes on the importance of social support in managing stress. Weekly lessons were delivered for 2 h to the experimental group for 16 weeks. At the end of the semester, the same questionnaires on stress and social support were administered on both experimental and control groups to comparatively evaluate their academic stress coping strategies. At the end of this study, I manage to get the results of pre-experimental, pre-control, post-experimental, and post-control groups.

Statistical analyses

The data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The researcher employs an exploratory, descriptive approach in analyzing the data involving frequency counts and percentage analysis. The descriptive statistics was used to summarize and describe the prevalence of academic stress, social support, and the relationship between them. The summary statistic reported for this study including mean, median, mode, range, and standard deviation of all the study variables. Moreover, correlation analysis was employed to examine the relationships between stress and coping mechanism.

RESULTS

Level of stress

In this study, the majority of the respondents in the four test groups of pre-experimental, pre-control, post-experimental, and post-control maintained moderate level of stress [Figure 1]. However, the number of low stressed students jumped from 21.7 to 25% (by 3.3%) of the sample in the experimental group. In contrast, the high stressed group raised from 22.45 to 28.55% (by 6.1%) in the controlled group, hence, a cumulative impact of counseling stands at 10%.

These results could be good outcomes, because the students in the post-experimental group learned to control their level of stress through the guidance of the researcher, therefore, at the end of the semester, the time when stress was very high, some of them were low stressed. To this end, it is highly recommended to counsel fresh students on the important of social support.

Causes of stress (stressors)

Generally, hostel rooms, equipment, books, teacher's attention, and environment seem to be a major source of stress in the case study [Figure 2]. Therefore, there is a need to pay urgent attention to these basics. Students' learning time, library services, and food rank second in causing stress to the students. These enumerated fundamental needs to be strategically managed. This is to enhance the pedagogy through appropriate instructional system commensurate with students' peculiarities

The importance of social support

Figure 3 shows that the experimental group tended to gain enhanced emotional balance and high social support, in spite of challenges associated with the later part of the semester. However, the control group show only slight enhancement in their social support with slightly significant mean differences throughout the

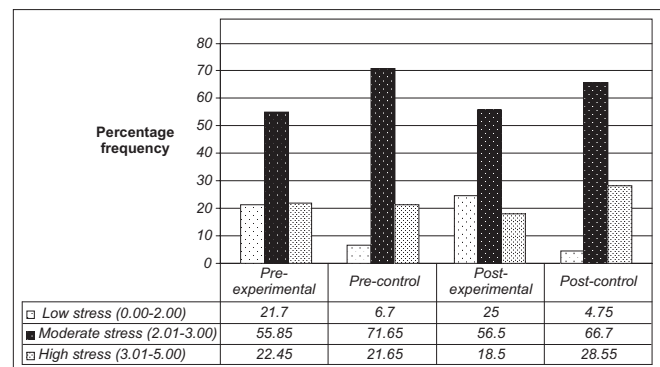


Figure 1: Stress measurement

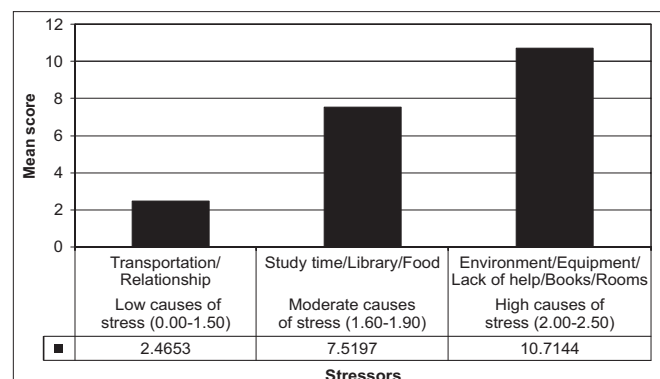


Figure 2: Causes of stress

semester. However, the mean score of social support jumped from 5.6958 to 6.199 (by 0.532) of the sample in the experimental group. In contrast, there is no much difference in the control group; the mean score jump slightly from 5.9041 to 6.0774 (by 0.1733).

Stress, coping, and gender differences

Figure 4 shows that male stress more than female and they regarded themselves as being more socially supported, less lonely, and overall better adjusted to university life compared to the female. These findings seem to be in different lines with earlier research.^[15] With respect to differences in social support, it has been argued that females form different kinds of relationships, with differing attributes^[16] and are significantly more likely than males to be higher in personal self-disclosure to others, particularly in times of stress.^[17]

DISCUSSION

The main focus of this research was in examining the role of social support in well-being and in coping

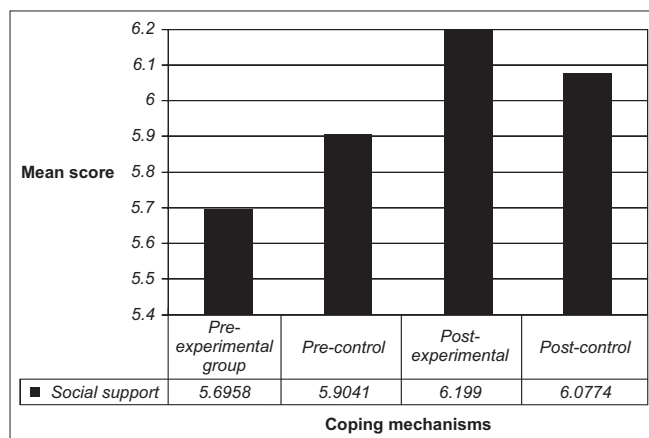


Figure 3: Social support measurement

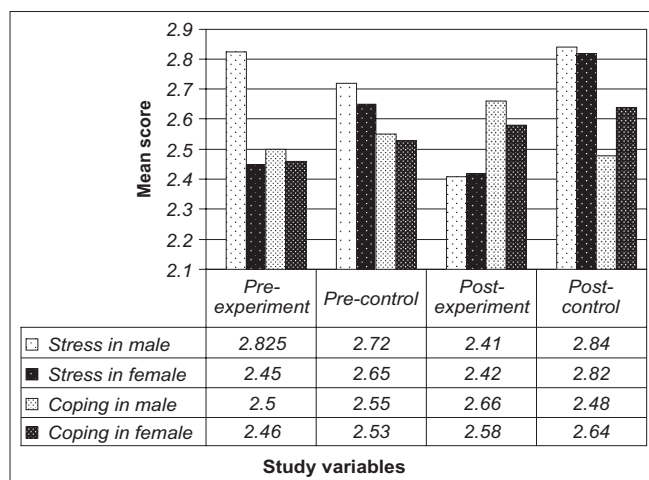


Figure 4: Gender differences

strategies. Evidence for the main-effect hypothesis was found. Students who reported less social support reported more stress. This is in line with other studies that found that a lack of familial support in adolescence is often associated with more distress, higher levels of problem behavior, and lower life satisfaction.^[18]

Adolescents who reported a high perception of availability of support from friends, however, reported more behavior and emotional problems. A possible explanation for this outcome might be that this group consists of students who can rely less on familial sources of affection, nurturance, and guidance. Based on the reports of 154 youngsters,^[19] it was found that adolescents who perceive friends as their major source of support are particularly at risk for poor adjustment.

The buffering hypothesis of social support from family or from friends was not sustained in this study. A trend was found suggesting that a high perception of availability of social support from the family could possibly influence the use of more support-seeking strategies and more academic stress. In these cases, increased levels of support from the family may permit the students to expose themselves to the memories of the stressful event and express their feelings. The fact that not even a trend was found for support from friends could be related to the different functions of social support from family and from friends. Students turn to friends as well as to family for day-to-day companionship; however, in times of high stress students rather turn to family.^[20] Therefore, familial support, at such moments, might be of more importance.^[21] The reason why only small moderator effects were found could be that the interpersonal resources (the family and friends) are not completely responsive to the specific needs elicited by the stressful situation.^[22] Social support can only be of help when it conforms to the coping strategies that are most adequate in the stressful situation.^[23] If, for instance, the family encourages avoidance it is less likely that a buffering effect will be found. Therefore, further research should focus on the functions of social support.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that stress and social support based on counseling lessons are effective in reducing stress among fresh students. Based on the results of this study, a meditation-based stress reduction-counseling program can be instituted among students.

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