

## Study of Academic Stress through Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

Kumar, P<sup>1</sup>; Yadav, J<sup>2</sup>; Sompal<sup>3</sup>; Kumar, A<sup>4</sup>; and Anupam<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract

Present research highlights the characteristics, determinants, and preventive measures of academic stress which relate to various contextual and personal factors of students. To identify these factors, in-depth open-ended interviews of 63 PG students were conducted after asking three questions about characteristics, determinants, and preventive measures of academic stress. In-depth interviews were conducted in 11 groups of students (5-6 students in each group). Students were asked to discuss their conscious experiences about these questions e.g. what they think, feel, observe and suggest? They transcribed their experiences after consensus in their respective subgroup. Accordingly, responses of all groups were gathered and considered for analysis and interpretation. Descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach was used for interpretation. Firstly, all responses are arranged in order in view of their frequencies. Responses with highest frequencies are placed at the top of order which indicate the most considered characteristics and determinants, and suggested preventive measures. Here, pertinent characteristics are found anxiety, procrastination, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, social isolation, fear of failure, lack of concentration, inferiority complex, low self-esteem and overthinking. Determinants are summarised in terms of expectations of family and society, peer and social pressure, poor academic facilities, social comparison, procrastination, lack of proper guidance, family environment, personality traits, and exam patterns. Relevant preventive measures are suggested in terms of proper guidance, favourable environment, yoga, meditation, exercise, support to mental health, sufficient academic resources, recreational activities, to provide the emotional support, health interaction between students and teachers, and inclusion of co-curricular activities. Findings of present study can be used for assessment and handling of academic stress. However, study is conducted on small sample and not included various other relevant factors which could influence the academic stress.

**Keywords:** Academic Stress, Characteristics, Determinants, Preventive Measures, Descriptive Phenomenology.

Academic stress relates to dysfunctions in physiological, emotional and psychological states due to various academic activities. Academic activities cover the domains of educational institutions, teaching-learning process, infrastructure, mentors, family setup, interaction with relatives, and characteristics of learners itself. Whereas, stress in general can be seen as a bodily response to physical or emotional tension. However, Selye (1956) is considered the first person who scientifically defined and studied the concept of stress. He explained in terms of “*nonspecific response of the body to any demand* “. It can trigger unpleasant emotions including anger, frustration and bury due to challenging life situations, which may further worsen their mental space over time.

In this regard, the body’s reaction to any demand or challenge can be deemed as stress. While there might be occasions when stress may serve as beneficial, however chronic levels of stress can cause serious health problems. At the same time the level of stress faced by a person depends on their reaction to different circumstances. While some individuals view stress as a minor setback and continue their lives without being significantly anxious, on the other hand some others may end up worrying excessively, which thereby results in negative impacts on their overall health.

Stress is typically defined as a person’s feelings that manifest as behavioural changes, such as happi-

ness, anger, tears, sadness, fear, etc. (Anusuya et al., 2018). A stressor is an outside source of stress or an agent that causes stress in students due to academic, personal, and environmental variables. Within the years 2014 and 2015, 22% of students experienced negative effects from anxiety, and 14% experienced bad effects from depression, according to a report by the American College Health Association (ACHA).

The period of human growth and development known as adolescence, which follows childhood but precedes adulthood, lasts from the ages of 10 to 19. Roughly 17% of the world’s population is of the same age (Rentala et al., 2019). The world’s largest population of adolescents reside in India. Adolescents experience several physiological and psychological changes at this time, which increases their susceptibility to different types of stress. Since their academic achievement at this point is crucial to their future in further education and their careers, academic-related events are seen as significant pressures for students, particularly in Asian countries. According to a number of researches conducted after the year 2000, stress was present in 13% to 45% of Indian teenagers. In Thiruvananthapuram, India, another study found that 1.9% of school children experienced severe stress and 93% to 100% experienced medium to moderate levels of stress.

Academic stress refers to the anxiety and tension associated with education and learning. There is a

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Central University of Haryana, India. Email: pradeeppsy@cuh.ac.in

<sup>2</sup>Principal, Government Girls College, Rewari, Haryana, India. Email: jyotiabhir@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Central University of Haryana, India. Email: sompal999289@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Central University of Haryana, India. Email: kmranuranjan@gmail.com

<sup>5</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Central University of Haryana, India. Email: anupamyadav764@gmail.com

significant pressure on students to excel in academics and attain a degree. While students are busy with their homework, assignments, quizzes, lab experiments, tests etc. they tend to feel stressed in balancing their academic work with other extracurricular activities. In this vein, academic stress becomes particularly challenging for school children who have to live away from home, especially during their initial phases of adjustments within new surroundings.

One of the most powerful pillars supporting a country's development is said to be its higher education institutions (Deng et al., 2022). Since, as the primary stakeholder, HEI performance is mostly dependent on student achievement. Students are required to acquire critical skills and talents in addition to expanding their knowledge in order to compete successfully in the current dynamic industrial environment. A number of elements, including social media, academic quality, family and social connections, and others, have a significant impact on students' performance in the contemporary, fiercely competitive academic environment. Researchers also found that students endure constant pressure from various sources throughout their academic careers, which eventually leads to stress.

In academic settings, stress is a common issue, particularly among high school students who face fierce competition. This stage of life is crucial; as academic performance plays a significant role in determining their future professional paths. High levels of academic stress during this period can have serious and long-lasting negative consequences. Excessive academic stress not only hampers academic performance but also increases the risk of physical and psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, and other stress-related disorders.

The degree of stress experienced varies among individuals and often arises when students set high expectations for themselves without possessing the requisite skills, interests, attitudes, or competencies to meet these expectations. While one may excel in certain areas, attempting to achieve success across all domains without recognizing their limitations or undervaluing their abilities can lead to significant stress. Globally, anxiety disorders affect approximately 8% of children and adolescents, and there is evidence of a positive correlation between parental hypertension and academic stress. Therefore, understanding and addressing academic stress is essential to ensure students' well-being and long-term success. During school years, signs of academic stress may manifest in a child home, school, community or peer relationships. In this context, Deb and associates (2015) define academic stress as the mental distress related to anticipated academic difficulties or failure in upcoming future.

Both academic and extracurricular elements, such as sociocultural, environmental, and psychological characteristics, contribute to the multifaceted stress experienced by undergraduate and graduate students (Brand and Schoonheim-Klein, 2009). Some students may experience considerable increases in stress,

which can manifest as anxiety symptoms, particularly during exam and test periods. According to prior studies, between 10 and 35 percent of college students may actually suffer from functionally impaired levels of test anxiety (Chapell et al., 2005; Naveh-Benjamin et al., 1997). But not every student feels anxious to the same degree. Exam anxiety is thought to hinder 15–20% of students' functioning to a "modest" to "high" degree, according to the German Student Union's Social Survey (Neuderth et al., 2009). Additionally, it was shown that university students who have exam anxiety are much more likely to experience delays and drop out, and that these outcomes are linked to substantial financial expenditures and psychological morbidity, such as suicidal behaviour (Schaefer et al., 2007).

Measuring instruments for academic stress are standardized by various researchers across the globe. Ten items scale is designed by Sheu et al., 2014 and psychometric properties were ascertained in the samples from Taiwanese and Singaporean college students. The Perception of Academic Stress Scale was developed by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) which includes 18 items. The scale composed with four factors which are stress related to academic expectations, faculty work and examinations, self-perceptions, and pressures to perform. Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) was developed which measures five areas such as Pressure from study, Workload, Worry about grades, Self-expectation, and Despondency (Sun et al., 2011); psychometric properties were calculated in terms of internal consistency, test-retest reliabilities and, concurrent validity.

These instruments are used frequently by researchers for the assessment of academic stress. But, due to different contextual factors, conscious experience and perceptions of students' in-depth observation is required which is possible through qualitative approach. Therefore, present research is designed to investigate the in-depth study of academic stress by applying descriptive phenomenological analysis.

## Method

Participants: Sample of 63 participants was drawn to conduct the open-ended interviews. For this, 14 Males and 49 Females participated in the research. Detail description of the sample is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline (Sample-II)

Baseline Characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Male	14	22
Female	49	77
Education		
Postgraduate	63	100
Institutions		
University	63	100

### Administration and Procedure

To achieve the objective of the study i.e. “To find the characteristics, determinants, and preventive measures of academic stress”, Phenomenological Qualitative research is conducted. However, it may be complex to read and understand the phenomenological approaches, and also challenging to analyze the information (Sundler et. al., 2019). Phenomenological research relates to philosophy and it studies how a person or group of persons perceive and feel about their faced and conscious experiences towards any phenomenon. Here, phenomenon is academic stress that has been faced or conscious by students.

Firstly, consent was taken from all participants. Preliminary interviews were conducted in group setting to acquaint participants with phenomenon of academic stress in terms of its characteristics, determinants, and preventive measures. After that open-ended group interviews were conducted consisting of 5-6 participants in a group. Participants were asked to write the characteristics, determinants, and preventive measures. Interviews were conducted after considering three research questions. Three research questions are 1. Explain the characteristics of academic stress in terms of thinking and feelings, 2. Explain the determinants of academic stress, and 3. Suggest some preventive measures of academic stress.

### Research Findings

To analyses the obtained transcripts, Descriptive Phenomenology method was used. Descriptive Phenomenology method provides the general characteristics rather than individual's experiences to determine the meaning or essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009; Crotty, 1996) and its objective is to describe the things as they appear to consciousness of people (Moran, 2000; Giorgi, 2006). Here, consciousness connects the people and world. Another method is interpretive phenomenology which explains about lived experiences of participants. Total 63 participants participated in the research under 10 groups. Researcher discussed with all 5-6 participants (in a single group) and asked them to write their relevant conscious experiences. Conscious experiences in terms of three research questions which were mentioned in open-ended interview form were obtained. After obtaining the statements/sub-statements/descriptors, inclusive description is discussed in terms of objective of the research.

### Inclusive Description

Inclusive description included mainly three aspects (characteristics, determinants, preventive measures) related to academic stress. Repetition of these three areas are found across the groups of participants. After considering the repetition, participants' responses are arranged as per frequencies. Responses with maximum frequencies are retained at the top and responses with less frequencies are retained at the bottom level.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Academic Stress

Characteristics	Frequencies
Anxiety	45
Procrastination	35
Loss of Appetite	35
Sleep Disturbance	30
Social Isolation	30
Fear of Failure	25
Lack of Concentration	25
Inferiority Complex	25
Low Self-Esteem	25
Overthinking	25
Headache	20
Depression	20
Poor Academic Performance	20
Feeling Mentally Burdened	15
Poor Motivation	15
Family Pressure	10
Losing Self-Confidence	10
Over Caffeine	10
Self-Doubt	10
Frustration	10
Social Comparison	5
Time Management	5

It reveals that any characteristic which is shared by maximum participants is the major which significantly defines the academic stress. In view of the frequency Table-2, it is observed that anxiety, procrastination, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, social isolation, fear of failure, lack of concentration, inferiority complex, low self-esteem and overthinking are the characteristics which are suggested by majority of the participants.

In case of determinants, expectations of family and society, peer and social pressure, poor academic facilities, social comparison, procrastination, lack of proper guidance, family environment, personality traits, and exam patterns are the significant contributors. These may cause for academic stress. Determinants are shown in following Table-3.

To tackle the academic stress, some preventive measures such as proper guidance, favourable environment, yoga, meditation, exercise, support to mental health, sufficient academic resources, recreational activities, to provide the emotional support, health interaction between students and teachers, and inclusion of co-curricular activities are the main which can contribute.

**Table 3.** Determinants of Academic Stress

Determinants	Frequencies
Family/Parental/Social Expectation	50
Social Pressure/Peer Pressure	35
Poor Academic Facilities	30
Social Comparison	30
Language	20
Procrastination	20
Lack of Proper Guidance	15
Family Environment	15
Personality Traits	15
Exam Pattern	15
Drug Abuse	10
Fear of Failure	10
Lack of Confidence	5
Conditional Regard	5

### Relationship with Existing Quantitative Investigates

Present findings report that most of the characteristics of academic stress relate to emotionality. Emotionality is one of the prominent factors of personality which negatively associated with academic performance. Researches (Ahadi & Narimani, 2010; Shokri et al., 2007) suggested that Neuroticism v/s Emotional Sta-

**Table 4.** Preventive Measures of Academic Stress

Preventive Measures	Frequencies
Lack of Proper Guidance	35
Favorable Environment	35
Yoga	30
Meditation	30
Exercise	30
Mental Health Support	30
Insufficient Resources	20
Recreational Activities	15
Seek Emotional Support	15
Healthy Interaction between Faculty and Students	15
Inclusion of Co-Curricular Activities	15
Flexible Routine	10
Therapy	10
Self-Awareness	5
Financial Aid	5
Maintaining Screen time	5

bility is which significantly accounts its significant variance with academic stress. Apostolov and Geldenhuys (2022) reported that Neuroticism is negatively related to academic motivation and rest of the factors of FFM are positively. It suggests that students characterized as high on neurotic tendency such as anxiousness, anger-hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, vulnerability etc. would be high on academic stress and vice-versa.

Descriptive phenomenological analysis of open-ended interview also reported some common characteristics of academic stress. Here, characteristics such as anxiety, procrastination, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, social isolation, fear of failure, lack of concentration, inferiority complex, low self-esteem and overthinking also relate to general emotionality. Inclusive description of characteristics confirms the relationship between neuroticism and academic stress. Here, it can be concluded that if students can be identified as high on emotionality, they would be more prone to develop the symptoms of academic stress. Hence, preventive measures can be planned.

Iqra (2024) summarized the findings of various studies and argued that academic expectations either at the part of parents or teachers or students themselves is protruding factor for academic stress. Banks and Smyth (2015) also found that teachers-students' interaction and peer-peer interaction create the academic stress. Hence, either expectations or pressure from family, society, teachers and peer generates the academic stress. **Inadequate study facilities are found one of the significant predictors by Reddy and his colleagues (2018).** Al-Khasawneha (2016) opined that language is one of the powerful predictors of academic stress.

Similar findings have been reported by students in present study through in-depth interview. They, in majority had consensus on these causing factors. Students also argued that poor academic facilities bring the academic stress. Participants agreed that language also plays vital role for reduction in academic performance, hence, academic pressure may be felt. It is also assumed that some personality traits particularly procrastination may be causal factor of academic stress. Other determinants such as exam pattern, drug abuse, fear of failure, lack of confidence, and conditional regard are suggested by very less participants. However, fear of failure is studied in various studies and found that it decreases the academic performance (Dang & Middlemiss, 2025; Nair & Sutar, 2023; Sagar et al., 2007).

Some of the preventive measures are also recommended such as proper guidance, supportive environment, yoga, meditation, exercise, sufficient resources, and some recreational activities. Kauts and Sharma (2009) also highlighted the relevance of yogic exercises for enhancement of academic performance. Hacks (2024) strongly opined that **play and recreation** play a crucial role in shaping **academic performance** in students.

## References

- Ahadi, B., & Narimani, M. (2010). Study of Relationships Between Personality Traits and Education. *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, 8(3), 53-60.
- Al-Khasawneh, F. (2016). Investigating foreign language learning anxiety: A case of Saudi undergraduate EFL learners. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 12(1), 137-148.
- Anusuya, A., Balaji, S., & Frenny, F. C. (2018). Students Using Various Techniques.
- Apostolov, N., & Geldenhuys, M. (2022). The role of neuroticism and conscientious facets in academic motivation. *Brain and behavior*, 12(8), e2673. <https://doi.org/10.1002/brb3.2673>
- Banks, J., & Smyth, E. (2015). 'Your whole life depends on it': academic stress and high-stakes testing in Ireland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(5), 598-616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.992317>
- Bedewy, D., & Gabriel, A. (2015). Examining perceptions of academic stress and its sources among university students: The Perception of Academic Stress. *Health Psychology Open* 2 (2). doi:10.1177/2055102915596714
- Brand, H. S., & Schoonheim-Klein, M. (2009). Is the OSCE more stressful? Examination anxiety and its consequences in different assessment methods in dental education. *Eur J Dent Educ*. 13(3), 47-53. doi: 10.1111/j.1600-0579.2008.00554.x.
- Chapell, M. S., Blanding, Z. B., Silverstein, M. E., Takahashi, M., Newman, B., Gubi, A., & McCann, N. (2005). Test anxiety and academic performance in undergraduate and graduate students. *Journal of educational Psychology*, 97(2), 268-274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/00220663.97.2.268>
- Crotty, M. (1996). *Phenomenology and Nursing Research*. Churchill Livingstone, Melbourne.
- Dang, H., & Middlemiss, W. (2025). Academic buoyancy and fear of failure differences among university students: Null findings. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 11, 1-7. ISSN 2590-2911, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101184>.
- Deb S., Strodl, E., & Amp, S. J. (2015). Academic stress, parental pressure, anxiety and mental health among Indian high school students. *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*. 5(1), 26-34.
- Deng, Y., Cherian, J., Khan, N. U. N., Kumari, K., Sial, M. S., Comite, U., Gavurova, B., & Popp, J. (2022). Family and Academic Stress and Their Impact on Students' Depression Level and Academic Performance. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 13, 869337. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.869337>
- Giorgi, A. (2006). Concerning Variations in the Application of the Phenomenological Method. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 34(4), 305-319. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15473333thp3404\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15473333thp3404_2)
- Giorgi, A. (2009). *The descriptive phenomenological method in psychology: A modified Husserlian approach*. Duquesne University Press.
- Hacks (2024). *The Role of Play and Recreation in Academic Performance*.
- Iqra (2024). A systematic Review of academic stress intended to improve the educational journey of learners. *Methods in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2024.100163>
- Kauts, A., & Sharma, N. (2009). Effect of yoga on academic performance in relation to stress. *Int J Yoga*, 2(1), 39-43. doi: 10.4103/0973-6131.53860.
- Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Routledge, London.
- Nair, P. N., & Sutar, D. (2023). Fear of Failure, Academic Self-Efficacy and Academic Performance among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(3), 375-384. DIP:18.01.036.20231103, DOI:10.25215/1103.036
- Naveh-Benjamin, M., Lavi, H., McKeachie, W., & Lin, Y. (1997). Individual differences in students' retention of knowledge and conceptual structures learned in university and high school courses: the case of test anxiety. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 11, 507-526.
- Neudert, S., Jabs, B., & Schmidtke, A. (2009). Strategies for reducing test anxiety and optimizing exam preparation in German university students: A prevention-oriented pilot project of the University of Würzburg. *Journal of Neural Transmission* 116: 785-790.
- Reddy, K. J., Menon, K. R., & Thattil, A. (2018). Academic Stress and its Sources Among University Students. *Biomedical and Pharmacological Journal*, Vol. 11 (1), 531-537.
- Rentala, S., Nayak, R. B., Patil, S. D., Hegde, G. S., & Aladakatti, R. (2019). Academic stress among Indian adolescent girls. *Journal of education and health promotion*, 8(1), 158. [https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp\\_116\\_19](https://doi.org/10.4103/jehp.jehp_116_19)
- Sagar, S. S., Lavallee, D., & Spray, C. M. (2007). Why young elite athletes fear failure: Consequences of failure testing in Ireland. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(5), 598-616.
- Schaefer, A., Matthes, H., Pfitzer, G., & Köhle, K. (2007). Mental health and performance of medical students with high and low test anxiety. *Psychotherapie, Psychosomatik, medizinische Psychologie*, 57(7), 289-297. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-2006-951974>
- Selye, H. (1956). *The stress of life*. McGraw-Hill.
- Sheu, H. B., Chong, S. S., Chen, H. F., & Lin, W. C. (2014). Academic Stress Scale [Database record]. APA PsycTests.
- Shokri, O., Kadivar, P., Naghsh, Z., Ghanai, Z., Daneshvarpour, Z., & Mohammad, M. (2007). Personality traits, academic stress academic and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology Studies*, 3(3), 25-48.
- Sun, J., Dunne, J., Hou, M., Xu, X., & Ai-qiang. (2011). Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents: Development, Validity, and Reliability with Chinese Students. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 29 (6), 534-546.
- Sundler, A. J., Lindberg, E., Nilsson, C., & Palmér, L. (2019). Qualitative thematic analysis based on descriptive phenomenology. *Nursing open*, 6 (3), 733-739.