

STRESS AND ITS CHALLENGES AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN EBONYI STATE

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ABSTRACT

It is on note; undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, Ebonyi State in particular undergo series of stress at the course of their academic pursuits. The challenges this stress pose to the undergraduates include reduced academic achievements, decrease motivation, increase in the risk school dropout, and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and so on. It is adduced that the sources of stress to the students ranges from poor power supply and water, hostel fee hike, increased transport fare, exorbitant electricity bills, insufficient libraries, insecurity and parental pressure to achieve high grades. The purpose of the study include: to determine the causes, effects of stress and identify intervention strategies in stress management. The following theories were used: theory of Reasoned Action and the theory of planned behaviour (TRA & TPB) and Health Belief Model. The choices of the two theorems are their implication to health education. Descriptive research survey is used. This is to enable researchers describe the characteristics of the population under study. Understanding the challenges stress poses to undergraduates will help to facilitate the development of effective strategies to help reduce stress on students.

Keywords: Stress, Challenges, Undergraduate.

Introduction

It is a known fact, that Nigerian undergraduate students undergo a great deal of stress as they go through their studies in the university, polytechnics and colleges of education. In the years past, people assume that the student populations were the least affected by any sort of stress. But, such assertions are not valid as students have their own lion share of stress.

There are various definitions about stress. People define stress as the situations they find themselves arise. Beehr (1976) uses the term stress to describe the environmental events that are thought to affect people adversely.

Stress therefore, can be defined as the subjective experience of anything/anybody (the student) when events associated with his/her student status interact with the student's personal characteristics to change his/her psychological and/or physiological conditions, such that the student is forced to deviate from normal function (Ezeilo & Chukwu, 1995).

It is also an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceived as dangerous or threatening to their well-being (Auerbach of Gramling, 2008). However, most psychologists regard stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening event.

Stress is now understood as a lifestyle crisis (Masil & Gulrez, 2006) affecting any individual regardless of his/her developmental stage. (Bangerjee & Chatterjee, 2016) assert, the only task students were expected to undertake was to study and studying was never perceived as stressful. What proved stressful according to them were the expectations parents had for their children, which in turn grew into larger burdens that these students could not carry any more. The statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau shows, there is one student in every hour that commits suicide. The Bureau registered 1.8% students who committed suicide due to failing in examinations and an 80% rise in suicide rates during a one-year time frame. Ezeilo & Chukwu (1995), assert that stress in undergraduates constitute critical factor in the aetiology of such deviant student behaviours and performance that are of concern to students, their families, teachers, the government and the larger society.

Cambridge English Dictionary defines challenge as a call to someone to participate in a competitive situation to decide who is superior in terms of ability or strength or a call to prove or justify something. Life challenges are problems and issues that interfere with one's quality of life or ability to achieve life goals. These include external issues that are beyond one's direct control such as cost of living increases, hike in tuition fee and internal issues that you can control such as a bad habit. Challenge can also be seen as something that needs great mental and physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability.

Collins English Dictionary defines undergraduate as a student at a college, polytechnic or university who has not received a first and especially a certificate, diploma or Bachelor's degree. It is pertinent to define undergraduate as any person in any tertiary/high institution who aims to obtain a certificate, diploma or degree at the end of his/her stay in the institution. Ezeilo (1995) outlined behaviours labeled indiscipline among undergraduates in her pilot study to include: examination malpractice, stealing, fighting, membership of secret society, rape, sexual abuse, immorality, drinking of alcohol, drug abuse, indecent dressing, truancy, bribing (sorting) lecturers, cheating, lying, noise making, violence among others. The aforementioned deviant behaviours are the students' attempt to cope with stress. In furtherance are: hostility, poor appetite, sleeplessness, lack of concentration, poor memory, aches and pains, internal heat, fast heart beats are other clinical psychological symptoms of stress among high institution undergraduates. The frequency and intensity of these disorders tend to increase as examinations approach.

Students in high institutions in Nigeria, Ebonyi State in particular are faced with varied range of ongoing stressors related to their academic pursuit. Studies carried out show that academic related stress can reduce academic achievement, decrease motivation and increase risk of school dropout. The long term impacts which include among others, reduced likelihood of sustainable employment, costs government billions of naira each year (Reddy, Menon & Thattil, 2018).

It was found during the course of this study that the following form sources of stress to the high institution's undergraduate students. They include but not limited to: personal inadequacy, fear of failure, interpersonal and difficulties with lecturers, lecturers-students'

relationship and inadequate teaching facilities. Incidences of depression was also found among stressful students as it is linked with inability to concentrate, fear of failure, negative evaluation of future and so on (Busari, 2012). Accordingly, it is necessary to also understand that low stress does not necessarily mean that students will perform better, but in fact under these circumstances, they would perceive the task as unchallenging and may also get easily bored (Uchil, 2011). Though certain levels of stress push students towards optimum performance. But when it is not managed efficiently due to inadequate resources to cope with it. It can have dangerous effects on the student as well as the institution. In Ebonyi State where this study covers has the following stressors indicated among the students. They are: fear of failure; hike in tuition fees, poor and inadequate hostel accommodation, prolong semester work, semester grading system, too much assignments and quizzes, peer group pressure, poor power supply and water increased transport fare, exorbitant electricity bills, waste management bill, undrinkable water, insecurity, academic competition; inadequate time management; insufficient lecture halls, poor teaching and learning facilities among other things. Other individual specific factors include: problems in financial management, changes in living atmosphere, difficulties managing personal and academic life (Reddy, Karishma & Thattil, 2018).

Though stress can have both positive and negative effects, it is a normal adaptive reaction to threat. It signals danger and prepares us to take a defensive action. Take for instance, fear of things that pose realistic threats, motivates us to deal with them or avoid them. It also motivates us to achieve and fuel creativity. Although stress may hinder performance on difficult task, moderate stress seems to improve motivation and performance on less complex tasks. In personal relationships, stress often leads to fewer co-operations and more aggression. Hence, here are ways to help one handle/manage ones stress.

Eating right diet with fruits, vegetables and proteins, whole-grains such as wheat breads and wheat crackers. Sleep-sleeping is a great way to help both the body and mind. It is advised that one gets between seven to nine hours of sleep every night. Relaxation is another factor, it is important to unwind like listening to soothing music, reading books, plan your time, set limits, help others, make time for yourself and exercise relieve stress and improve one's mood. Stress and its challenges among undergraduates have not been completely studied. Hence, necessitated

this study; stress and its challenges among undergraduates to guide them besides others aright in Ebonyi state and beyond

This study will be of great importance to health ministries, health administrators, health counselors, the undergraduate students, government and non-governmental agencies. Other beneficiaries are the parents, the higher institution, and indeed the general public who are interested in health matters.

The findings of the study will in no small measure help the ministry of health in planning programmes that will promote and consolidate on the strategies to handle stress among the undergraduates. Hence, it will enable the ministry to train health counselors that will continue surveillance on stress amongst the undergraduate students and report to the ministry promptly.

The health administrators will immensely benefit from the result of the study as it will help to equip them with the requisite information that will help them in policy making. And it will in turn enable them supervise the health workers and counselors in their assignment in the various institutions of higher learning understudy. This will enable them apply their knowledge gained to work to encourage students live stress free life.

The findings of the study will help the health counselors in acquiring requisite information as it regards helping the students understand stress as events or situations that are thought to affect people or students in this context adversely. It will further help them health educate the students especially those affected with stress the normal way(s) to handle stress.

The students and the general public will gain so much from the study by way of acquiring knowledge about causes of stress, effects, coping strategies among other things. It will further help those under stress whether academic or not to understand how best to handle their situations. It will further enable people to take care of themselves health wise by adopting healthy lifestyle: eating a healthy balanced diet and staying clear from alcohol and drug abuse.

The government and non-governmental agencies will also benefit from the result of the study by way of helping them make policies, programmes and laws that will among other things reduce students' tuition fees, increased facilities and equipment both for studies and recreation,

impose stringent measures on those who indulge in drinking of alcohol and drug abuse and their sales in campuses. It will also help government to encourage student to adopt healthy lifestyle and galvanize host communities to play a role in helping students in their domains adopt better lifestyle and sustain the tempo. It will further help the government improve on the health needs of the people especially the students, regulate prices of goods and services and monitor activities of campus groups students belong to. The study is expected to attract and enable government, supervise health workers and counselors carryout surveillance and interventions to ensure students lead stress free lives while on campus.

This could be made possible by the benefactors to enjoy the benefits of the study by means of organizing seminars, conferences, workshops and symposia to the above sectors of the society.

There are several models and theories in health used to determine health behaviours of individual. And for the sake of this study Health Belief Model and Reasoned Action planned Behaviour are used. The choice of the two models is because of their relevance to the study. Health belief model (HBM) is a theoretical model that can be used to guide health promotion and disease prevention programmes. It is used to explain and predict individual's changes in health behaviours. It is one of the most widely used models for understanding health behaviours. This model is the basis of or is incorporated into interventions to increase knowledge of the health challenges, enhances perceptions of personal risk, encourages actions to reduce or eliminate the risk and in its later interaction-build and a sense of self-efficacy to undertake the needed changes. The model's application to Health Education includes:

1. It provides incentive to take action.
2. It provides clear course of action to acceptable cost.
3. It enhances feeling of competency to take action.

However, the following are limitations of the health belief model. One of the problems that plagued the HBM is that different questions are used in different studies to determine the same beliefs. Consequently, it is difficult both to design appropriate tests of the HBM and to compare results across studies. Another reason why research does not always support the HBM

is that factors other than health beliefs also heavily influence health behaviour practices. These factors may include special influences, cultural factors, socio-economic status and previous experiences.

In the context of stress management, application of Reasoned action planned behavior implies that an individual's conduct is determined by their intention to engage in the behavior which is a result of the individual's. Attitudes, Subjective Norms and Perceived Behavioural Control.

1. TPB is used in order to predict and understand health and unhealthy behaviour and the outcomes of behaviour.
2. It has important implications for health education in examining health related behaviours, implementing and developing health prevention programmes.
3. It is used to predict and understand intentions, behaviours and outcomes of health related behaviours including weight loss, alcohol abuse, smoking behaviour, physical activity, and stress management among others. However, the limitations of this theory are:
 1. Factors such as personality and demographic variables are not taken into account;
 2. There is ambiguity regarding how to define perceived behavioural control and this creates measurement problems;
 3. Assumption is made, that perceived behavioural control predicts actual behavioural control. This may not always be the case.
 4. TPB only works when some aspect of the behaviour is not under volitional control;
 5. The longer that time interval between behavioural intent and behaviour, the less likely the behaviour will occur;
 6. The theory is based on the assumption that human beings are rational and make systematic decisions based on available information hence, unconscious motives are not considered.

Summary of the Findings

Stress is a feeling of physical and emotional tension. It can come from any event or thought that makes one feels frustrated, angry or nervous. The research finding is predicated on

the students response obtained from the undergraduate student in Ebonyi state. The study covered one thousand and one hundred (1,100) samples as undergraduates in Ebonyi state. Students in tertiary institution in Ebonyi state face a wide range of ongoing stressors related to academic activities. Similar research has been carried out in other areas and state of the country indicated that academic related stress can reduce academic achievements, increase mental health problems, decreased motivation, increased school dropout. The aforementioned consequences due to stress on the students were due to insufficient financial support by parents, insufficient time management, inadequate hostel and hall accommodation, incessant power outage, industrial dispute among others as discovered by the researchers.

Discussion of the Study

Stress is a known phenomenon both in academic and in other sphere of life but when it is too much, then it becomes a problem. The discussion of findings in this study showed that students in tertiary institutions in Ebonyi state are vulnerable to varied of sources of academic stress such as financial difficulties, incessant power outage, industrial action, parental pressure for good grades, prolong semester academic activities, academic overloads among others. The aforementioned is in agreement with results of Misra and McKecra (2000) which reported that the movement from secondary school to tertiary institution is proven to alter social security, physical comfort and ability to enjoy serene activities for the new entrants. It has become a major challenge facing students and a major public concern around the world today. Research has proven that students as well as others who are stressed tend to be more forgetful and less likely to remember specific information. When students are stressed up he/she may find it difficult to concentrate.

Healthy diet, regular exercise, adequate rest and sleep, asking for help when the need arises, healthy lifestyle can help the management of stress in students.

Implication of the Study

This section entails making deduction and inferences from the result of the study, reduction in motivation, poor academic performance in school lead to increased school dropout rates had been identified as some of the consequences of stress on the students of tertiary

institutions in Ebonyi state, Nigeria. This may eventually amount to school dropout and limited opportunity for survival for the concerned persons. The implication is that many more poor parents will emerge in the future, if something urgently is not done to avert the trend. This is because a poor student today who is not equipped educationally may likely become a poor parent in the future and by extension poor society.

The study has also identified unplanned pregnancy on the part of the girl -child who may not meet up with the economic challenges faced by undergraduates in Ebonyi state. It's widely believed that children born outside wedlock are often brought up in an unhealthy environment where they are exposed and vulnerable to all kinds of abuses. The implication is that the society will breed many "street children" who may become veritable tools in the hands of some politicians for ethno- religious and political conflicts.

When a student is experiencing anxiety or depression, the majority of their mental capacity is used to create and process worrisome thoughts. This can make it extremely difficult to focus on positive thoughts and can be very exhausting for the students, which detracts from their learning abilities. Undiagnosed anxiety and depression among most students can negatively impact their ability to learn and enjoy their time in school. When students have anxiety and depression that go unnoticed, their mental health is at risk, which can result to social and behavioral problems, neglected hygiene, poor self- care practices and low self-esteem. The implication is that the society will harbor many unkept individuals with poor self care practices in the society, who may become vulnerable to any circumstances due to their low self-esteem

Conclusion and Recommendations

Students in tertiary institutions face a wide range of ongoing stressors related to academic activities. The findings of the study showed that undergraduates in Ebonyi state are vulnerable to varied stressors such as: high expectations and pressure for academic achievements, insufficient financial support by parents, peer group pressure, incessant power outage, academic overloads, inadequate hostel and hall accommodation among others. It was discovered that most stressed among the students were the year one students. This is partly because of their mode of entry among other things. Stress can impair students cognitive functioning, the ability to learn and

decrease academic performance, reduce motivation, increased number of school dropout. Therefore, the study suggested being aware of what one needs to do and work through such challenges as one of the managing strategies, observe enough rest and sleep, healthy diet, regular exercises, ask for help when necessary, cut down on religious and social activities and proper management of time. The guidance and counseling unit of tertiary institutions that know their onus can identify stressed out students in time. And render help to them to avoid worsening of their situation which at times can lead to attempted rape, rape or other social vices. Even though stress can have a positive impact on students' academic performance, the findings of this study indicated that to a large extent, it affects students negatively.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

Freshman orientation should be compulsory for all the newly entrants and academic development program introduced for the returnees at different levels.

Schools should emphasize more on quality programs that improve mental alertness, academic performance, readiness and learning interest for the students' development

There should be reduction in number of course loads (i.e. elimination of allied core subjects on the students).

There should be staff development program to better equip the lecturers for optimal performance in the contemporary society.

The guidance and counseling unit of tertiary institutions needs to be strengthened to be able to tackle the challenges of the unit as they arise.

Education stakeholders should target a well communication based sports to encourage greater participation in sports to lessen stress.

Government at all levels needs to allocate considerable amount of money to schools to help her do the needful in the areas of lecture and hostel accommodation among other concerns.

School authorities should as a matter of fact regulate the activities of both religious and social groups on campus.

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