



EXAMINATION STRESS AMONG INDIAN ADOLESCENTS: A PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Examination stress is an essential component of academic life of a student. Like any other form of stress, examination stress seems to have a beneficial and a detrimental component since it rests on continuums of frequency, intensity, duration, and situation. All of these components vary with individual personalities and the way they are appraised. Examination stress, again like other stresses, requires some degree of efforts for effective coping, and one may settle down even if nothing is done about it in particular if stress is situational. The present paper aims at re – visiting the examination stress in view of adolescents' quality of life from the perspective of a clinical psychologist. The paper stresses on de – stressing the phase of examinations in the life of adolescents and the significant others associated with them.

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial phase of life which involves several transitions, internally both physically and mentally, and externally with respect to familial roles and societal responsibilities. The individuals experiencing this phase solely because of age – factor are termed as adolescents. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines adolescence as the period of life between 10 – 19 years of age. Adolescence is said to be a period of stress and strain. Adolescence is a special group because of their transitional developmental stage along with its special problems (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, & Rath, 2012) and because of problems created by others who are more often than not, confused about whether to treat an adolescent as a child or else as an adult.

In a country as focused on achievement and as exam – obsessed as India, it becomes imperative to consider the piling up of examination stress as a serious concern. Expectations of educational performance are generally high all over India, rooted in the cultural beliefs about the value of education, and the belief that educational achievement is the pathway to future success (Rao, 2008). It is relevant to mention here that in one year alone in India, 2320 children, or more than six children per day, commit suicide because of failure in examinations (National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2000). This shocking figure underlines the seriousness of this problem and its resounding social costs to communities. While Indian parents are known to be deeply involved in their children's education (Larson, Verma & Dworkin, 2000), at present, little is scientifically documented about the role of parents in the student experience of academic stress and adolescent distress (Rao, 2008). Yet, it is a common observation that parents put considerable pressure on children to perform whether it is in academics, extra curriculum activities or else leisure activities. The desire for designer children has become so pronounced that children attend many coaching classes, for dance, go for football etc. that they end up having no leisure at all. No free unstructured time for leisure. In a way, it has both good as well as bad consequences. Between May and August 2013, 572 people ended their lives for various reasons in Bangalore alone. Of them, 179 were teenagers, as per data available with police (Times of India).

The present paper is attempted as a need to focus on yet another parallel perspective of examination stress including roles of most people in contact with an adolescent's life. Like most articles covering the examination stress, present paper also highlights various causal models of examination stress and unlike these articles, it does not suggest strategies for adolescents and their significant others regarding what to do and how to lessen or avoid examination stress.

The motivation for the present paper comes from the desire to communicate that examination stress may stem from multiple causes. Worrying about just one or two factors as important and disregarding the contribution of



other factors by presuming that these factors are not important, that too without much reasoned evidence for the same, doesn't serve much good. The paper highlights that passing underlying messages that it is unhealthy to experience examination stress and one need to take measures to deal with it creates further stress of experiencing examination stress. The present paper discusses how the role of experts, researchers, teachers, parents, significant others, and adolescent students themselves contributes towards increasing the stress further. The derivations so obtained from these perspectives will be discussed with respect to adolescents' quality of life.

Experts' Role

Experts are people who have knowledge and have sought experience in the field(s) of Indian adolescents and/or examination stress and how, in all possible ways the two are inter – related. Most experts in personal and professional setup talk about the incidence, prevalence, and etiological models of the examination stress. After gaining knowledge from above, they try exploring and understanding respective case(s) in view of the above and then try building upon plausible feasible alternatives of dealing with examination stress. Dealing with examination stress could range from avoiding to lessening of the experience till the student is comfortable. When students take exams in April and May, there are columns in the newspapers on test-taking tips, in which students are reminded to learn and answer questions in a certain order, to sleep well the night before the exam, and to keep aside 30 minutes for checking the work before the exam is submitted. At the end of the exam season, psychologists and counselors write articles in which students are reminded that poor scores do not determine their future, and that many fields of study are open to them (Rao, 2008).

Researchers' Role

The researchers exploring the examination stress focus upon the existing models of causation, how valid they stand in current setting in proposed population. Researches stress upon the developmental trajectory of statistics, focusing upon well – documented and explored important causal factor in leading towards examination stress. The researchers also criticize and question the educational system of India including the reservation in the field of education, efficacy of models of board examinations as State boards and Central boards, regular academia and the curricula, minimum cut – off to apply for various colleges and institutions and the evaluation system. At times, their dialect opt the role of an activist who pleads and announces for a social change which according to them is required in order to 'eradicate' examination stress from the lives of adolescent students without considering the actual intention for the same.

Teachers' Role

The teachers are the individuals who directly interact with students and for most times influence their thoughts processing. The teachers in adolescents' life are mostly aware of their capabilities of performing in examinations. Teachers mostly demand of their students to perform as per their expectations of students. They pose indirect demands to excel academically from certain students. In classes, during the academic session, teachers' thoughts and perceptions regarding examination get translated in how they teach and preach. Teachers who consider performance and achievement in examinations as an important factor in determining success in life ahead consistently stress on studies, methods of studying and preparing, hours spent in rote preparation, and judging students with their potential of individual performance in examinations solely.

Parents' and Significant Others' Roles

Like teachers, the parents, relatives, and peer group also strongly influence and indeed get influenced by the adolescents. The examination stress experienced by the adolescents builds up pressure among parents as well. Research indicates that Indian parents are deeply involved in their child's education, and that they try to create an environment in which academic achievement is valued and expected. They do so by enrolling their children in classes that improve their academic skills and performance. Parental involvement is intensified when children are in their high school years, when many parents go to great lengths to create a study setting with few distractions so that their children can focus on their academic work. They do



this by compromising with their own lifestyles or making sacrifices (Rao, 2008). Now a days, parents are in constant pressure both for making their adolescent children excel in studies and also considering the alternatives regarding what if their children perform badly. Parents believe that their worth as parents in society is more determined by their children's performance in examinations.

Considering the role of relatives and peer group, they are majorly seen as comparing the performances on some standard examination which could be a board examination. These significant others of an adolescent's life feel sense of pride in doing so if their adolescent child excels academically in comparison with others.

Adolescent Students' Roles

The students themselves adopt or build upon a perspective based on their experience with teachers, parents, significant others, past performances, and what all they learn from professionals through readings on internet or through direct personal experience. Although every individual adolescent has different experience with significant others and hence, the different perspective regarding academics and different pattern/style of preparing for examinations in dealing with examination stress. Anything done by an adolescent in dealing with examination stress is coping. Even if nothing is done to deal with examination stress is also a sort of coping. For ease, the plausible perspectives of the students have been grouped with respect to how achieving they consider themselves.

Less Achieving Adolescent Student

Adolescents primarily considering themselves in this category perceive examination stress more with respect to at least passing in all the subjects and all the papers. Considering their family environment, their parents wish them to be more achieving but failure to experience that due to 'n' number of factors make them more frustrating and taunting towards their children. Parents of these adolescents continually try and experiment on new things towards increasing the productivity in examinations. Their consistent task – focused and emotion – focused strategies help both, parents and adolescents cope better.

Average Achieving Adolescent Students

The adolescents who regard themselves in between the two extremes of achievement category fear that they may fall back in the less achieving category. Their further concern includes that what if they may flunk in one or two papers which they consider to be their weaker papers. Their family poses demands to attain even better marks, which makes them anxious about striving to achieve highly. They are able to control their anxieties before their parents but worry about both failure and parental demands of achieving in isolation.

High Achieving Adolescent Students

This group of students enjoys the tag of a 'topper' and therefore has an absolute need to maintain this tag. Although they have enough evidence to negate the anxiety but their absolute need to excel keeps on building pressure. Their families and relatives are highly proud of them and consider them as their asset. Such students are source of conversations both in formal and informal places. Their concept of self is deeply fused in the expectations of teachers and significant others.

Moreover, every adolescent has her/his individualistic pattern of preparing which includes frequency, intensity, duration, mode, and time of study. Majorly, two categories of students: those who were studious throughout the year, consistently receiving good grades, and those who were only more active towards their studies during exam time, with grades varying from below average to good. The component of anxiety was present in both categories of students, but far less in studious students who maintained a good grade year-round (Sarkar, 2014).

De – Stressing the Experienced Stress

The experience of examination stress is inevitable in the phase of adolescence. Not every adolescent experience same degree of it and neither all are stressed out to a limit that they attempt Deliberate Self Harm (DSH) or



suicide. How can we then differentiate this clientele who might think of ending their lives due to examination stress before or during the phase of examinations? The adolescents who attempt suicide once results are declared cannot be categorized as suffering from chronic examination stress as although the stress might have been building up before exam but the actual incident that triggered suicidal behavior was the failure and the independent problems which failure and/or need to perform in any exam poses.

As was mentioned earlier, examination stress has beneficial effects of planning, concentrating, continuing the zeal to get involved, study effectively, and hence performing better. For this, the examination stress needs to be within the limits of tolerance and productivity as per the individual adolescent. The detrimental effects of examination stress could be uncontrollable anxiety, experience of weakness, fatigue, faintness, inability to concentrate at stretch, might get frustrated and irritated, unable to perform under stress, and might also think of ending their lives.

Now days, professionals and significant others are so much concerned about examination stress among adolescents that they try all possible measures to lessen or avoid it. This further creates stress of experiencing examination stress. A continuous message of the experience of examination stress as something to be dealt with is communicated to such an extent that parents worry in extremes and often continually blame themselves for the extreme untoward experience of their adolescent committing suicide. The fact needs to be stressed that it is never a single cause in isolation that can lead to an extreme consequence of suicide. The parental demands could just be one contributory factor in the outcome. Moreover, not every adolescent who experiences taunts and achieves low as expected commits suicide. Pressure to perform well academically is a strong predisposing factor for Depression, Anxiety, and Stress among the students (Bhasin, Sharma, & Saini, 2010). An act of suicide has more to do with the adolescent herself/himself who might have construed the events in a particular way and that lost situations were worth the life. Furthermore, many adolescents who attempt/commit suicide don't figure out much the causes rather are driven by either impulse or the attempt is secondary to a clinically diagnosed disorder.

Consider the situation of an adolescent who is already stressed with the amount of syllabus to be covered is further consoled that don't worry, don't worry. More than that, (s)he is asked some strategies to try out to deal with the stemming stress, taken to a mental health professional to further do something about the stemming stress. Now the adolescent student has additional tasks to be done during this tiring phase of examinations. Even further, specific ways, timings and schedules of study are made and the adolescent is presumed to adjust to other demands which might lead to better marks as mentioned in researches. Now think about the adolescent who was already suffering from examination stress now has 'n' number of strategies to deal with examination stress and another set of 'n' number of strategies to study in particular way which may/may not be as per the comfort zone of student, and yet another set of energy and efforts wasted in trying to remember 'the right method'. It is evident that for an individual who was finding it difficult to deal with five issues will certainly not be able to deal with additional twenty demands. As a most likely result of not excelling academically despite the enormous efforts of both adolescent student and the family members who assisted the student in availing services of mental health professionals. This further increases the frustration of adolescent, parents, professionals who invested their knowledge and energy with the student. Now some one is to be blamed for the consequences, which in most situations is the one directly implementing the tried and tested principles, which is the adolescent. This might further make the adolescent believe that (s)he is good for nothing and the further increase in vicious stress cycle.

A probable question here could be then what to do and how to deal with the stemming and pilling stress. Adolescents assess themselves primarily on academic success. This can distort their perception of reality and cause them to blow things out of proportion. The stress of academic performance may not even be noticeable to close friends because students who begin to feel overwhelmed and hopeless tend to hide their feeling by immersing themselves in work thereby increasing self-inflicted stress (Sharma & Sidhu, 2011). There is a high need to assess candidature of the student for treatment and management by ascertaining if stress is crossing the



limits of productivity. Not every adolescent experiencing examination stress needs assistance. Moreover, how much to ask an individual to perform varies as per their human capabilities and stress tolerance. Not everyone can be asked to top the results. Some are assisted to at least score passing percentage. Not every strategy fits every situation with every adolescent suffering from examination stress. Adolescent students need to be assisted as per their special attributes and demands for the same. It is a thumb rule that the psychological principles never fail. It is always the way they are applied needs to be revised by the professionals.

Conclusion

Stress does not work on all or none principle. It exists in a continuum. Steps need to be taken only if stress passes the limits of tolerance. Measures don't mean loading the adolescent with another set of demands rather just acknowledging the presence of examination stress and doing nothing about it in particular rather working towards just studies the way most suited to their individual style. It is believed that if focus is drawn more towards actual exam – giving process, the other stressors gradually subside rather than doing something in particular about checking for examination stress.

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