

Stress and its Sources among Professional Students of Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Stress has become a part of day-to-day life and seems to be normalised. While some stress, especially when experienced over a longer period of time, produces harmful effects, some stress can motivate one to progress towards the objective. Fewer research has been carried out regionally, despite the fact that many studies have been carried out globally to identify the sources of stress among professional students. The present study was conducted to assess the stress level in professional students of Kerala and to identify various stress factors. A pre-tested questionnaire was prepared in google forms and was distributed among the professional students of Kerala. The study was conducted among 287 respondents and 33% of the females and 31.11% of the male respondents were observed to be stressed. As with age or place of residence, there was no association between gender and reported stress levels. The academic factor was the major stressor followed by the socio-psychological factors. The frequency of exams was observed to be the most contributing factor among the academic factors. The nutritional stress factors were more prevalent among females. Understanding the stress factors would help to develop various stress management strategies and to implement various stress relieving activities to alleviate stress among the students. The current study's findings can be used by psychologists and counsellors to build effective counselling modules and intervention strategies to help students to cope up with stress.

Keywords: Stress, Professional students, Academic, Social, Health.

INTRODUCTION

The term "stress" refers to "any challenge to homeostasis," or the body's natural sense of balance (Bansal & Bhave 2006). Stress can also be defined as "a state of mental or emotional strain" and "a number of normal bodily reactions (mental, emotional, and physiological) designed for self-preservation (Princeton University, 2001). Stress can produce either a beneficial effect or a detrimental effect on the body. Selye (1956) defined eustress as a stress that encourages one to achieve goals, whereas distress is the stress that has a negative influence on the body. Distress can be manifested in three forms: psychological manifestations (anger, low self-respect, etc), physical manifestations (headache, low immunity), and behavioural manifestations (weight loss, smoking, and alcohol drinking) (Fatima and Ashin 2016).

In earlier times, it was believed that stress issues were least prevalent among students. Nowadays, stress is recognised as a lifestyle problem that can affect everyone, independent of developmental stage

(Banerjee & Chatterjee 2012). There exists a gender variation in stress perception and distinct coping mechanisms used by students (Graves *et al.*, 2021). Due to several reasons such as high expectations of parents, the overwhelming burden of information, future consciousness, etc, students perceive stress at one or another point of time. While some of them can overcome it, others feel more stressed. The personal and social sacrifices students must make in order to maintain good academic results in a highly competitive atmosphere stress them out (Casey *et al.*, 2016). As per the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB), Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India (ADSI) report 2021, 864 out of 10,732 suicides reported were due to "failure in examination."

Several studies on the stress experienced by students, particularly professional students, have been undertaken around the world. Fewer studies on stress and stressors are conducted among professional students in Kerala. The examination pattern and frequency vary among different professional courses. Engineering students are

assessed half yearly whereas medical students are evaluated yearly. Therefore, the present study was carried out to evaluate the stress among the professional students of Kerala, and also its association with academic, social, and health related factors.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to find the stress in the professional course students who have enrolled in higher educational institutions located in Kerala, India, and to understand whether there exists any gender or career wise relationship with the stress perceived. Also aimed at studying the contribution of academic, social, and nutritional factors towards their stress generation. This study was conducted in the colleges functioning located in Kerala during the 2022-2023 academic year, involving both undergraduate and postgraduate students. An exploratory research design was adopted for the current study and students' stress level was ascertained through a semi-structured pre-tested questionnaire. With the help of the subject matter specialist and the available literature (Amanya *et al.*, 2017) the questionnaire was prepared. It was pretested among the non-sampling study area and necessary modifications were done before the actual data collection. It was subjected to judges' rating and finalised. Required data were collected by using the google forms tool from the students pursuing professional courses in Kerala. The participants were allowed to participate voluntarily and by taking their

own time. A total of 287 students responded and the corresponding data obtained were evaluated.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. Profile of the students such as age, sex, and course of study were collected and descriptive statistical analysis was done to describe the socio-personal profile of them. Personal details such as the name of the respondent, college name, etc. were not included to ensure anonymity. Academic factors and their contribution as stressors (12 questions) were assessed in section two while section three assessed how social/ psychological elements (8 questions) contributed to the production of stress. Section four focused on nutritional factors/ health factors (4 factors) and their association with stress in students. The total stress score of each respondent was calculated by summing the scores of each statement. The stress percentile score was obtained by multiplying the total stress score of the individual respondent by hundred and divided by the maximum obtainable score (seventy-two). Respondents who secured a total stress score of more than 66.66 was classified under the stressed category and others in the unstressed category. Chi-square statistics was done to establish the relationship between the independent variables and stress.

All the stressors which are included in the questionnaire were rated on a 3-point continuum scale and weightage of 1, 2, and 3 was assigned to never, sometimes, and always respectively. Weighed Mean Score (WMS) for the stressor was calculated using the following formula.

$$\text{Weighed Mean Score} = \frac{3 \times \text{No. of always} + 2 \times \text{No. of sometimes} + 1 \times \text{No. of never}}{\text{No. of respondents}}$$

To determine which of the three categories—academic, social/psychological, and nutritional/health—contributes most to the generation of stress among students, the three categories were ranked using the Mean Percent Score (MPS). The mean percent score (MPS) was obtained by multiplying the total obtained score of the particular category by hundred and divided by the maximum obtainable score under each category. Ranks were assigned based on MPS by simple rank order technique.

$$\text{MPS} = \frac{\text{Total obtained score}}{\text{Maximum obtainable score}} \times 100$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, 287 professional students from various courses participated. Out of 287 study participants, 90 (31.4%) were males and 197 (68.6%) were females, 222(77.4%) were between the age group 18- 25 years and 58(20.2%) were between the age group 25-30 years and rest 7 (2.4%) were more than 30 years old. Among the study groups, 50.17%, 21.60%, 17.77%, 5.57%, and 4.88% were undergoing medical courses, agriculture, engineering, nursing, and other professional courses respectively. A large proportion of the professional students (257) were staying at hostels during their course of study. The data obtained in the current study are presented in Table 2. The current study observed no significant relationship between

gender, place of residence, or course of study and stress perception (Table 2). Supe (1998) obtained a similar result that stress was not associated with place of residence while Waghachavare *et al.* (2013) observed that there exists an association between gender, place of residence, and stress perceived by them. Among the respondents, 33% of the females and 31.11% of the males were stressed. The stress perceived by the females was more as compared to the male counterparts. Similar findings were observed by Kharel *et al.* (2017) and Hamza *et al.* (2011). Out of the 287 respondents, 32.40% experienced stress by one or the other factors. The stress level observed among the professional students in this study was lower when compared to the other studies conducted across the world (Supe, 1998; Abdulghani *et al.*, 2011; Abu-Ghazalah, 2011) and showed a similar result to that of Waghachavare *et al.* (2013). Social or geographical variations existed can be attributed to the much lower stress experienced by these students.

Among the stress factors studied, the academic domain ranked first in stress generation followed by social/psychological factors which were followed by the nutritional/health related factors (Table 3). Similar results were obtained in the previous studies (Al-Dabal *et al.*, 2010; Abu-Ghazaleh *et al.*, 2011; Behere *et al.*, 2011) where academic concerns were the biggest source of stress in professional students. From Table

1, it is evident that the increased frequency of exams and the worry about finding a job after the completion of the course were the two academic elements that caused the most stress. Irrespective of the gender, the fear of getting a job was ranked first among the stressors with an MPS of 56.45%. Out of 287 respondents, 73 students felt unhappy or depressed always during their course period. About 20.56% of the study population were always suffering from sleep apnoeas. Poor performance in exams accounted for stress generation in 77.70% of the study group. The continuous/increased frequency of exams, combined with less leisure time, can be attributed to stress development (Amanya *et al.*, 2017). Psychological factors produced more stress in the males when compared to the females, in contrast, physical/health related factors contributed more stress in females as compared to the males. Among the socio-psychological factors studied, the lack of transportation facilities inside the campus and the financial problems faced by the students ranked first and second in stress generation, respectively. Nicholl and Timmins (2005); Amanya *et al.* (2017) found a similar conclusion, suggesting that economic constraints acted as a major stressor for professional students. The fact that this study is being conducted in a developing country can be linked to the presence of this stressor. Out of the total respondents, 31.36% were always stressed due to the lack of proper transportation facilities inside the college. Lack of transportation facilities may create

stress for these students as different departments of these institutions may be located at a distance resulting in long-distance walking etc. Among the study group, 16.03% were always stressed due to the parental expectations, while 31.71% experienced stress at one or another point of time due to the same factor.

In the present study, two males (2.22%) and 10 females (5.08%) were permanently suffering from physical disability contributing towards their stress. The dietary habits practiced during their course work contributed to the major share of stress among the nutritional/health factors. In the study group, 54 (18.82%) students were suffering from permanent nutritional illness while 15.68% suffered from nutritional illness at one or another point of their course period. Lack of physical health would hinder students' learning and exam performance since they wouldn't be able to concentrate on classwork. Students when experiences stress for a longer period, can lead to psychological abnormalities, nutritional illness such as ulcer, etc. It may also lead to poor professional abilities (Jafri *et al.*, 2017).

There exist some limitations in this study. As a self-administered questionnaire served as the basis for this study, reporting bias cannot be completely eliminated. The participants' current emotional state or personality may be contributing factors. The study did not take into account the variations in stress levels during the pre-examination, examination, and post-examination periods.

Table 1: Gender wise association of stress factors.

Sr. No.		MALE			WMS ± SEM	FEMALE			WMS ± SEM	TOTAL			WMS ± SEM
		Always	Sometimes	Never		Always	Sometimes	Never		Always	Sometimes	Never	
ACADEMIC FACTOR													
1.	During your period of study, Have you felt constantly under strain	26 (28.89)	54 (60.00)	10 (11.11)	2.178 ± 0.064	68 (34.52)	121 (61.42)	08 (04.06)	2.305 ± 0.039	94 (32.75)	175 (60.98)	18 (6.27)	2.265 ± 0.033
2.	During your professional study period, have you felt unhappy and depressed	21 (23.33)	63 (70.00)	06 (06.67)	2.167 ± 0.055	52 (26.40)	139 (70.56)	06 (03.05)	2.234 ± 0.035	73 (25.44)	202 (70.38)	12 (4.18)	2.213 ± 0.030
3.	Have you ever felt as self-worthless or It fit for the course during your period of study	19 (21.11)	32 (35.56)	39 (43.33)	1.778 ± 0.082	37 (18.78)	82 (41.62)	78 (39.59)	1.792 ± 0.053	56 (19.51)	114 (39.72)	117 (40.77)	1.787 ± 0.044
4.	Have you ever come across with the problem of sleep apnea (loss of sleep) during your course period	17 (18.89)	30 (33.33)	43 (47.78)	1.711 ± 0.081	42 (21.32)	74 (37.56)	81 (41.12)	1.802 ± 0.055	59 (20.56)	104 (36.24)	124 (43.21)	1.774 ± 0.045
5.	Have you felt of loss of confidence while studying	26 (28.89)	39 (43.33)	25 (27.78)	2.011 ± 0.080	50 (25.38)	108 (54.82)	39 (19.80)	2.056 ± 0.048	76 (26.48)	147 (51.22)	64 (22.30)	2.042 ± 0.041
6.	Whether the frequency of exams contribute towards stress development	44 (48.89)	22 (24.44)	24 (26.67)	2.222 ± 0.089	106 (53.81)	57 (28.93)	34 (17.26)	2.365 ± 0.054	150 (52.26)	79 (27.53)	58 (20.21)	2.321 ± 0.047
7.	Whether your poor performance in exam generates stress	34 (37.78)	38 (42.22)	18 (20.00)	2.178 ± 0.078	94 (47.72)	57 (28.93)	46 (23.35)	2.244 ± 0.058	128 (44.60)	95 (33.10)	64 (22.30)	2.223 ± 0.047
8.	Whether the course curriculum is difficult for you?	32 (35.56)	34 (37.78)	24 (26.67)	2.089 ± 0.083	64 (32.49)	74 (37.56)	59 (29.95)	2.025 ± 0.056	96 (33.45)	108 (37.63)	83 (28.92)	2.045 ± 0.047
9.	Whether the competition with peers generates stress in you?	15 (16.67)	27 (30.00)	48 (53.33)	1.633 ± 0.080	57 (28.93)	61 (30.96)	79 (40.10)	1.888 ± 0.059	72 (25.09)	88 (30.66)	127 (44.25)	1.808 ± 0.048
10.	Whether the lack of extracurricular activities/ recreation time creates stress in you?	32 (35.56)	15 (16.67)	43 (47.78)	1.878 ± 0.096	72 (36.55)	58 (29.44)	67 (34.01)	2.025 ± 0.060	104 (36.24)	73 (25.44)	110 (38.33)	1.979 ± 0.051
11.	The career opportunities/fear of	46 (51.11)	19 (21.11)	25 (27.78)	2.233 ±	116 (58.88)	41 (20.81)	40 (20.30)	2.386 ±	162 (56.45)	60 (20.91)	65 (22.65)	2.338 ± 0.049

	getting job after your course generates tension/stress in you				0.091				0.057				
12.	Whether the lack of understanding the classes taken from the colleges accounts for stress generation?	27 (30.00)	36 (40.00)	27 (30.00)	2.000 ± 0.082	66 (33.50)	67 (34.01)	64 (32.49)	2.010 ± 0.058	93 (32.40)	103 (35.89)	91 (31.71)	2.007 ± 0.047
SOCIO PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR													
13.	Whether any family problems exists for you?	21 (23.33)	18 (20.00)	51 (56.67)	1.667 ± 0.088	38 (19.29)	31 (15.74)	128 (64.97)	1.543 ± 0.057	59 (20.56)	49 (17.07)	179 (62.37)	1.582 ± 0.048
14.	Whether high expectations from parents on you creates pressure on you?	18 (20.00)	25 (27.78)	47 (52.22)	1.678 ± 0.083	28 (14.21)	66 (33.50)	103 (52.28)	1.619 ± 0.052	46 (16.03)	91 (31.71)	150 (52.26)	1.638 ± 0.044
15.	Poor socialisation with peers/college mates creates stress in you	21 (23.33)	20 (22.22)	49 (54.44)	1.689 ± 0.087	38 (19.29)	56 (28.43)	103 (52.28)	1.670 ± 0.056	59 (20.56)	76 (26.48)	152 (52.96)	1.676 ± 0.047
16.	Whether any financial problem exists? If existing whether it creates pressure on you?	31 (34.44)	19 (21.11)	40 (44.44)	1.900 ± 0.094	47 (23.86)	56 (28.43)	94 (47.72)	1.761 ± 0.058	78 (27.18)	75 (26.13)	134 (46.69)	1.805 ± 0.049
17.	Whether your living conditions in the hostel/ home creates stress in you?	18 (20.00)	17 (18.89)	55 (61.11)	1.589 ± 0.085	46 (23.35)	61 (30.96)	90 (45.69)	1.777 ± 0.057	64 (22.30)	78 (27.18)	145 (50.52)	1.718 ± 0.048
18.	Whether you find lack of interest in the concerned course during your course period??	22 (24.44)	36 (40.00)	32 (35.56)	1.889 ± 0.081	39 (19.80)	77 (39.09)	81 (41.12)	1.787 ± 0.054	61 (21.25)	113 (39.37)	113 (39.37)	1.819 ± 0.045
19.	Whether your relationship with opposite sex contributes towards your stress generation?	09 (10.00)	27 (30.00)	54 (60.00)	1.500 ± 0.071	18 (9.14)	34 (17.26)	145 (73.60)	1.355 ± 0.046	27 (9.41)	61 (21.25)	199 (69.34)	1.401 ± 0.039
20.	Lack of transportation facilities inside the campus is creating stress in you	31 (34.44)	15 (16.67)	44 (48.89)	1.856 ± 0.096	59 (29.95)	46 (23.35)	92 (46.70)	1.832 ± 0.061	90 (31.36)	61 (21.25)	136 (47.39)	1.840 ± 0.052
NUTRITIONAL AND PHYSICAL FACTOR													
21.	Any physical disability is present, if so whether it creates stress in you?	02 (02.22)	06 (06.67)	82 (91.11)	1.111 ± 0.040	10 (05.08)	16 (8.12)	171 (86.80)	1.183 ± 0.036	12 (4.18)	22 (7.67)	253 (88.15)	1.160 ± 0.028
22.	Any nutritional debility or any disease condition exists? If so whether it accounts for stress generation?	15 (16.67)	07 (07.78)	68 (75.56)	1.411 ± 0.080	39 (19.80)	42 (21.32)	116 (58.88)	1.609 ± 0.057	54 (18.82)	49 (17.07)	184 (64.11)	1.547 ± 0.047
23.	Whether any physical illness exists? Are they contributing towards stress?	15 (16.67)	10 (11.11)	65 (72.22)	1.444 ± 0.081	35 (17.77)	35 (17.77)	127 (64.47)	1.533 ± 0.056	50 (17.42)	45 (15.68)	192 (66.90)	1.505 ± 0.046
24.	Whether your current style of food habits creates stress in you?	18 (20.00)	26 (28.89)	46 (51.11)	1.689 ± 0.083	60 (30.46)	48 (24.37)	89 (45.18)	1.853 ± 0.061	78 (27.18)	74 (25.78)	135 (47.04)	1.801 ± 0.050

Figures in parentheses are percentage (adjusted to two decimals not to 100) ; WMS – Weighed Mean Score ; SEM – Standard Error of Mean

Table 2: Sociodemographic factors and stress.

Sr. No.	Variable	Category	Stressed	Unstressed	Total	Chi square	P value
1.	Sex	Male	28 (31.11)	62 (68.89)	90 (31.36)	0.100 ^{NS}	0.752
		Female	65 (33.00)	132 (67.00)	197 (68.64)		
		Overall	93 (32.40)	194 (67.60)	287 (100.00)		
2.	Place of residence	Home	10 (41.67)	14 (58.33)	24 (08.36)	1.035 ^{NS}	0.596
		Hostel	81 (31.52)	176 (68.48)	257 (89.55)		
		Rental	02 (33.33)	04 (66.67)	06 (02.09)		
	Overall	93 (32.40)	194 (67.60)	287 (100.00)			
3.	Course of Study	Medical (Includes MBBS, Ayurveda, Dental, Veterinary, etc)	47 (32.64)	97 (67.36)	144 (50.17)	3.116 ^{NS}	0.539
		Engineering	12 (23.53)	39 (76.47)	51 (17.77)		
		Agriculture	22 (35.48)	40 (64.52)	62 (21.60)		
		Nursing	07 (43.75)	09 (56.25)	16 (05.57)		
		other professional courses	05 (35.71)	09 (64.29)	14 (04.88)		
	Overall	93 (32.40)	194 (67.60)	287 (100.00)			

Figures in parentheses are percentage; ^{NS} Non-significant (p>0.05)

Table 3: Ranking of stressors.

Sr. No.	Stressors	MALE		FEMALE		OVERALL	
		MPS	RANK	MPS	RANK	MPS	RANK
1.	Academic	66.88	I	69.81	I	68.89	I
2.	Psychological	57.36	II	55.60	II	56.16	II
3.	Physical	47.13	III	51.48	III	50.12	III
4.	Overall	60.42	##	62.02	##	61.52	##

MPS – Mean Percent Score

CONCLUSIONS

Professional students are exposed to stress irrespective of the professional courses under study with the female proportion being higher. The most reported stressor in this study was academic factors followed by socio-psychological factors and then nutritional/ health related factors. Hence more targeted approaches are required to reduce the academic stress in the students such as peer mentoring, the inclusion of a stress management curriculum, etc. Students should be encouraged to be indulged in recreational activities and extracurricular activities. A holistic approach can be targeted that improves the overall well-being of the student.

FUTURE SCOPE

The curriculum should be evaluated in more detail to identify the components that challenge students and to ensure adequate changes in curriculum evaluations. It is important to conduct further research on students to see how stress affects their personalities. More research studies have to be done that are inclusive of representations from diverse races/ethnicities, different social and economic backgrounds, different sexual orientations, different dialects, educational levels, etc., and the coping strategies adopted by them.

Conflict of Interest. None.

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