Chapter 8

The Impact of Academic Stress on Students’ Performance

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ABSTRACT

Studies conducted in recent years throughout the world have shown that people are growingly more exposed to stress, its level increasing dramatically over time. Thus, stress has been identified as one of the major scourges of our modern era. It seems that not only adults but also children are affected; pupils and students are also experiencing stressful life situations that can be harmful to their overall condition and health. The transition from pre-academic to academic education, the need to adapt to independent living, to gain insight into new social networks, to comply with high academic requirements constitute potential stressors that may affect the performance of students. Considering all these issues a comprehensive assessment of stress is required, from the perspective of the authors in the field, from analyzing the views of students in the research group and from formulating a personal opinion which can support the effort to reduce stress using coping strategies so that the academic environment to become a pleasant place for students.

INTRODUCTION

Although we all speak about stress, very few of us assign it its real meaning and understand it in its complexity. Even scientists are far from absolute agreement in this matter as there are multiple aspects to be studied which are hard to capture.

The studies carried out in recent years throughout the world have shown people are more subjected to stress than ever, its level increasing dramatically. Thus, stress has been identified as one of the most important afflictions of our modern times.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2960-6.ch008
According to a report of the American Psychological Association in 2003 78% of American adults claim their level of stress increased over the last 5 years, and, moreover, 30% claim it had a significant negative impact on their physical and mental well-being.

Situation is no better in Europe either. Thus, the statistics of the European Commission for the period between 2001 and 2005 show that the prevalence of stress registered an increase of 28-30% among the active persons in EU member states. The study conducted at the request of the European Committee (2006) in Romania shows that people experience high levels of stress and most of them feel overburdened by their work tasks. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work established that among the employees suffering from anxiety due to professional stress, the largest share work in education, healthcare, social assistance and public administration (2009).

Considering this, the ‘Ana Aslan’ International Foundation launched, starting with 2014, the National Anti-Stress Day, which is to be celebrated every year on October 28. This Foundation also initiated a campaign to raise awareness and fight against stress, aiming to inform and educate Romanians regarding the dangers it represents.

It seems not only adults are affected but also children, pupils and students, facing stressful life situations which can be damaging to their general well-being and their health.

The transition from pupil to college student, adapting to an independent way of life, forging new friendships and setting up new social networks, as well as observing academic requirements are all potential stressors that may influence students’ performance (for good or bad).

Although everyone faces the same stressors, the way in which students perceive them is different, depending on their personality and life experience. Each student attributes certain significance to the stressful situation. The same can be said about stress consequences, that they differ from one student to another. The occurrence of stress is caused by positive as well as negative events.

We must highlight the fact that a certain dose of stress is useful for any of us because it provides a surge of energy, an impulse that motivates us; however, when the bearable threshold is overtaken, it gives rise to strain, nervous tension and discomfort.

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

Stress affects everyone, to a greater or lesser extent. It is an essential and necessary part of our lives; it is the result of the interaction between us and environment.

Stress has been approached and defined as a stimulus, a reaction and a process. Seen as a stimulus, stress focuses on the factors that may affect the natural balance of a person. As a reaction, it offers the individual an explanation for their nervousness, for one’s state when faced with a new situation. As a transaction, stress is a model of the exchange between an individual’s resources and environment’s requirements. It should be noted that different persons may present different reactions to the same type of stress. A stimulus may be negative or positive, according to an individual’s perception, their previous experiences and the prediction they are able to make regarding the effects of the stress source.

Stress may have multiple effects on a person. The effects of stress may develop across various levels: physiological, psychological and behavioral. The exhaustion of the necessary resources to cope with the various challenges may affect the health of the individual. A level of stress which is either too high or too low influences the performance of an individual in their activity. In case there is no strategy adapted to the purpose of reducing stress, its effects may increase, causing real perturbation of day to day activities.
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