

Review Article

Impact of Academic Stress and Competitive Examinations on Adolescent Mental Health in India

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A B S T R A C T

Academic stress and competitive examinations have become prominent determinants of adolescent mental health in India. The intense emphasis on academic achievement, combined with high-stakes entrance examinations and limited educational opportunities, places adolescents under substantial psychological pressure during a critical developmental phase. This review article examines the nature of academic stress, the structure of competitive examinations, and their cumulative impact on the mental health of Indian adolescents. Evidence from existing literature indicates that excessive academic demands and performance-oriented evaluation systems contribute to increased levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances, reduced self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion among adolescents. Sociocultural factors such as parental expectations, peer competition, societal definitions of success, and socioeconomic constraints further intensify stress experiences. The review also highlights the role of school environments, coaching institutions, and lack of accessible mental health support in exacerbating psychological distress. Gender and socioeconomic differences in stress perception and coping are discussed, along with the long-term implications of unmanaged academic stress on overall development and well-being. The article emphasizes the need for comprehensive educational reforms, school-based mental health interventions, parental awareness, and policy-level initiatives to promote a balanced, supportive, and student-centered educational ecosystem. Addressing academic stress is essential for safeguarding adolescent mental health and ensuring holistic development in the Indian context.

Keywords: Academic Stress, Competitive Examinations, Adolescent Mental Health, Educational Pressure, Anxiety And Depression, India, School Environment, Parental Expectations, Psychological Well-Being

Introduction

Mental health among adolescents has emerged as a critical public health concern globally, and in India, this issue is intricately linked with academic stress and the highly competitive examination system. Adolescence is a formative developmental stage marked by rapid physical growth, emotional maturation, identity formation, and increased sensitivity to social evaluation. During this phase, academic expectations and performance pressures significantly influence psychological well-being. In India, the education system places extraordinary emphasis on academic success, often equating scholastic achievement with personal worth, social status, and future economic security. As a result, adolescents face immense stress arising from academic workload, parental expectations, peer competition, and the pressure to succeed in high-stakes competitive examinations. This review article examines the nature of academic stress, the role of competitive examinations, and their cumulative impact on adolescent mental health in India, while also discussing contributing factors, consequences, and possible interventions.¹

Adolescence and Mental Health: A Vulnerable Developmental Phase

Adolescence, typically defined as the age range of 10 to 19 years, represents a critical transitional period characterized by significant biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. Neurological development during adolescence affects emotional regulation, impulse control, and decision-making abilities, making individuals particularly vulnerable to stress. Mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression often first emerge during this stage, and environmental stressors can strongly influence their onset and severity. In the Indian context, adolescents constitute a substantial proportion of the population, making their mental health a matter of national importance. Academic demands during this period coincide with identity exploration and future planning, intensifying the psychological burden when expectations become excessive or rigid.²

Understanding Academic Stress

Academic stress refers to the psychological distress associated with educational demands that exceed an individual's adaptive capacity. It arises from factors such as heavy syllabus load, frequent examinations, time pressure, fear of failure, unrealistic performance expectations, and comparison with peers. In India, academic stress is often chronic rather than episodic, beginning at an early age and escalating through secondary and higher secondary education. The emphasis on rote memorization,

performance-based evaluation, and ranking systems further contributes to stress by prioritizing outcomes over learning processes.³ Academic stress manifests emotionally through anxiety and irritability, cognitively through poor concentration and negative self-evaluation, and physically through fatigue, headaches, and sleep disturbances.

The Competitive Examination System in India

Competitive examinations play a central role in shaping educational and career trajectories in India. Entrance tests for engineering, medical, management, and government services attract millions of candidates annually, while the number of available seats remains limited. Examinations such as JEE, NEET, and various state-level entrance tests are perceived as decisive determinants of future success. This "winner-takes-all" structure amplifies pressure, as even marginal differences in scores can significantly alter outcomes. The high stakes associated with these examinations transform preparation into an intense, prolonged process, often beginning years in advance and dominating adolescents' daily lives.⁴

Sociocultural Factors Intensifying Academic Pressure

Indian society traditionally places high value on education as a pathway to social mobility, financial security, and family honor. Parents often invest substantial resources—time, money, and emotional energy—into their children's education, which, while well-intentioned, can increase pressure on adolescents to meet expectations. Cultural norms frequently associate academic success with obedience, discipline, and moral worth, making failure emotionally devastating. Additionally, societal narratives that glorify top rankers and elite institutions reinforce the belief that success is narrowly defined. These sociocultural factors create an environment where adolescents may feel compelled to prioritize academic achievement at the expense of mental well-being.⁵

Role of Parents and Family Environment

The family environment plays a crucial role in shaping adolescents' responses to academic stress. Parental expectations, communication styles, and attitudes toward failure significantly influence mental health outcomes. Adolescents whose parents exert excessive pressure, compare them with peers, or condition affection on academic performance are more likely to experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms. Conversely, supportive parenting that emphasizes effort, personal growth, and emotional well-being can act as a protective factor. In many Indian households, limited awareness of adolescent mental health further complicates

the issue, as emotional distress may be dismissed as laziness or lack of discipline.

School Environment and Educational Practices

Schools and coaching institutions are central contributors to academic stress. Large class sizes, teacher-centered instruction, frequent testing, and emphasis on marks rather than conceptual understanding contribute to performance anxiety. In coaching hubs dedicated to competitive exam preparation, adolescents often follow highly regimented schedules involving long study hours and constant evaluation. Such environments may neglect social interaction, recreation, and emotional support. The limited availability of trained school counselors and mental health services exacerbates the problem, leaving students without appropriate avenues for expressing distress or seeking help.⁶

Peer Competition and Social Comparison

Peer relationships are a significant aspect of adolescent life and can both alleviate and intensify academic stress. In competitive academic environments, constant comparison of grades, ranks, and achievements can erode self-confidence and foster feelings of inadequacy. Adolescents may internalize the belief that they must outperform peers to be valued or accepted. Social media further amplifies comparison by highlighting achievements while obscuring struggles. However, positive peer support—characterized by shared experiences, mutual encouragement, and emotional understanding—can mitigate stress and promote resilience when appropriately nurtured.⁷

Psychological Impact: Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is one of the most common psychological consequences of academic stress and competitive examinations. Adolescents may experience persistent worry about performance, fear of failure, and anticipatory anxiety related to examinations. Symptoms often include restlessness, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and physical complaints such as palpitations or stomach discomfort. Test anxiety, a specific form of performance anxiety, can impair memory retrieval and problem-solving abilities, creating a cycle where anxiety undermines performance and poor performance reinforces anxiety.

Psychological Impact: Depression and Emotional Distress

Chronic academic stress can also contribute to depressive symptoms among adolescents. Feelings of hopelessness, sadness, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, and social withdrawal are commonly reported. When

academic success becomes central to self-identity, setbacks may lead to profound disappointment and diminished self-worth. In severe cases, prolonged stress and perceived failure may result in emotional exhaustion and feelings of helplessness. The stigma surrounding mental health in India often prevents early identification and intervention, allowing symptoms to worsen over time.⁸

Impact on Self-Esteem and Identity Formation

Adolescence is a critical period for identity development, and academic experiences play a significant role in shaping self-concept. When self-esteem becomes overly contingent on academic performance, adolescents may struggle to develop a balanced sense of identity. High achievers may experience constant pressure to maintain success, while others may internalize labels of inadequacy. This narrow definition of self-worth limits exploration of interests, talents, and personal values beyond academics, hindering holistic development.

Sleep Disturbances and Physical Health Consequences

Academic stress and exam preparation frequently disrupt sleep patterns among adolescents. Late-night studying, excessive screen time, and anxiety-related insomnia are common, leading to chronic sleep deprivation. Poor sleep adversely affects attention, memory, emotional regulation, and immune functioning. Physical health issues such as fatigue, headaches, digestive problems, and lowered resistance to illness are often reported. Over time, these physical symptoms can further impair academic performance and psychological well-being.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

In response to overwhelming academic stress, some adolescents adopt maladaptive coping strategies. These may include social withdrawal, excessive screen use, neglect of self-care, or reliance on stimulants such as caffeine. Avoidance behaviors, procrastination, and disengagement from academics can also emerge, paradoxically increasing stress levels. The absence of healthy coping skills and emotional literacy makes it difficult for adolescents to manage stress constructively, highlighting the need for early skill-building interventions.

Extreme Outcomes and Public Health Concerns

In extreme cases, unrelenting academic pressure has been associated with severe psychological crises. Academic failure or fear of disappointing others can precipitate intense emotional distress. While such outcomes are multifactorial, academic stress is frequently identified as a significant

contributing factor. These incidents underscore the urgent need for systemic changes, early identification of distress, and accessible mental health support for adolescents within educational settings.^{9]}

Gender and Socioeconomic Differences

Research indicates that experiences of academic stress may vary across gender and socioeconomic groups. Female adolescents often report higher levels of internalized stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, possibly due to socialization patterns and heightened expectations. Male adolescents, on the other hand, may underreport distress due to norms discouraging emotional expression. Socioeconomic status also influences stress experiences, as students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face additional pressure to succeed academically as a means of upward mobility, often with fewer resources and support systems.

Policy Initiatives and Educational Reforms

Recognizing the growing mental health concerns among students, educational policymakers in India have proposed reforms aimed at reducing academic stress. Initiatives such as curriculum rationalization, competency-based learning, and reduced emphasis on rote memorization seek to create a more balanced educational environment. The National Education Policy emphasizes holistic development, flexibility in subject choices, and the integration of mental health awareness. However, effective implementation remains a challenge, requiring coordinated efforts across schools, examination boards, and teacher training institutions.

Role of Schools in Mental Health Promotion

Schools are uniquely positioned to promote adolescent mental health by fostering supportive environments and integrating psychosocial education. Life skills training, stress management workshops, mindfulness practices, and accessible counseling services can enhance resilience and coping abilities. Teachers trained to recognize signs of distress and adopt empathetic teaching approaches can significantly reduce classroom-related stress. Creating spaces where students feel safe to express concerns without fear of judgment is essential for early intervention.¹⁰

Parental Awareness and Community Involvement

Parental education and community engagement are critical components of stress reduction. Awareness programs can help parents understand adolescent developmental needs, recognize signs of distress, and adopt supportive communication strategies. Encouraging balanced lifestyles that include recreation, physical activity, and family interaction can buffer the effects of academic

pressure. Community-level initiatives involving schools, health professionals, and youth organizations can further strengthen support networks.

Conclusion

Academic stress and competitive examinations exert a profound influence on adolescent mental health in India. While education remains a vital pathway to personal and societal advancement, excessive pressure undermines emotional well-being, identity development, and overall health. Anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and diminished self-esteem are common consequences of an education system that prioritizes performance over holistic growth. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach involving educational reform, mental health integration, parental support, and cultural shifts in defining success. By fostering environments that value learning, resilience, and emotional well-being alongside academic achievement, India can better support its adolescents in realizing their full potential.

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