

Managing Psychosocial Stress in a Modern University System: Implications for Counselling

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Abstract

Despite the debilitating consequences of stress and the fact of its being widespread, it does not seem to have got the deserved attention. This article looks at the concept of stress, especially as it affects the modern university students. It describes stress as a ubiquitous concept that affects everyone irrespective of educational qualification, belief system, colour or any other consideration. Apart from relying on literature to establish a link between stress and mental health, the paper also gives a brief analysis of statistics which establish the highly prevalent status of stress in Nigeria in particular, and the world in general. These articulations consolidate the need for stress to be in the front-burner of researchers and other stakeholders. The article also gives an overview of challenges faced by modern university students, which can become stressors. In addition to giving the broad classification for stress, the article expatiates on the triggers of stress, and also presents the red flags for stress. Furthermore, this article x-rays the consequences of stress to modern university students, and concluded with some “Do It Yourself” strategies

for managing stress, including regular exercise, practicing good sleep hygiene, adopting simple relaxation techniques, paying attention to time management, amongst others.

Keywords: stress, modern university, undergraduates, counselling, mental health.

Introduction

Stress is an interdisciplinary concept that respects no boundary among professionals. It is a topical issue among guidance counsellors, medical professionals, psychologists, social scientists, among others. Its multi-disciplinary status seems to be from the fact that it has implications for the whole of humanity. Stress is a psychological construct that has both positive and negative implications to human beings, depending on its level and the management strategies adopted. Stress has a feature of being universal, as it affects everyone irrespective of race, gender, educational level, socio-economic status, political leaning or religious affiliation. It is this ubiquity that has placed the concept on the front burner of researchers in different professions, with a view to creating awareness on the concept and devising strategies to manage same.

In consonance with its interdisciplinary nature, different persons have attempted to provide different definitions for stress. The definitions are tainted by the perspectives that these experts are viewing this concept from. Considering that there is no unanimity in what stress is, it is expedient to reproduce a few definitions and highlight any commonality amongst them. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2023) defines stress as a state of mental tension which is caused by a difficult situation. Selye (1974) described stress as a non-specific response of the body to a demand made on it. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), stress is a change which affects nearly every system of the body, and has influences on how people feel and how they behave. According to APA, such changes in mind and body have implications for psychological and physiological wellbeing. This means that stress affects both mental and physical health, which overtly implies that it reduces the quality of life (APA, n.d). A common denominator of these definitions is that stress is a reaction of the human system to a situation. Therefore, these authors define stress as an innate response to situations and which serves to prompt human beings to address threats to survival.

Though, virtually everything in life can be a stressor, World Health Organization declared that there is the tendency for stress to be widespread during events such as major economic crises, natural disasters, war, outbreak of epidemic, and community violence (WHO, 2023). There is no denying the fact that Nigeria is currently facing major economic crises (Jarmajo, 2024; Ogbonna, 2024; WFP, 2024). This fact therefore implies that Nigerians are experiencing stress in a magnitude that should be of concern to stakeholders in the

helping profession. This justifies the article which addresses stress, with a view to enlightening the populace on the concept and ways of managing it.

Stress and mental health

Stress is known to have varied implications for different aspects of an individual's wellbeing. Researchers have attempted to scientifically establish the links between stress and these different dimensions of human living. Schneidermann et al. (2005) averred that stressors affect mood, behaviour, health and general sense of wellbeing. While some researchers targeted the school setting and sought to establish the relationship between stress and students' academic performance (Triastuti, 2024), others focused their studies on the relationship between stress and mental health. In his study on the relationship between stress and mental health, Muslimah (2024) reported that high perceived stress is associated with psychological difficulties among college students. With particular reference to academic stress, Javeth (2018) reported the outcome of his study to indicate that a significant negative relationship exists between academic stress scores and mental health scores. The negative relationship implies that as academic stress increases, mental health declines. Other studies also reported similar findings indicating that stress was significantly related to mental health (Maddock, 2024; Toussaint et al., 2016).

Mental health is a critical aspect of health in human existence. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) affirms the pivotal role of mental health in human functioning as it describes mental health as having influence on man's abilities to build relationship, make decisions, and contribute to the fate of the society. It further describes mental health as a state of mental well-being which has influences on the extent to which people cope with the stresses of life, learn and work well, realize their abilities, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world.

This brief exposition on mental health goes to consolidate the need for this article on stress. If mental health is so pivotal in human affairs, and stress is linked to mental health, then the need to present an elucidation on stress cannot be overemphasized. Such explication will help to arm the readers with sufficient information on the concept, including how to manage it.

Some interesting statistics

The available statistics on stress is quite interesting and serves to reiterate the justification for this paper. In a survey conducted in 142 countries in 2023, Nigeria emerged as the

third most stressed country in the world. The only countries before Nigeria are Northern Cyprus and Israel. More so, while 30% of the adults surveyed worldwide in 2023 indicated that stress was the biggest health problem in their country, the percentage increased to 31% when the survey was conducted in 2024 (Vankar, 2024). Additionally, a survey carried out by the Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research (WINMR) indicated that Nigeria displaced Poland in the 2024 survey as the country with the highest reported level of poor health. The emergence of Nigeria as the third most stressed country in the world and the highest level of poor health have implications for university students in the country.

With particular reference to stress, the survey indicated that 79% of individuals globally are experiencing stress at different degrees of severity; and that those that are feeling most stressed on a daily basis are students with 83% and full-time workers with 82% (WINMR, 2024). Still at the global level, Stinson (2023) reported on a study conducted in 31 countries which indicated that 62% of the participants confessed that in the year before the study, they were stressed to the point of their daily life being disrupted. These statistics give an indication that university students in Nigeria are regularly stressed.

In the US, a whopping 75% reported that they experienced physical or mental symptoms of stress in the month preceding the survey. Additionally, occupational stress alone is reported to have caused absenteeism, diminished productivity, and medical, legal, and insurance costs, which is valued at over \$300 billion yearly (Single Care, 2024). 80% of workers in the US are reported to feel stress on the job, while in Australia, 91% of adult Australians feel stress in at least one important area of their lives (Global Organization for Stress, 2024).

The outlook is not different in the United Kingdom, where 11% UK adults feel stress every single day, while 24% feel stress more days in a month than when they do not feel stressed. In addition, 74% of people feel stressed to the extent that they are overwhelmed or unable to cope, and moderate-to-high levels of stress are experienced by 80% of employees, with 79% of the participants reporting work-related stress (Brownlee, 2024).

Types of stress

There are different ways of classifying stress. These different approaches to classification of stress give rise to many different types of stress. Attempt is hereby made to highlight on the different classifications, which are:

- a) Classification based on type of stressors

Stressors are simply the causes of stress. In this classification, different types of stress are identified based on what causes the stress. Examples of the types of stress under this category are physiological stress which are caused by physiological stressors including injuries, pregnancy, and other physical health problems; lifestyle stress, caused by the choices individuals make which dictate their lifestyles; financial stress, social stress, environmental stress, amongst others.

b) Classification based on duration of the stress

Another classification of stress is based on the duration of the occurrence of stress. This classification considers stress as being either acute, episodic or chronic. Stress is considered acute when it lasts for a short period and goes shortly after it comes. Episodic stress is also known as episodic acute stress. As the name implies, it is an acute stress but which is experienced on a frequent basis. Stress can be considered chronic when it is long term and can stay for a long period of time, which can be weeks or even months.

c) Classification based on effect

There is yet another classification based on the role of the stress in human functioning. This gives rise to two basic types of stress which are eustress or good or positive stress, and distress or bad or negative stress. Though stress is commonly considered from the negative perspective, it is important to mention that the concept also has a positive value to human beings. Cooks-Campbell (2024) declared that positive stress enhances performance, motivates individuals and helps them to achieve their goals. Positive stress is usually stress in its low level, which is usually desired, useful and healthy (Shahsavarani et al., 2015). Selye (1974) is reputed to have described stress as the spice of life, and declaring that the absence of stress is death. Eustress is said to serve motivational purpose; it helps in adaptation and facilitates reaction to the environment thus improving biopsychosocial health and enhancing performance (Cooks-Campbell, 2024; Shetgovekar, n.d. Shahsavarani et al., 2015).

Triggers of stress

Stress is usually an unconscious reaction to something, which may be an event, a person, an environment or even a situation. Such event, a person, an environment or even a situation is usually referred to as stressors. They can also be understood as the triggers of stress. The list of triggers of stress is inexhaustible; this is because anything can trigger stress in an individual. But such is dependent on the individual's resilience and coping mechanism. It is also instructive to mention that the same nature of event happening at the same time at the same degree of severity to two different individuals may have different effects on the individuals. While these may trigger stress in one individual, it may not have the same outcome in the other individual. This means that the event,

situation, person or environment are not triggers of stress by nature, but can only be considered as triggers when they have elicited a stressful response on an individual.

Some examples of triggers of stress include:

- i) Tight deadline
- ii) Excess workload
- iii) Unnecessary worry
- iv) Financial difficulty
- v) Unemployment
- vi) Dwindling economy
- vii) Indebtedness
- viii) Health challenge
- ix) Infrastructural deficit
- x) Lack of support

The red flags

This section is concerned with the symptoms of stress. Paying adequate attention to such red flags will facilitate timely diagnosis of stress and the concomitant adoption of appropriate remedy. The red flags are presented under the following categories:

1) **Physiological symptoms:** Stress can manifest in poor physical health of the affected individual. Some of the likely signs include fatigue, headache, taut muscles, skin irritation, frequent infection, constricted breathing, insomnia, amongst others.

2) **Emotional red flags:** In the emotional domain, symptoms of stress may include loss of confidence, apprehension, indifference, depression, irritation, self-guilt, mood swing, amongst others.

3) **Mental indicators:** Worrying is one of the mental indicators of stress. Other indicators in this category include indecision, negativity, foggy thinking, impaired judgement, amongst others.

4) **Behavioural red flag:** Change in behaviours can also be a manifestation of stress. An individual who suddenly indulges in substance abuse deserves attention as such resorting to abuse of substances may be a signal that he is experiencing stress. Other behavioural indicators of stress include loss of appetite, excessive eating, restlessness, being easily upset or irritated, loneliness or withdrawal, change in sexual behaviour, nail biting, fidgeting and pacing, amongst others.

Students' challenges in a modern university system

Students are faced with a multiplicity of challenges in a modern university system. These range from issues of conflict in, or new, value system, social adjustment, rigorous

academic demand, unfamiliar teaching approaches, social media distractions, financial difficulty, amongst others. The university has a population of students from an assortment of backgrounds and differing in value system. Considering an established relationship between the value system of the undergraduates and the standard of education in the universities (Omeje & Eyo, 2008), the students are concerned with issue of value system, especially when their value system conflicts with the value systems of other members of the student population. These differences in the background of the students also pose the challenge of social adjustment which may lead to home sickness, difficulty in making new friends, loneliness, amongst others.

University education also demands deep and active involvement of the students in the learning process, especially in the areas of attending lectures, doing assignments, carrying out research, amongst others. This, in addition to the adoption of unfamiliar teaching approaches by the lecturers, increases the difficulty faced by students in the university. There is also the challenge of social media distractions, which an undergraduate has to contend with. Though the social media has positive implications for the teaching learning process, there is no denying the fact that it can also mar the attainment of educational goal (Eyo, 2020). The students are therefore faced with the challenge of exhibiting self-discipline in their use of the social media. Financial difficulty is another potent challenge faced by undergraduates. There are several financial demands on their lean resources; they therefore regularly contend with the challenge of reconciling the available financial resources with the long list of financial demands.

Other challenges faced by modern university students are the arduous task of managing the new found independence with less parental control, relationship with opposite sex, time management, difficulty with course materials, issue of ICT literacy, online learning approach, among many others. These numerous challenges can pose as stressors to the university students.

Consequences of psychosocial stress for university students

The consequences of stress on the human system are deep and multi-dimensional. It is its seemingly inescapable nature and the dire consequences it has on quality of life that has made the concept a topical issue amongst different genre of professionals. Devi et al. (2019) declared that stress has damaging effect on one's health, mood, productivity and quality of life generally. Montgomery and Gouvea (2024) affirmed this when they explicated on the effect of stress on learning, memory thus cognitive deficiency. They also reported the negative implications of stress on mood, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions. Physiologically, they reported that stress can cause suppression

of the immune system, cardiovascular problems, digestive issues and muscle tension. Other researchers have generally confirmed the negative effects of stress on physical, behavioural and emotional life of individuals (Schneidermann et al., 2005; Chouhan, 2016).

In addition to the other types of stressors, the student population is faced with a special type of stress called academic stress. This can be described as a form of stress faced by students which is induced by an inappropriate concern to achieve academic goals. The onset of academic stress is usually caused by a number of variables including adjustment to the new environment, parental or societal pressure, excess course load, poor time management, insufficient funding, test anxiety, examination malpractice, among others.

Researchers have investigated the impact of stress on the student population. Some researchers have established a correlation between academic stress and mental health of the students (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Javeth, 2018; Maddock, 2024, Muslimah, 2024), while others report that academic stress has implications for academic performance (Gobena, 2024; Saqib et al., 2019). Other school-related effects of stress are high school dropout, low self-efficacy, low class participation and low Grade Point Average (GPA).

Do It Yourself “DIY” Management strategies

Stress is quite challenging and threatens the achievement of an optimal learning. The good news however is that stress can be managed. Proper management of possible triggers of stress can help to prevent the occurrence of its symptoms. More so, even where symptoms have already occurred, effective management strategies can help to reverse the symptoms and return the individual to a fully functional status. Articulated hereunder are some simple and “Do It Yourself” measures that can help to prevent or reverse stress.

1) Visiting a counsellor: A counsellor is someone who is professionally trained to render assistance to individuals that have problems, be it educational, vocational or personal-social problems. Being a professional, a counsellor will adopt the relevant theoretical paradigm and work with the client towards the resolution of the client’s problem.

2) Creating simple wins: It is a fact that recording success in one activity will boost confidence and enhance the possibility of succeeding in another activity. It is also true that failure to achieve one’s goals can trigger stress. It is therefore logical to recommend that a long-term goal should be broken into smaller goals; and the least difficult tasks should be confronted first before the more difficult. This explains the concept of “low hanging fruits,” which implies that easier tasks should be approached first; as success in such tasks will boost the morale to confront other tasks.

3) Celebrating little successes: Some persons are not fair to themselves as they keep extending their goals without acknowledging the ones that have been achieved. Celebrating success is a stress management strategy. Giving oneself the deserved compliments for achieving a goal, no matter how small, will help to fortify such individual against the more arduous tasks.

4) Creating a “to do” list: Poor time management is one of the underlying causes of stress. Adopting efficacious time management techniques, including a schedule of proposed tasks for a day or week, will be a good stress management technique.

5) Embarking on regular exercise: Exercise is known to have invaluable impact on an individual’s physiological and mental health. Regular exercise will help to relieve accumulated tension and enhance the resilience of an individual in facing the rigours of life. Simple but habitual act like walking can do the trick. Other exercises like jogging, cycling, skipping and many others can be very helpful. The watchword should however be on regularity of getting involved in such activities. The American Heart Association (AHA, 2024) recommends that adults should embark on a minimum of 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activities or 75minutes per week of vigorous aerobic activity, or a combination of both.

6) Inculcating good sleep hygiene: Sleep hygiene refers to inculcating good sleep habits. This includes being consistent on the time that one goes to bed every night and the time one wakes up in the morning; sleeping in a dark, quiet and relaxing environment; reducing the use of electronic appliances like smart phones, computers and televisions before going to bed; avoiding heavy meals, caffeine and alcohol before going to bed; amongst others. It is a well-known fact that a good sleep helps to repair, relax and revitalise the body; it also stabilizes an individual.

7) Staying physically connected: The emphasis is on physical connectivity. It is indisputable that the advent of social media has had negative impact on physical connections with friends and families. It is recommended that individuals should keep and establish physical contact with friends and families, and share feelings and concerns regularly. Such act is capable of lifting mood and helping to relieve stress.

8) Practicing rational thinking: In the counselling profession, rational thinking originated from the Rational Emotive Therapy of Albert Ellis. The theory proposes that the thinking pattern of man can either be rational or irrational; and that while irrational thinking breeds discontent, self-guilt and other emotional challenges, rational thinking pattern leads to happiness and higher productivity. Outside a strictly professional sphere, this rational thinking can also be understood to mean positive thinking. Staying positive, irrespective of the present situation can help an individual to remain calm and be in charge of his situation. Such practice of remaining rational in thoughts or thinking positively can be a veritable asset in stress management.

9) **Healthy eating is important:** It is an indisputable fact that lifestyles of individuals have direct effects on the health of the individuals, including mental health. A veritable approach to managing stress is to eat right, by eating a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables and drinking plenty of water. Eating healthily also includes eating a balanced diet at the right time and in the right proportion. This will enhance the capability of the body to resist or withstand stressful exposures.

10) **Adopting relaxation techniques:** Relaxation techniques are also very useful tools in stress management. One of the most common, effective and easy to practice relaxations techniques is deep breathing. This involves taking a slow and deep breath and releasing it slowly after holding it for a little while. Other notable examples of relaxation techniques are prayer or meditation, transformation, massage, visit to nature, amongst others.

Conclusion

This article explored the counselling implications of stress in a modern university system. It described stress as a topical multi-disciplinary concept which is ubiquitous in its spread, as it affects everyone irrespective of race, gender, educational level, socio-economic status, political leaning or religious affiliation. Making reference to relevant literature, the article established a relationship between stress and mental health. The paper also gives an exposition on relevant statistics on stress, and used same to establish the fact that stress is indeed a very widespread phenomenon. The paper also provides insight into types of stress, causes of stress and symptoms of stress. In addition to articulating the challenges faced by undergraduates, the article highlights the consequences of stress to university students. It concludes by articulating some “do it yourself” (DIY) strategies for managing stress.

Counselling implications

This article has implications for counselling practice. It has described stress as a phenomenon that respects no boundary or status. This averment will serve to reawaken the counsellors to the wide-ranging nature of stress and the need to device deliberate strategies to reach array of backgrounds affected by stress. The article has also explored the types, causes and symptoms of stress using the headings classifications, triggers and red flags respectively. This part of the article will serve to create further awareness on the concept, thus placing the professional counsellors on the good stead to offer the much-needed help to clients that need such help on stress-related problems.

The article has also made a good presentation of data on the prevalence of stress in Nigeria and in a global perspective. Such statistics will serve to stir the counsellors into appreciating the magnitude of the problem, thus being in a position to fashion out

interventions to remedy the situation. More so, this article presented an overview of challenges faced by modern university students. This section of the article will serve to broaden the horizon of counselling practitioners on the challenges faced by university students, which are not necessarily stress-related. Such awareness will assist in their counselling interactions with university students.

Lastly, the article provides some strategies for managing stress. Apart from the recommendation on the need to visit a professional counsellor when the need arises, the focus of the paper with respect to strategies is on those non-technical measures that the clients can take on their own to manage stress. It represents a bold deviation from the regular recommendation of seeing a specialist, when one is faced with stress. The provision of these “Do It Yourself” (DIY) strategies also has implications for practicing counsellors. One of such implications is that it serves to impress on the counsellors to encourage clients to adopt such non-technical steps with a view to managing their stress and living a more productive and quality life.

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