

Forum: World Health Assembly

Issue: Addressing the rising academic stress of students

Student Officer: Hae Jun Lee

Position: President

Introduction

Stress is defined as tensions that make people emotionally uncomfortable, while the effects of stress vary depending on the level of stress that an individual can endure alongside other personal factors. According to Hans Selye, the first endocrinologist who was able to relate stress to medicine, the conditions of overstress and no stress are dangerous to human health. This report will try to explore the circumstances of overstress targeted towards the students, and thus come up with potential resolutions that can mitigate this issue.

Overstress among students is becoming a rising health issue, and its entrance into becoming a worldwide issue has startled the education system in many countries. This health issue is mainly caused by parental pressure and stress in school life. Because of the intense competition within the school environment, the students (especially high school students) are overwhelmed by challenges to receive better grades and enter into top universities. Due to these problems of overstress, students tend to become more nervous, anxious, and worried, which reduces their motivation to do well at school. According to the Lancet Report, these issues lead to India having “the biggest numbers of suicides with 62,960 deaths by 10~24 aged group”. As the COVID-19 pandemic escalates, the emotions of high school students are aggravated by the examinations such as the cancellation of SAT Subject Tests and the conundrums of socialization after recovering from quarantines and lockdowns. As some more privileged students are able to unequally make their way into top universities, the environment of unfair education seems to have made achievements harder for normal students, which causes more stress.

The aim of the World Health Organization (WHO) is “to promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable”. By working internationally, it is WHO’s responsibility to ease the sufferings of every teenager and give opportunities to cope with stress that is detrimental to their health. At the same time, WHO has to cooperate with other organizations and governments to overcome the external factors that make academics and school life stressful to students.

Definition of Key Terms

Overstress (or distress)

Overstress is a psychological tension felt by the person over the limit. The term has originally been used in physics to analyze the type of force on the string or other metals. However, medically speaking, overstress is a disorder that causes a person to be nervous, anxious, and all of these factors contribute to certain diseases like heart

problems, headaches, arthritis, nervous disorders, and thus have the potential to cause the person to become depressed.

Eustress

'Eu' comes from the word 'Euphoria' which means happy. It is essentially the level of stress that becomes able to be handled and it does better than harm. Eustress can be observed in every person, and it is almost a light stress that happens when the person concentrates on work or gain motivation.

Burnout

Unlike normal stress, burnout is the emotional disorder where the person starts to feel exhausted due to continuous stress. Stress still motivates the person to work harder, but burnout is a condition when most of the activities seem hopeless.

Stressors

It is the surrounding environments or events that can cause stress in people. There are six types of stressors: the stress caused by daily hassles, ambience, life events, disasters, and organization. Daily hassles include the stress coming from the workplace, school life, conversations with colleagues, car traffic, etc.. Ambience means the stress of a person from its unchangeable environment such as the stress caused by the nearby construction noises and the debate in politics. Life event stresses are due to the drastic change in person's life such as the death of a lover. Stresses because of disasters and catastrophes occur when people are victimized by crisis. Lastly, organizational stress is because of the negative feelings about certain organizations like the school, government, army, and so on.

Adolescents

Specifically, it is the period when the transition from a child to an adult happens. Most middle/high school students and young college students are considered adolescents in many countries. For instance, in America, 21 is the age of majority, whereas the lowest is up to 15 years of age in Indonesia.

Academic anxiety

Academic anxiety is a form of anxiety that is related to schoolwork and exam scores. Even though a manageable level of academic anxiety helps in gaining motivation to study, a substantial level of it can affect the performance and emotional wellbeing of a student.

Background

History of stress

Research about stress

In 1658, 'Hooke's law' was first introduced in physics to talk about stress in elasticity. However, as time passed, the word stress became apparent in the field of medicine and psychology. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, during the industrial revolution, there was critical progress in improving the medical sciences. Before the Second World War, the term 'stress' was not commonly used since there was a lack of knowledge on the specifics of psychological stress and more research about stress was in progress. In 1915, Walter Cannon was the first scientist

to discuss the “fight or flight” response towards psychological stress. Then, in 1936, Hans Selye developed the idea of stress and extended it to the theory of General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). He describes that there are three stages of stress: ‘alarm stage’, when the person first encounters stress; ‘resistance stage’, which happens during the person’s effort in coping with the stress; and ‘exhaustion stage’, when the person can’t fight back anymore and feels vulnerable about it. A physiologist named John Mason took the theory to experiment on monkeys to see how they would react to stress. According to his experiment, there were two monkeys on one side and one monkey on the other, and both were able to see each other. John gave food to the two monkeys and not the other one, which caused the monkey to produce stress hormones. It was not because of the physical stressors from just hunger, but the feeling of stress was because of its jealousy of the unfair treatment. Unfair treatments and inequality in education explain the feelings of envy and anger we easily encounter in the school environment. As the word ‘stress’ infused in people’s daily lives, more people tried to use the word to express the condition that they are in. In the 1970s, Herbert Freudenburg, an American psychologist introduced another word called ‘burnout’. Similar to Selye’s idea of the third stage ‘exhaustion’, the word ‘burnout’ usually applied for doctors or nurses at that time who helped others but later become ‘stressed out’ after an extended career life. Today, stress became a serious issue and it can be seen negatively in many people’s lifestyles, especially in academics.

Causes of academic stress

The main causes of academic stress vary depending on students. However, qualitative examples of stress sources among many adolescents include large workloads, short sleeping time, decreasing grades, little motivation, and so on. Approximately 10~30% of students would have experienced academic stress throughout their school life. According to the research by the King Saud University and Imam Mohammad ibn Saud Islamic University, first to second year medical students who experience academic stress in their stressful study periods produced stress hormones like ACTH and cortisol and some students’ immune system has become weakened due to the higher level of stress. As students’ mindsets and performance become decreased by the prolonged academic stress, their energies to work harder become “burned out” in the end. Thus, the students would gain more academic stress and become depressed if they regard themselves as a failure.

Effect of academic stress

The whole purpose of students’ eagerness to push through academic stress is about their educational success. Most high school students aim to get into top universities and college students strive for graduation. According to the interviews by Stanford University, people unconsciously think that “more is better” and that all students are trying to gain achievements in this competitive education system. Many parents require their children to get the best score and refuse to think about the middle scores. In some curriculums, creativity and confidence in learning are the first and academics are considered as the latter. Some research has shown that creativity is able to reduce stress as it turns negative emotions into a more productive and enjoyable way. Nevertheless, few schools promote this creativity and confidence in learning, while the rest of the schools reinforce only content-based learning. Academic stress is affecting students worldwide. In Japan, 500 students on average below the age of 20 commit suicide every year. In America, colleges accept 65% of the applicants and the 24% within that 65% are stressed out after they have entered the college.

Major Parties Involved

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

Related to academic stress, China has more than 30% of students suffering from depression and anxiety due to stress. In late 2021, the Chinese government started to ban both online and offline private tutoring outside of the school class because it creates inequality in education and creates a greater gap between the wealthy and poor. A perspective to this new policy is that restricting tutoring can make some Chinese high school students “learning English” harder as it is a second language and only one class time is not enough for them to get ready for Chinese entrance exams like GaoKao. On the other hand, the policy alleviates the problems of academic stress from tutoring. The life before the ban of tutoring was stressful to some students as it pushed them to spend a long time to catch up on the work from both school and extracurricular classes. While at the same time, the tutoring industry saw a high level of profit up to 100 billion dollars.

The Republic of Korea (ROK)

Approximately 65% of Korean students answered that they are struggling to go through the stressful condition, in a 2014 survey done by the Korea Health Promotion Institute. Based on the percentage, some students throw things and use violence to express their stress, while most of the students just use vulgar language to show their feelings. To solve these issues, Seoul Metropolitan Government tried to improve the environment by putting each “stress free zones” in 6 different schools in Seoul. Additionally, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Health also took actions to give counseling opportunities to 19,872 students who undertook suicide attempts.

World Health Organization (WHO)

The World Health Organization (WHO) did not directly help in solving the rising issue of academic stress because it is a non-specific health problem and the extensive impacts of this condition make it difficult to address. In addition, treating psychological stress, especially academic related stress, proves to be difficult and varies greatly between individuals. However, commonly used ways of treating stress medically include the intake of medications such as antidepressants, beta-blockers, and sedatives to support the person to cope with stress. Except that, consuming too many pain-killing drugs can give the person an addictive relief which may be an adverse effect on its mental and physical health. WHO publishes written guidelines on its official website to guide and motivate people from various segments to take a strong response against stress. In 2020, when the COVID pandemic was ongoing, it has also published an illustrated guide called “Doing What Matters in Times of Stress” to reduce the rising issue of stress.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

World Health Organization (WHO) supported by the United Nation has tried to use many multimedia resources such as illustrations, cartoons, and audios to educate and support people on ways of coping with stress. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the academic stress for students has risen more, and WHO has become more serious about addressing the rising issue of stress. As Hans Selye mentioned about stress as “non-specific”, it is not possible for the WHO to find a complete cure for stress as it is not a conventional disease that harms people’s health. Thus, WHO has considered a creative approach to convince people to reduce their stress hormones. Recently, “Doing What Matter in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide” has provided a list of solutions and techniques that people can follow step by step on dealing with feelings of depression and anxiety raised from stress. Since every community is different, WHO allows people to act on stress based on their personal values.

Possible Solutions

- Academic stress is the most challenging problem that many organizations and countries will need to come together and reduce. Since eliminating the existence of stress is almost impossible, the only method is to reduce academic stress among adolescents. Many scientists and experts claim that stress is naturally caused when something cannot satisfy the students' expectations. Thus, it is essential to bring up a new international curriculum that abolishes competition and the old grade system which causes academic stress among many students. The ideal curriculum can promote more creativity and a behavior-oriented grading system so that students will not need to worry about gradings.

- According to Oxford research, gamification of learning is a way to reduce academic stress and give more motivation to students to work harder. Games have existed for a long time, and it is an activity that is popular among all students. Due to technological development, games have also evolved to become more enjoyable and attractive. By linking the characteristics of games with learning, students will enjoy their learning and become less stressed out.

- For students to not get stressed about their learning environment, it is better to acquire professional support towards the students in school. These professional supports will include teachers who are more experienced and are able to help their students. Especially for high school students who are sensitive towards grading and college acceptance, it is necessary for them that there are many teachers who are available to help.

- School bullying, harassment, students' poor attitudes in class, cyberbullying are issues and conflicts impacting many students' school life. They are the main causes of students' stress, and it is an aim to reduce these physical stressors in school. By imposing more direct school policies, it is a beneficial factor for a safer school environment. However, there is no guarantee that all schools have the capability to promote these policies. Thus, it is a possibility to create a new inspector's role in the school that can check on the learning environment of school frequently.

Bibliography

1. "China Targets Costly Tutoring Classes. Parents Want to Save Them." *The New York Times*, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/business/economy/china-education-tutors.html. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
2. "Stress Relief: Schools Build Special Zone to Reduce Student Anxiety." *Koreatimes*, 17 Mar. 2019, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/03/119_265406.html. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.

3. “7 Ways to Gamify Your Studies to Make Learning More Fun.” *Oxford Royale Academy*, 28 July 2020, www.oxford-royale.com/articles/7-ways-gamify-studies/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
4. Heckman, William. “Here’s How to Cope with Stress, according to the World Health Organization - the American Institute of Stress.” *The American Institute of Stress*, 25 Aug. 2020, www.stress.org/heres-how-to-cope-with-stress-according-to-the-world-health-organization. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
5. Ye, Wendy. “China’s Harsh Education Crackdown Sends Parents and Businesses Scrambling.” *CNBC*, CNBC, 5 Aug. 2021, www.cnbc.com/2021/08/05/chinas-harsh-education-crackdown-sends-parents-businesses-scrambling.html. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
6. “Burnout.” *Psychology Today*, 2021, www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/burnout. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
7. Thakkar, Anoushka. “Academic Stress in Students - One Future Collective - Medium.” *Medium*, One Future Collective, 6 Apr. 2018, medium.com/one-future/academic-stress-in-students-498c34f064d7. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
8. Mascarenhas, Anuradha. “Suicide Leading Cause of Death among India’s Young, Says Lancet Report.” *The Indian Express*, The Indian Express, 10 May 2016, indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/suicide-leading-cause-of-death-among-indias-young-report-2792671/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
9. “The Mental Health Toll of Academic Pressure.” *Newport Institute*, 14 Apr. 2021, www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/academic-pressure/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
10. Tan, SY, and A Yip. “Hans Selye (1907–1982): Founder of the Stress Theory.” *Singapore Medical Journal*, vol. 59, no. 4, Apr. 2018, pp. 170–171, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5915631/, 10.11622/smedj.2018043. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
11. “What We Do.” *Who.int*, 2021, www.who.int/about/what-we-do. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
12. “History of Stress - CESH / CSHS.” *CESH / CSHS*, 17 Aug. 2017, humanstress.ca/stress/what-is-stress/history-of-stress/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
13. Alsulami, Saleh, et al. “Perception of Academic Stress among Health Science Preparatory Program Students in Two Saudi Universities.” *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, vol. Volume 9, Mar. 2018, pp. 159–164, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5856041/, 10.2147/amep.s143151. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.

14. "Pressures to Succeed Affect Student Health." *Stanford Graduate School of Education*, 6 Dec. 2011, ed.stanford.edu/news/pressures-succeed-affect-student-health. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.
15. "The Concept of Schooling Was Designed to Prepare Young People for the Adult World, Not Just in Trade Opportunities but Also in Maintaining Relationships and Dealing with Other People. While School Presented an Opportunity for Young Adults to Simulate Current World Scenarios, It May Have Unintentionally Introduced Another Real-World Concept—Student Stress. This...." *Research.com*, Research.com, 26 Oct. 2020, research.com/education/student-stress-statistics#2. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.