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## **EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED STRESS AND EMOTIONAL STABILITY AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present research study was conducted to examine the relationship between perceived stress and emotional stability among high school students of private schools in Bangalore city. Perceived stress refers to the subjective experience of stress. It refers to the individual's perception which involves their thoughts and feelings about how much stress he or she is experiencing at a given time period. Emotional stability on the other hand is an important contributory factor to the mental health of adolescents. Stability in emotions and emotional regulation helps an individual to be more flexible and adaptable to their life situations and environment. Hence, this study aimed to assess the level of perceived stress and emotional stability among the high school students and to examine, whether, the perception and appraisal of situations as stressful is related to their emotional stability. A sample of 200 students were selected to be a part of this study, out of which 100 were boys and 100 were girls in the age range of 15-16 years. Perceived Stress Scale by Sheldon Cohen (1994) and Emotional Stability Scale (1995) developed by PSY.com services were the tools used in the study. Pearson's correlation technique was used to explore the relation between perceived stress and emotional stability. The study showed significant negative correlation between perceived stress and emotional stability. Results further showed that high school students experienced high level of perceived stress. Independent t- test results also showed significant gender difference in the level of emotional stability among high school students.

**Keywords:** Perceived stress; Emotional stability; High- school students, Stress.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence, the period of transition from childhood to adulthood, is one of the most dynamic stages of human development. It is a time of dramatic physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes. Adolescence is an age of opportunity for the children and it is a pivotal time for the parents and teachers to help them navigate risks and vulnerabilities and to set them on the path for fulfilling their potential. While for many adolescents the transition period from childhood to adulthood is relatively smooth, for others this transition period is characterised by an increased risk of psychological issues like depression, anxiety (M. Cole & Cole, 2001). Majority of high school students undergo immense stress either contributed by their home environment wherein they are under pressure of parental expectations or due to the school environment wherein they might get overwhelmed due to the academic pressure and excessive competition. As this is the stage where they are still not fully-grown adults but at the same time, they expect more freedom and the need to be treated like adults this often creates lot of conflicts between them and those in their surroundings. Sources of stress be it internal or external, hampers the functioning of their mind and body. Constantly adjusting to changes in themselves as well as to changes in their environment at this stage can be challenging for them

causing conflict and disharmony. At times, the pressure on them is so much that they force themselves to work beyond their capacity finally causing burnout and exhaustion.

The term stress is often used to describe emotions like nervousness, strain, tension, worry, anxiety, apprehension. However, perception of stress varies from person to person. What is perceived stressful by one person may have little effect on another person. Thus, perceived stress involves subjective component. Perceived stress may not be the actual amount of stress which a person has rather it is the amount of stress which he feels or thinks he is undergoing at a given point of time. There can be marked differences between the actual stress and an individual's level of perceived stress. In adolescents, stress can be a result of a number of factors and predictors including psychological, social and economic variable and is considered to be one of the major causes for adolescent mental health issues. At times, students, especially adolescents perceive their environment to be more stressful than what is actually present. Hence, to understand how student's perception of stress in their environment effects their emotional stability becomes important.

Emotional stability points out to the ability of a person to remain balanced, calm and composed emotionally under stressful circumstances. According to Smitson (1974) "it is the continuous thriving of the personality for greater sense of emotional health and occurs both at physical and personal level". As adolescence is a stressful phase in terms of overall growth and development hence, emotional stability serves as an important component towards positive mental health of adolescents. Emotional stability has been found to be one of the seven important indicators of mental health (Matheen, 2011), which also affects the learning of an individual. Emotional stability helps a person to perform with flexibility and adaptability throughout their life. Lack of emotional control may lead to anxiety, depression, inferiority feelings and guilt. Emotions have an influential role to play in life, hence, adequate control on emotions is essential for prosperous life. Adolescence is a highly emotionally charged time of life. The loss of childhood, the developmental challenges, the vulnerability from insecurity are all too high. At this intense period of growth managing emotions is not easy. Learning to regulate emotions is an important task at this stage if children have to grow and develop positively. Emotional control leads to emotional stability. Studies have shown that individuals who are emotionally stable show less reaction and are not affected severely to negative stimuli as compared to individual who are emotionally weak. Emotionally stable individuals are more focused, have better self-control and are self-confident (Ormel et al., 2013). Emotionally stable students were found to be less anxious and payed less attention to errors, which facilitates overall development and learning (Zhao, 2011). Emotionally stable students are able to distract themselves away from anxiety provoking stimuli in their environment and hence, prevent themselves from getting engaged in the ruminative thought cycle (Kircanski et al., 2008). Looking at previous studies it is clear that adolescence is a period of stress and strain, possessed by intensity of feelings, anxiety, mood swings, fluctuation of feelings, egotism etc. It is also a stage of great emotional turmoil if not handled adequately. Achieving emotional stability is important at this stage of growth and development.

### **Methodology**

The present study adopted a purposive sampling technique to gather data from high school students, studying in private schools of Bangalore city. Sample consisted of 200 students (100 boys and 100 girls) the age group 15-16 yrs. (mean 15.2, SD 0.42) from three private schools of Bangalore city. The study attempted to assess the relationship between Perceived stress and Emotional stability among the high school children of private schools in Bangalore city. The

study followed the ethical guidelines for research on human subjects. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Regional Centre of IGNOU Bangalore.

### Measures

**Emotional stability scale (1995)** developed by PSY.Com services. Emotional stability scale is a self-administered test which helps to assess the level of emotional stability of an individual. On an average it takes 15-20 minutes to complete the test. The questionnaire consists of 60 items. The scale has a reliability value of 0.74. Scoring is done as per instructions given in ESQ manual. Level of emotional stability was determined based on the sten scores. Sten score from 1-3 is considered as low, 4-7 as average and 8-10 as high.

**Perceived stress scale by Sheldon Cohen (1994)** it is the most widely used psychological instrument that measures the perception of stress by an individual i.e. an individual's appraisal of situation as stressful. Items measure how unpredictable, uncontrollable respondents find their lives along with the current level of stress experienced with a reference time frame of last one month. Scores ranging from 1-13 is considered as low, 13-20 as average and 20 and above as high.

### Procedure

After approval of the research proposal by the Regional Centre of IGNOU Bangalore an appointment was fixed with principals of 3 private schools in Bangalore city. The objective and rationale of the study was explained to the principles of the institutes from where the sample was selected. Prior permission was taken by the researcher from the class teachers of respective classes before fixing the date for administration of the tests. The researcher did data collection only on the dates agreed by the class teachers. The questionnaires were administered in a group setting. The study participants were first given a brief about the purpose of the study and a formal consent of participation was taken from the students. The students were explained about the confidentiality of their responses as part of the ethical standards followed by the researcher. It was instructed to the respondents that there was no right or wrong answer to any of the question. Doubts were clarified by the investigator. On an average the respondents took nearly half an hour to complete the questionnaires.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive statistics, independent 't' test and Pearson correlation were used to analyse the data. Out of the 200 students that formed the sample, 153 (76.5% of the total sample) students were of the age of 15 years and 47 (23.5% of the sample) students were of the age of 16 years. The mean age for the sample was found to be 15.2 with an S.D. of 0.42. Level of perceived stress and emotional stability was assessed in the sample. It was observed that with regard to level of perceived stress the sample showed high level of perceived stress. Out of the total sample of 200 students, 91 students (45.5%) showed high level of perceived stress. Stress is considered as a risk factor for the onset of various mental health problems such as anxiety, depression in adolescence, which can, in more severe cases, lead to suicide. The way an individual views his environment and conflicting situations plays an important factor in deciding their response to it and also how well they will be able to cope with it. An individual's environment might be stressful, but, if he perceives it more positively and optimistically then he will be able to adjust and adapt better. Current study has shown that level of perceived stress is high among high school students which is a matter of concern. Hence, parents and teachers should help adolescents in building healthy coping strategies, guiding them positively. It is important to address the attention of professionals directly involved with the adolescents,

researchers and public health institutions who can guide the adolescent how to withstand, how to react on and most importantly developing positive attitude and coping style while facing the stressful condition.

Independent- t test analysis was done to identify if there is any gender difference in perceived stress and emotional stability. Results showed that there was no significant gender difference in perceived stress of high school students. However, significant gender difference in emotional stability of high school students was observed. Table 1 shows the independent t- test result for gender difference in emotional stability. On looking at table 1 it can be seen that the sig (2-tailed) value is found to be 0.035 which is found to be less than the level of significance fixed, hence we say that there is significant gender difference in emotional stability of high school students.

**Table 1: showing independent t -test result for gender difference in emotional Stability**

Emotional Stability Score	Mean	Std. Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	-0.440	0.207	-2.118	198	0.035*

\*significant at 0.05 level

The mean score of emotional stability for girls was 6.65 with an SD of 1.55 and that for boys was 6.21 with an SD of 1.37 indicating that girl's level of emotional stability is better when compared to boys. Previous studies have shown similar finding. In one of the study which measured emotional intelligence, a construct almost similar to emotional stability, it was seen that females demonstrated higher degree of emotional intelligence than males (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Patel, 2017). Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2012) in their study analysed emotional stability from a biological perspective and claimed that female biochemistry was more suitably adapted to the individual's own and other's emotions as a vital factor for survival and hence females were emotionally more stable than males. Craig et al. (2009) in their study argued that males and females were different in cerebral processing of emotions thus, giving rise to the differences in emotional stability.

The primary objective was to examine if perceived stress and emotional stability had any relation in high school students. With regard to the same Pearson's correlation was carried out. Table 2 shows the result for the same. Looking at the table it can be seen that sig. 2 tailed value is 0.000 which shows that there is a significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional stability. Further, the Pearson's correlation value (r) is found to be -0.386 which shows that there is a negative correlation between the variable of perceived stress and emotional stability. That means, the higher the level of perceived stress the lesser the emotional stability and vice versa. If the students perceive their situation as stressful and demanding, then their emotional stability will be low. Similarly, individuals with low emotional stability tend to perceive the environment to be more stressful than it is.

**Table 2: showing Pearson's correlation results**

ESS	PSS
Pearson Correlation	-0.386**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
N	200

\*\*significant at 0.01 level

The findings are in line with previous research. The way an individual appraises his environment and situation determines the extent of impact it will have on their well-being. Though stress, when perceived to be moderate and in an optimistic manner can motivate an individual to focus and work towards their goals, however, when this perception turns negative and even a minor stressful situation is analysed and interpreted by the individual in a catastrophic way it can cause a lot of harm to their growth and well-being. This is especially evident and more common in the case of adolescents. Several studies have shown this negative impact of perceived stress. Firth J, Mamo C, Buttigieg R, Vassallo D, Azzopardi L (2012) in their study found that “increased perception of stress might be associated with moderate level of anxiety, depression symptoms, interpersonal sensitivity, frustration and powerlessness”. Wiegner L, Hange D, Björkelund C, Ahlborg G Jr. (2015) in their study observed that “prolonged exposure to stress and higher levels of perceived stress tends to have negative consequences resulting in the development of anxiety disorder and high-risk behaviours, such as smoking and use of alcohol and drugs”. Gadzella, Baloglu and Wang (2012) found a negative correlation between perceived stress and academic performance. A person with high emotional stability will react less negatively to his circumstances than a person with low emotional stability. If the students are emotionally stable, they can handle situations efficiently thus reducing the level of perceived stress.

Perceived stress can cause exhaustion, cynicism, which can affect daily life and can even lead a person to depression (Maryam Mir Haghi and Saeed Sarabian, 2016). It can have an impact on the emotional stability of the adolescence. As stability in emotions determines the ability of a person to deal with problems and difficulties in life and stress arises if a person finds it difficult to handle his situations in a balanced way it is clear that perceived stress can result in emotional instability. Individuals having less emotional stability behave nervously, anxiously, and doubtfully, while those with high emotional stability remain calm and confident. Thus, perceived stress which induces negative emotion tend to increase if the level of emotional stability is low. In the same way by reducing the level of perceived stress a significant increase in emotional stability can be achieved.

## CONCLUSION

The present research study was conducted to examine the relationship between perceived stress and emotional stability among the high school students of private schools in Bangalore city. The findings of the study showed that high school students were found to experience high level of perceived stress. Secondly, significant gender difference was observed in emotional stability wherein girls were found to have better emotional stability compared to boys. Lastly, the study found a significant negative correlation between the perceived stress and emotional stability. Perceived stress is the subjective experience of stress at a given point in time. It is not the actual stress present in the environment of an individual. Many a times, there is a significant gap observed between the level of stress perceived by an individual and the actual stress that might be present in their life. Individuals are often found to perceive a situation as stressful more than what it tends to be. This gap is more evident during adolescent and young adulthood. High level of perceived stress is detrimental to one's mental health causing anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and in extreme cases can lead to suicidality. It results in a feeling of uncertainty, uncontrollability and unpredictability. Therefore, if an individual feels that he is unable to have control over his environment and life situation's and perceives his environment to be more stressful and threatening than it actually is it will have an impact on their emotional stability which in turn will slowly affect other areas of their life. Hence, from the findings of the study it is evident that by helping students to modify the way they perceive different situations in



their life, i.e. by helping them develop skills to alter their negative and ruminative thought process, reducing their tendency to catastrophize and overanalyse their situations can help them to significantly increase their emotional stability. As Adolescence is considered to be a critical phase during which the individual is highly at the risk of the onset of problems of depression, substance abuses and suicide tendencies, hence the finding that majority of high school students are showing high level of perceived stress and that perceived stress is negatively associated with emotional stability serves as an important data pointing to the fact that parents, teachers and school authorities should take necessary measures to develop counselling and life skill training programs to help students develop better and healthier coping mechanisms. Psychoeducating parents about the problems and issues faced by adolescents, which might be contributing to their child's stress level and making them aware of the role played by them as parents in this context can go a long way in helping students have an understanding rather than critical family environment. Teaching healthy activities for mental well-being such as meditation, yoga, teaching self-compassion and cognitive and emotion regulation skills right from the school age and as part of the school curriculum can help build mental strength and resilience in the child, thus, helping them to be confident and self-sufficient in the future. Implementation of training programs that develop and enhance the emotional stability and reduces perceived stress of students are required. This training should be part of the academic curriculum, and should be a continuous process, instead of a single exercise.

### Limitations

The study did have its own limitations. The sample was not diverse and was relatively small. The study concentrates only on high school students. The study concentrated only on the urban population. The sample was restricted to just three schools. All this can affect generalizability. Representation of different age groups was unequal. Hence, age as a factor influencing both variables could not be studied. Only private schools were approached. Purposive sampling technique was used which again effects the generalizability of results. As correlational statistics were utilized, no definitive statements can be made about causality. The tools used for perceived stress and emotional stability are self-reported measures. Hence, respondents test taking attitude might also have an influence in their pattern of responding. We don't know how sincerely and seriously they have approached this testing

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Nil

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