



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXAMINATION STRESS COPING STRATEGIES OF HIGHER SECONDARY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

People use many ways to cope with stress. Students also use different strategies to cope with stress. Examination stress is the most common stress that students experience naturally. The level of this stress among higher secondary students is comparatively high because this stage is the most crucial stage of education in India as it determines the future path of the students. The present study is an attempt to find out the coping strategies used by the higher secondary students and to investigate whether there are any differences in the coping strategies of the students in respect to their gender and locality. 200 higher secondary final year students have taken as sample for this study. Stratified random sampling technique was used to collect the sample and descriptive research design has been used for this study. Results show no gender wise difference in coping strategies of the students, but significant difference has been found in emotion focused coping of the students in respect to their locality. Emotion focused coping is significantly higher for the students of rural area than the students who are from urban area. However, no locality wise difference has been found in problem focused coping of the students.

INTRODUCTION

Today's world is highly competitive. We are living in an era of competition in every walk of our life. This competition has become so unavoidable that it has made our lives stressful. We have to face stress in our family life, in our academic life, in our working life, in our social life for one reason or the other. Stress is simply defined as emotional disturbance and changes, some kind of pressure or tension of fulfilling any kind of demand which may be physical, mental, emotional and social. Carolyn M. Aldwin (2007) stated that stress refers to that quality of experience, produced through a person-environment transaction that, through either over arousal or under arousal, results in psychological or physiological distress. Auerbach and Grambling (1998) regarded stress as an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that individuals experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. Where there is stress, there are ways to deal with stress. The ways or strategies used for reducing tensions caused by different stresses are known as coping strategies. Stress and coping with stress are phenomena closely related to human life. We try to cope with the stressful events by using different strategies and adopting different measures. The term 'coping' is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as stressful or threatening to the person. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in the book "Stress,

Appraisal and Coping" stated that coping is the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person environment relationship that are appraised as stressful and the emotions they generate. In stress literature, the word "coping" has two connotations. It has been used to denote the way of dealing with stress or effort to master conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available (Park and Adler, 2003). In psychology, coping means to invest own conscious effort, to solve personal and interpersonal problems, in order to try to master, minimize or tolerate stress and conflict (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coping-psychology>). The term coping is also defined as realistic and flexible thoughts and acts that solve problems and thereby reduce stress. The main function of coping is to reduce tension and to restore equilibrium in the mind of a person. Mechanic (1974) stated three functions of coping: dealing with social and environmental demands, creating the motivation to meet those demands and maintaining a state of psychological equilibrium in order to direct energy and skill toward external demands. Considering the nature of the coping functions, the ways or strategies of coping can be broadly divided into two categories:

- } Problem Focused Coping (PFC) and
- } Emotion Focused Coping (EFC).

Problem focused coping or PFC involves thoughts, actions and strategies geared toward removing or diminishing a stressful event or its impact and tend to operate when people believe that something can be done to alter their situation. Emotion focused coping or EFC involves thoughts, actions and

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strategies directed toward the management and reduction of distressing emotions associated with the threatening event and is involved when one perceives that a stressor must be endured (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980).

Significance of study: Students easily fall victim of stress in their academic life. Establishing oneself in the future through a good career, fulfill one's own as well as parents' and family's dream, holding an identity in the society and all these through academic performance or excellence in the field of education has made the students' life even more stressful today. In our country, academic performance is all that a student ultimately gets in the mark sheet. In other words, the marks obtained in the examination determine the future of a student, especially at the secondary level of education. Because after the final examination of higher secondary stage, students in our country get the chance to choose their future path, to what way they want to go, what are the courses they want to take up. Higher the marks are, higher the possibility of getting seat in a good college or in professional courses. So examination automatically brings stress among the students at this level, though there is stress in other stages of education also. Pressure of performing well, fear of failure in the examination, high expectations from parents and family, social pressure as well as one's own aspirations are the main causes that students experience stress before or during their examination, which we call examination stress. Many students fail to cope with this stress and ultimately go into depression or suffer other mental health issues or in extreme cases take their own lives. According to data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau, in India every hour one student commits suicide, with 28 such suicides reported every day (The Hindu, 29 Jan 2020). In Assam also reports show student suicide cases very frequently. According to a report published in 'The Telegraph' stated that between 2008 and 2014, 245 school going students had committed suicide in the state and it was found that the major cause was poor performance in examination. The scenario has not improved over the years and student suicide cases are on rise. This clearly indicates the need and importance of the study about the stress induced by examination and the effective coping strategies. Psychologists and counselors revealed that young students are not well equipped to cope with the stress of performance in education and constant stress leads to variety of mental disorders. Hence, it is important to discuss the issue and make people aware of the current situation. This will hopefully help in understanding examination stress faced by the students and different coping strategies. Caring family members, supportive friends and teachers can help them to great extent to overcome from such stressful situations by adopting suitable coping strategies. So, it is a duty of our all to protect the adolescent students mentally and emotionally, so that they can cope with their stress, make better adjustment and progress in their life.

Review of literature: Coping with examination stress is a complex process. Because it is an interaction between personality variables such as coping capacities, psycho biological responses and environmental variables such as the time allowed for a special interaction session. So, Hobfoll (1998) opined that coping with examination stress is not only an individual, but also a communal process e.g., between examinee and examiner. To cope with this examination stress different students use different strategies. Variables like gender and locality of the students, along with other variables play a role in the coping strategies that the students adopt to deal with

examination stress. Several studies related to coping strategies and gender have found gender differences in coping strategies. Male and female do not cope with stress the same way. Women are more prosocial than men in their coping, but no less active. Men are more likely to use antisocial and aggressive strategies, but use less assertive coping strategies than women (Hobfoll, Dunahoo, Porath and Monnier, 1994). Several studies have found that men use more problem focused or instrumental methods of handling stressful experiences whereas women tend to use coping strategies that are aimed at changing their emotional responses to a stressful situation. [Endler and Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004; Ptacek et al., 1994]. Tamres, Janicki and Helgeson (2002) opine that men and women often differ in their coping styles; women were more likely than men to engage in most coping strategies; masculine behaviour leads towards either confronting the problem directly or denying it, while women exhibit a more emotional response to their problems. Gregory S. Wilson, Mary E. Pritchard and Brian Revalee (2005) also find gender differences in physical and psychological health symptoms as well as in coping styles.

They found that relation between health symptoms and coping varied significantly by gender. Study results of Melendez, Mayordomo, Sancho and Tomas (2012) reflect significant differences in coping strategies' use as a function of gender. Women were found to have higher scores on emotional coping styles, i.e. overt emotional expression, religion, avoidance and social support seeking. Emotional support or emotion focused coping was used significantly more frequently by women than men (Kelly, Tyrka, Carpenter, 2008 and Ramya, Parthasarathy, 2009). Results of the study conducted by Martinez, Meneghel and Penalver (2019) reveal that some coping strategies differ depending on the gender. Females show a higher level of support seeking coping whereas males show a higher level of meaning focused coping. However, several studies have also found that male and female do not differ in the use of problem focused coping (Rosario et al. 1988, Felsten, 1998, Tamres et al. 2002, Malendez et al. 2012, etc.). Hamilton and Fagot (1988) compare male and female coping behavior in order to test the theory that men use instrumental coping strategies more frequently than women, who are thought to use emotion focused coping strategies. But the majority of analyses of the study show no gender differences in the coping strategies used by male and female students. Williams and De Lisi (1999) find in their study that adolescents in all age groups varied their coping strategies in relation to the types of stressors, but there were no significant gender difference. Neil and Proeve (2000) while studying ethnicity, gender, self-esteem and coping styles of Australian and South-east Asian secondary students, also find that there are no gender differences in the use of coping styles.

There are significant differences in the rural urban life styles. This difference is observable in various aspects of the students' life also. Regarding stress and coping strategies, rural urban difference has been found in several studies. Zhang et. Al. (2011) found that students of low socio- economic status in rural schools were likely to seek help than those in urban schools. They were also found to use venting and fantasizing as coping. Mathew (2017) found that most of the urban students' coping was moderate and all the subjects in rural area showed good coping. Coping strategies adopted by the rural adolescents were constantly higher than that of the urban adolescents.

On the other hand, Srivastava et.al (2014) found that urban adolescents use more coping strategies than rural adolescents. However, despite challenging socio economic conditions in rural areas, ways of coping were similar in rural and urban adolescents (Elgar, Arlett and Groves, 2003).

Objectives of the study

The present study is an attempt

-) To find out the coping strategies adopted by the higher secondary students when they face stress especially due to their examination.
-) To find out if there are any gender and locality wise differences in the coping strategies adopted by the students.

METHODOLOGY

Participants: The participants in this study are 200 students of 12 grade of Kamrup Metro and Kamrup Rural districts of Assam, India studying under Assam Higher Secondary Education Council (AHSEC). There are 100 male and 100 female students of 17-19 age group from Arts, Science and Commerce stream. Stratified random sampling technique was used to collect the sample. A descriptive research design has been used for this study.

Materials: The investigator has adopted and constructed Coping Strategies Scale mainly on the basis of ‘SCOPE’(Student Coping Scale) by C. Ward Struthers, Raymond P. Perry and Verena H. Menec and taking help from ‘Ways of Coping’ by Lazarus and Folkman(1985). The scale consists of 32 items, 4 for each sub-scale to measure two ways of coping: Problem Focused Coping (PFC) and Emotion Focused Coping (EFC). Problem Focused Coping (PFC) involves thoughts, actions and strategies directed toward altering the source of stress. The sub scales taken under PFC are Academic Planning, Self-controlling, Positive reappraisal and Active coping. Emotion Focused Coping (EFC) involves thoughts, actions and strategies directed toward the management of the emotional distress associated with stressful events. The sub scales under EFC are Seeking social support, Avoidance coping, Accepting responsibility and Religious coping. Each item of the scale has 4 responses on a 0-3 likert scale.

Procedure: The students were given the questionnaire and asked to respond each item carefully. They were intimated with the purpose of the study and assured that their responses will be kept confidential. Students took 15 to 20 minutes to complete the task. After data collection, proper tabulation of data has been done. Then statistical techniques like mean, Standard Deviation (SD) and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

Coping Strategies and Gender: Table 1 shows the percentage of students using PFC and EFC. The percentage of female students using EFC is more than PFC. On the other hand, percentage of PFC user is higher for male students than the percentage of EFC user male students.

Table 1. Coping strategies and Gender

Gender	Coping Strategies		Total
	PFC	EFC	
Female	48	52	100
Male	53	47	100

Table 2. Mean, SD, Minimum and Maximum score of PFC and EFC of students in relation to their gender

Female					
Variable	N	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
PFC	100	-0.007	0.92	-2.42	1.85
EFC	100	0.002	1.00	-2.75	2.21
Male					
Variable	N	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
PFC	100	0.011	1.07	-3.22	1.85
EFC	100	-0.002	0.99	-2.48	2.61

Table 3. ANOVA test showing the significance of mean of the PFC and EFC scores of the students in relation to their gender

Analysis Of Variance of PFC score by Gender					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Between Groups	0.01	1	0.018	0.02	Not Significant
Within Group	199.54	198	1.007		
Total	199.5661	199	1.002		
Analysis Of Variance of EFC score by Gender					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Between Groups	0.001	1	0.001	0	Not Significant
Within Groups	199.157	198	1.005		
Total	199.159	199	1.00		

Table 2 shows that the mean PFC score of male students is greater than the score of the female students. So, the male students use PFC strategies more than the female students. The standard deviation of the PFC scores of male students is also slightly higher than standard deviation of the PFC score of female students. On the other hand the mean score of EFC is higher for female than the male. It means that the female students use more EFC strategy than the male students. The standard deviation is higher for female EFC score than the male EFC score. It is completely in contrast to the findings in regard to the use of PFC coping strategy. The ANOVA result in Table 3 shows that in using both the strategies i.e. PFC and EFC, there is no significant difference between male and female students. So, we can say that there is no significant difference in the examination stress coping strategies of the male and female students.

Coping Strategies and Locality

Table 4. Coping Strategies and Locality

Locality	Coping Strategies		Total
	PFC	EFC	
Rural	43	57	100
Urban	55	45	100

Table 4 shows that the percentage of EFC user is more among rural students and the percentage of PFC user is more among the urban students. The ANOVA result in Table 6 shows that although the mean score of PFC is higher for the students of rural areas compared to the students of urban areas, there is no significant difference in the mean score as calculated F statistics is less than the corresponding critical value at 5% level of significance.

Table 5. Mean, SD, Minimum and Maximum PFC and EFC score of students in relation to their locality

Rural					
Variable	N	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
PFC	100	0.08	0.94	-3.22	1.85
EFC	100	0.17	0.98	-2.75	2.61
Urban					
Variable	N	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
PFC	100	-0.08	1.04	-2.90	1.85
EFC	100	-0.17	0.99	-2.62	2.34

Table 6. ANOVA test showing the significance of mean of the PFC and EFC scores of the students in relation to locality

Analysis Of Variance of PFC by locality					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Between Groups	1.36	1	1.36	1.36	Not significant
Within Groups	198.20	198	1.00		
Total	199.56	199	1.00		

Analysis Of Variance of EFC score by locality					
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Significance
Between Groups	6.47	1	6.47		Significant at 0.05 level
Within Groups	192.68	198	0.97		
Total	199.15	199	1.00	6.65	

So, we can say that there is no significant difference in the use of PFC strategy among rural and urban students. On the other hand, the mean score of EFC is significantly higher for the students of rural areas than the urban areas which mean that there is significant difference in the use of EFC between the rural and the urban students.

DISCUSSION

In this study, examination stress coping strategies of higher secondary final year students across gender and locality (rural and urban) has been sought to examine. From the result of the study it has been found that examination stress coping strategies do not differ among male and female students. Though the female students use emotion focused coping strategies more and the male students use problem focused coping strategies more than their counterpart, the difference is not significant. This result is consistent with previous literature examining gender difference in coping strategies of the students of higher secondary stage of education (Hamilton and Fagot 1988, Williams and De Lisi 1999, Neil and Proeve, 2000). On the other hand, regarding locality of the students it has been found that the number of EFC user is more among rural students and the number of PFC user is more among urban students. But it has also been found that both PFC and EFC is used more by rural students than the urban students. While no significant difference has been found in the use of PFC by rural and urban students, the mean score of EFC for rural students has been found significantly higher than the urban students. This indicates that there is significant difference in the use of EFC by rural and urban students.

Conclusion

It is evident that examination stress is very common among the students of all stages. While minimum level of stress works positively, higher level of stress causes threat to not only the mental health of the students but also to their lives. It is therefore very important for the students to adopt proper coping strategies to deal effectively with their examination

stress. Curriculum, academic activities, examination, etc should be suitably designed so that it does not create extreme stress among the students. Besides schools should have guidance and counseling cell and organize stress management program on regular interval to provide the students with adequate knowledge, awareness and help regarding stress management. Teachers at school and parents at home have very important role to play in students’ coping with examination stress. They should be always open to discuss the difficulties of the students and concerned with their feelings. Parents, teachers and friends should always help and guide the students in adopting right coping strategies so that they can overcome examination stress and move ahead towards a bright and stress free future.

Abbreviations

- PFC- Problem Focused Coping
- EFC- Emotion Focused Coping
- AHSEC- Assam Higher Secondary Education Council
- SCOPE- Student Coping Scale
- SD- Standard Deviation
- ANOVA- Analysis of Variance

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