ACADEMIC STRESS AS A FACTOR IN REDUCING SCHOLASTIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract
The research aims to identify sources of stress for students aware of the negative effects that stress has on the body. Stress has become the disease of the century and therefore it is better to seek ways and ways to prevent than to combat because young students are the future workforce and hope for the future. We used a qualitative method, focus-group which is a type of group interview, which is based on an interview guide, semi-structured. I used nominal group technique using the interview as a primary tool of investigation. Participants: 10 students from the Academy of Economic Studies, the Business and Tourism Faculty, first year, daily attendance license cycle, aged between 18 and 21 years old. The objective of this study is to determine the level of stress among students and identify sources of stress in order to prevent negative effects of stress, which can affect the results achieved by students at exams.

Keywords: stress, eustress, distress, academic stress

JEL classification: I1, I2, I3

1. Definition of stress
The term „stress” designated a series of nouns related in meaning but with nuances which can diversify its meaning: strain, pressure, burden, force, effort, requirement, tension, constraint etc. Depending on the inner interpretation of events and consequences which result, stress manifests in two ways: eustress and distress. Eustress is caused by positive attitudes and pleasant activities and is favorable to the body, whereas distress is caused by pessimistic attitudes and unpleasant activities and is damaging to the body.

Hans Selye, believed to be the father of stress, defines stress as a general and unspecific reaction of the body to the external action of some factors – stress agents – of varied nature (physical, chemical, biological and psychological) (Selye H., 1984)

Lazarus and Folkman define stress as a „cognitive and behavioral effort to reduce, master or tolerate external or internal requirements which surpass personal resources” (Lazarus, 1999).

The definition given by the reputable Romanian professor and researcher Golu M. Is „state of strain, tension, discomfort determined by agents which generate

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affections with a negative significance (or a positive one), frustration or the repression of some motivations (needs, wants, aspirations), of the difficulty or impossibility to resolve some issues” (Golu M., 2000)

Stress is omnipresent in all spheres of human life: at home, at school, on the job, in the streets, out shopping etc. Academic stress is that state in which the body finds itself threatened by a series of stress generating factors which can affect scholastic performance, professional performance, physical and psychological health of people involved in an academic process. Stress factors in the academic environment are: the evaluation process, strained relations with teachers and colleagues, verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal communication issues, precarious financial situation, emotional abuse, distrust in one’s self, fear of failure (exams, tests, projects), having too many activities to perform or too many expectations to meet with the allotted frustration levels, lack of implication in curricular and extracurricular activities, social embarrassment, the fear to speak in public etc.

Academic stress is inevitable due to the fact that students must show skill, must hold a certain base level of knowledge, must be able to deal with challenges and be able to capitalize on their own potential they’ve acquired in the work field. The professional forming period done in an academic environment is quite stressful because it requires an intellectual, physical, affective and behavior effort to deal with challenges. The learning process is a complex process and assumes the acquisition of certain information, knowledge, operations, skills, notions, behaviors or behavior patterns, necessary for the smooth running of activities undertaken in all spheres of human life. The purpose of leaning must facilitate the adaptation of individuals to their own living environment, and in the case of human being, we’re talking about a superior adaptation, oriented teleologically and creatively and in a final meaning, teaching favors the most subtle existential experience, that being the experience of transcending one’s self (Maslow A, 2009). Thus, chronic stress endangers one’s ability to learn.

So as to reduce anxiety and academic stress levels, multiple methods and techniques are used, such as: hipnotherapy, cognitive-behavior therapy, the rational-emotional theory, systemic desensitisation, trainings meant to improve practices relating to managing stress during exams and tests. Among the techniques and methods listed, the one proven to be the most efficient is the cognitive-behavior technique because it helps the individual understand what the issue is, to identify automated negative thoughts and irrational beliefs gained during their childhood, which have spurred and maintained the issue and to find alternate, more rational and positive methods by which to better manage events in their lives.

2. Research method

So as to exemplify the fact that the academic environment is a source of stress, we’ve done a qualitative research in the form of a focus group with the purpose of identifying sources of stress among first year students.
The psychological instrument used by the focus group is a type of group interview which is based upon an interview guide and is semistructured. We applied the nominal group technique, using the interview as a primary instrument of investigation and so as to ensure the validation of information obtained through other methods and potential descriptions of certain directions of evolution as well as discovering the motives behind the formation of certain opinions and attitudes.

Participants: 10 students (5 female and 5 male) from the Academy of Economic Studies, the Business and Tourism Faculty, first year, daily attendance license cycle, aged between 18 and 21 years old. We wrote up an interview guide, split across 3 sections: Section I. General presentation (5-10 minutes), section 2. Discussion introduction (15 minutes), section 3. In-depth investigation (25 minutes) and section 4. Closure (10 minutes). The duration of the focus group is of 60 minutes.

We applied descriptive design, transverse for qualitative research, used a focus group, investigated sources of stress in first year students without intervening to trigger certain behaviors related to stress.

3. Results obtained

As a result of applying the focus group qualitative method, we have deduced the following: the vast majority of first year students show a high level of stress, maybe also because the research was done one week before the exams session. Upon performing a content analysis, we have concluded the following:

- Most students specified that the most stressful factor is the approaching exams session itself (55%), given that they are first year students and this is their first exams session as students, as such we believe this to be a normal phenomenon. Another stress factor is their financial situation (18%), their lack of revenue, very many students depending on their parents, and their needs are far greater than available financial resources. Their relation with their parents is strained (10%), mentioning the dated mentality of the said parents, lack of understanding and communication. The wish to improve (9%) and pessimism (8%) are two internal factors which registered lower shares as far as stress levels go.

- Participating students have listed a series of physical symptoms which manifest in the moment they become stressed. The most frequent physical symptoms are headaches (42,8%), agitation (23,8%), limbs perspiring (19%), tics (19%) and with a very low percentage stammering (4,4%).

- Most participants specified emotional symptoms such as crying, laughing and screaming which shows to us that they exteriorize their stress and thus unload emotionally, while this behavior also being an observable indicator. Introverts (23%) are those whom do not manifest their stress, are reserved, quiet and timid. Many times they are those whom get to the brink of depression and may manifest stress severely.
• Stress influences individual’s behavior, and as such affects their weak concentration and memorization (47.7%), and in the case of our participants this is important because it can affect their exam results, can lead to failing some exams, failing the university year and can even cause dropping out of school. Being isolated from other students (28.5%) means a lack of communication and socialization which can worsen their state of stress. Physical and verbal aggression (23.8%) will marginalize them, and being excluded from or ignored by the student body will lead to a loss of self-esteem and a worsening of their state of stress.

During their faculty years, more so than ever, students must contend with various situations in which they must prove their skill and deal with as many challenges as they come across, and at the same time is the period when many get hired and must contend with professional requirements, must be capable of putting in practice what they’ve learned. This starting period is quite stressful and requires consistent intellectual, physical and psychological effort, so as to perform well in these problem-situations. The first year of being a student is the period during which the first steps are taken into the workforce and the student’s hopes and ideals are rather fragile, they crumble easily. This thought alone is enough for the fear of failure to monitor each attempt to do something.

Conclusion

As a result of the research we’ve done, we’ve ascertained that first year students show a high level of stress, especially during their exams session. We’ve identified a series of sources of stress which produce negative effects upon human life activity. The conclusions of participants as far as what the consequences of stress on their biological, social and professional life are: it affects their physical health state: exhaustion, headaches, dizziness, anemia, obesity, sleepiness, insomnia etc.; affects their psychological state: states of panic, anxiety, depression, states of suicide; an incapacity to take a certain objective or project to a successful end; it affects interhuman relations; it generates conflict within the family, professionally, social and within the sphere of private life etc.

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