

University Students' Perceptions of the Causes of Stress

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KEYWORDS Life Changes. Relationships. Pressure. Family. Conflicts

ABSTRACT This paper explores the university students' perception and views on the causes of stress. Qualitative research design was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three female and three male students. The questions were open-ended questions, which allow the researcher to probe for more information from the participants. The collected data was transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings of this research shows that stress is a general response of the body to a threatening situation. The findings also reveals that things such as conflicts, life changes and pressure, are among other causes of stress. The paper concludes that students experience a lot of problems that cause stress such as unplanned pregnancy, family problems, school problems and illness. It was also concluded that students are pressurised by their friends to do a number of things such as going to night club, which they end up going because they want to be recognized by their friends. The paper recommends that the university provide counselling for student who faces academic, financial and social problems. University department such as psychology should also arrange workshops for educating students about stress, its symptoms, causes and ways of helping people with stress.

INTRODUCTION

Time at university is enjoyable for most students; it is also associate with emotional challenges and mood disorders (Kumar 2011). University students are also exposed to various psychosocial and physical problems. University students go through a lot of things such as leaving their home to campus, meeting new people, feeling intense pressure to get high marks, a willingness to get their degrees at record time, romance and social life (Heckman et al. 2014).

University fees increases every year, some students turn to loan money for paying their tuition and graduate with debts (Pariat 2014). They spend their university years with stress on to how to pay the debt that that they have. According to Lim et al. (2014), finances is a second largest stressor among university students. Financial problems among students includes loans, cost of the degree, borrowing money and paying their debts after completion of their degrees.

Trombitas et al. (2012) indicated that stress at university students is associated with their academic failure and health problems. Financial stress among students leads to sexual practices in exchange of money, binger drinking and suicide. Pariat (2014), shows that stress is caused by low self-esteem and poor academic performance. Lack of coping with stress among students leads to anxiety, depression and mental

problems. University students came across a lot of stressor and if one is to be able to come up with coping and managing strategies it is important to identify those stressors.

Stress is a normal part of living that cannot be avoided completely (Mazo 2015). A chronic stress can damage relationship in the family; between partners, and between parents and children. Since it causes anger and aggression; stress can sometimes lead to violence in the family directed against children and partners. In extreme case, stress can cause the family to split up or lead to children being taken into children's care center (Gerald 1991). Among students stress cause to fail their modules and also drop out (Ishaque et al. 2015).

People came across conflict situation when they must choose between two attractive alternatives. This type of conflicts occurs when an individual confronts two alternatives (Welten 2004). One of the most important causes of stress is major life changes for example, marriage, serious illness, a new job, moving away, and death in the family. Sudden changes in life situations are at the roots of stress for many of people (Pastorino et al. 2006). Although change is good, too much change is a problem (Zimbardo et al. 1994). Heckman et al. (2014), Feldman (2011) and Pastorino et al. (2006) indicated that, life changes, such as a change in marital status, represent a key type of stress. Life changes are any no-

ticeable alterations in one's living circumstances that require readjustment (Welten 2004).

According to Abdulghani et al. (2011) one of the most common causes of chronic illness is stress. Researchers have showed that students who are under stress are more likely to develop infectious diseases and viruses (Wagas et al. 2015). Stress also leads to substance abuse. Researchers have suggested that stress is closely linked to the initiation and maintenance of drugs and alcohol use (Sadock et al. 2015; Trauer 1990). According to Bernstein et al. (1994), stress is also associated with violence. Many researchers have found that unemployment, inadequate pay, job dissatisfaction and other stressors are associated with increases in the rate and severity of domestic violence.

Students spend lot of their time at school than doing other activities; because of this school can be source of stress (Pariat et al. 2014; Gerald 1991; Trauer 1990). Poor relationships between students and lectures may be stressful (Feldman 2011; Trauer 1990). Pressure involves expectations or demands that one behave in a certain way. You are under pressure to perform when you're expected to execute tasks and responsibilities quickly, efficiently and successfully (Welten 2004; Bernstein et al. 1994). Pressures from parents and classmates to perform well at school activities can also be a factor in causing student stress (Ishaque et al. 2015).

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper was to explain university students' perception on the causes of stress

Objectives

- Students' perception of stress
- Students' perception on the causes of stress.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design was used. Qualitative research designs are types of designs which use verbal descriptions of behaviour and experience resulting from processes of observational interpretation and analysis (Cook 2013). The reason why the researcher choose this research design is because it enables the researchers to find in-depth information of the topic being studied.

Participants and Sampling

The sample size of this paper consisted of six participants, of whom three were female and three were male. Only psychology students were included in the study. This paper was conducted at the University of Venda. Non-probability sampling method was used to sample participants (Babbie and Mouton 2012; Strydom 2005).

Data Collection

The technique of collecting data which was used in this paper is unstructured interview (Breakwell et al. 2006). By using unstructured interview the interviewers was free to ask question in whatever way she think is appropriate and natural, and in whatever order is felt to be most effective in the circumstances (Brynardet al. 2006). The researcher was also free to probe for more information (Bitsch 2005; Greeff 2005; Dyer 1995).

Data Analysis

To analyse data the research used content analysis, which is a technique for making inference by objectivity identifying specific characteristics of messages (Goodwin 2005). The recorded data were classified into units that had same meaning together in order to formulate themes (Babbie 1990).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained ethical clearance from the University of Venda before the study was conducted. The following ethical issues were taken into consideration when conducting this paper: The research participants were informed about the reason and purpose of the research, to be told what will be involved and what will happen to the data they generated (Dyer 1995). All information obtained in the course of the research project was treated as confidential (Cohen et al. 2011).

Trustworthiness

Participants were given opportunity to participate or refuse to participate in the research and data was only collected to those who were willing to participate in this research (Shenton

2004). The methodology of the study is clearly detailed so that other researchers may be able to repeat it (Babbie 2010). Triangulation method was also used to ensure trustworthiness of the paper, data from different participants was gathered to increase validity of the data (Babbie 2010). The researcher in this paper conducted a pilot study. Pilot study was done to assure that the questions were reliable. Four students were selected for pilot testing. Pilot test help the researcher to modify ambiguous instructions, in adequate time limits, unclear (Welman et al. 2005).

RESULTS

The Perception of Stress

The findings of this research show that stress is a general response of the body to a threatening situation. It happens when a person is unable to cope with a threatening situation. *“Stress is when a person body is unable to cope with a situation”* (participant 4). The other participant mention that *“Stress refers to the physiological and the psychological reaction people show in respond to the environmental events such as stressor”* (participant 2).

Feldman (1994), define stress as the pattern of specific and general responses made by an organism to stimulus events that disturb the organism’s equilibrium and exceed its ability to cope. Bate (2011), states that stress is a physiological and psychological reactions that people exhibit in response to environmental events called stressors. According to Sadock et al. (2015), stress is a person’s perception of his or her inability to cope with a certain tense event or situation.

The Causes of Stress

The paper reveals a number of things that can cause stress to a person. Daily problems have been explained as the cause of stress. The experience of feeling stress depends on what events one notices and how one chooses to appraise or interpret them. Things which are stressful for one person may be routine for another. One of the participant in this study indicated that *“Stress is caused by a number of things such as divorce (that is when you have separate with a man that you love you may be stressed), money (it can be for school tuition) and life in general”* (participant 6). The causes

of stress according to the participant includes school, marital problems, family problems and divorce, unemployment and financial problems, changing the environment, abuse, peer pressure, pregnancy, chronic illness and environmental factors. Researchers have found that daily problems are also important form of stress (Welman 2004). One of the most important causes of stress are major life changes for example, marriage, serious illness, a new job, moving away, and death in the family (Abdulghani 2011).

Conflicts and Challenges at School

According to the findings of this paper when student are facing challenges at school they are more likely to suffer from stress. The challenges can either be failing of subjects or problems with the lecturer. *“Here at university student come across a number of stressful events, the challenges at university are too many, students came across challenges with their lectures may be because they ate too strict and we always compare them with secondary teachers”* (participant 3). Poor relationships between students and lectures may be stressful (Trauer 1990). Students are more likely to be stress by school activity because they spend lot of their time doing those activities, activities such as difficult homework. (Feldman 2011; Gerald 1991; Trauer 1990). Academic pressures are a major source of stress for teens in addition Richards-Gustafson (2014) indicated that things such as fulfilling academic dreams, meeting parent’s academic expectations can feel like a big weight to carry for a students, and can cause stress to them.

Marital Problems, Family Problems and Divorce

Participants has indicated that marital problem cause stress both at school and at home, student who are married when suffering from stress it affect their school performances. Family problems such as divorce were also indicated as a cause of stress. *“Marital problems- marriage sometimes can cause stress because people are not always happy in a relationship and Divorce- divorce can cause stress to ether the couple who are divorcing, their children or their family”* (participant 2). *“Family problems affects students life a lot, when our parents’ divorce it also stress us as children.”* (participant

1). Another participant mentioned that “*when our parents’ divorce affect our studies, mostly single parents after divorce fail to pay for our tuition, which is a stressful to us, even parents problems affect us, when you are living in a family with conflicts it also stress us as children*” (participant 4). Family problems affects the people who are divorcing and the children of those people which in turn affect the children at school and also their life in general. The student’s life away from the school can also cause stress at school (Pariat et al. 2014).

Unemployment and Financial Problems

The findings reveal that unemployment and financial problems are the major causes of stress. Unemployment rate is very high among the graduate people and as a result people are stress because they are not finding a job after their education. “*unemployment is also a cause of stress, when you are not working is stressful because you will need to buy things, sometimes you may even find that you be married and the kids what food and cloth, that is very stressful*” (participant 5). Henriques (2014) indicated that financial problems are a stressful thing to students. According to Richards-Gustafson (2014), when parent do not have money for their children fees it stress both the parents and the student.

The Death of a Spouse or Parents

The finding of this paper shows that the death of a spouse or family member also results to stress. When bread winner dies the dependence suffers from stress, thinking of the way they are going to live and continue with their education without the presence of the person who was supporting them. “*the death of a parents all spouse is stressful, you, if a parent who work in a family died it cause a number of problem, the remaining family may fail to support the family, which is stressful to us as children and the remaining parent*” (participant 2). Deaths, more especially of breadwinners are the roots of stress for many people (Pastorino et al. 2006). Life changes include a change of school, death of a family member and retirement of parents (Bate 2011). Although change puts spice in people’s lives, too much change is not good for people’s health (Zimbardo et al. 1994). Life chang-

es, such as a change in marital status, are a serious cause of stress to many people. Life changes are any noticeable alterations in one’s living circumstances that require readjustment.

Physical Abuse Was Also Identified As a Cause of Stress

Physical abuse is a serious problem in South Africa. The participants indicate that the victims of abuse live in a stressful situation. The paper shows that children who are physically abused at home and at school also suffer from stress. Some may even decide to drop school more especially if the abuse is taking place at school. “*Abuse is a stressful event, when people are abused it affect their life in a bad way*” (participant 4).

Peer Pressure as a Cause of Stress

Peer pressure was also identified as a cause of stress. Students suffer a lot from peer pressure, sometimes in order for them to be part of their friends group they are forced to do the things that their peer are doing. “*Students are full of competition with friends, they always want to compare themselves with others, and when they are unable to get what their friends have they become stressed*” (participant 2). Pressure involves expectations or demands that one behave in a certain way. You are under pressure to perform when you’re expected to execute tasks and responsibilities quickly, efficiently and successfully (Heckman et al. 2014; Welten 2004; Bernstein et al. 1994).

Life Changes

Some student shows that changing of the environment also causes stress, the findings of this paper reveals that when people are involved with major changes in their life they also suffer from stress, when students start with the university, they are not sure of what they will come across, they need to start with new life and find new friends, which in turn cause of stress to them. This statement was supported by one of the participant who said that “*Changing of environment such as moving to a new school adapting to new job*” (participant 6). The other participant mentioned that “*major life changes such as change of environment- people do not*

are stressed of how to adapt those changes” (participant 2). As already stated, life change can be significant stressors. This statement was also supported by Swartz et al. (2011), they indicated that positive and negative changes that create demand adjustment behaviour are the causes of stress.

Unplanned Pregnancy

Pregnancies rate among student is very high. Student fall pregnant while they are still at school, which sometimes lead them to drop school or to fail their class. Other than dropping school students are also stress by unplanned pregnancy when they start to think about how their parents will react and how they are going to look after the child. “*Students engage themselves in unprotected sex but they don’t what pregnancy, when they are pregnant they think about a number of stressful things which accompany pregnancy, such as the things that parents and the father of the child will say, and where they will find money to look after the child.*” Bates (2011) indicated that unwanted pregnancy double the risk of having stress, and this rate stays the same even when a woman choose to abort or continue with pregnancy. Rivera (2006) stresses that pregnancy and child-rearing are sources of stress for teen mothers. Billings and Moos in Rivera (2006) indicated that teenager approach their parenting role with a number of problems including stress and depression. Teenager parents’ depression is associated with a negative impact on their children’s emotional and behavioural (Mazo 2015).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research show that stress is a way in which a body respond to a threatening situation. When a person is exposed to a threatening situation the body respond with stress. It happens when a person is unable to cope with a threatening situation. Feldman (1994), define stress as the pattern of specific and general responses made by an organism to stimulus events that disturb the organism’s equilibrium and exceed its ability to cope. Scott (2014) states that stress is a physiological and psychological reactions that people exhibit in response to environmental events called stressors. According to Sadock et al. (2015), stress is a

person’s perception of his or her inability to cope with a certain tense event or situation.

The paper reveals a number of things that can cause stress to a person. Daily problems have been explained as the cause of stress. The experience of feeling stress depends on what events one notices as being stressed and how one chooses to appraise or interpret them. Things which are stressful for one person may not be stressful to another. The causes of stress according to the participant includes school, marital problems, family problems and divorce, unemployment and financial problems, changing the environment, abuse, peer pressure and pregnancy. This causes of stress was also supported by Bolo et al. (2014). Researchers have found that daily problems are the most causes of stress in many people (Welten 2004). Other most important causes of stress includes major life changes for example, marriage, serious illness, a new job, moving away, and death in the family.

According to the findings of this paper when student are facing challenges at school they are more likely to suffer from stress. The challenges can either be failing of subjects or poor relationships between students and lectures (Trauer 1990). Students are more likely to be stress by thing at school because they spend lot of their time doing those activities. Students spend lot of their time at school than doing other activities; because of this school activities is a source of stress to students (Gerald 1991; Trauer 1990).

Participants have indicated that marital problem cause stress both at school and at home, student who are married when suffering from stress it affect their school performances. Family problems such as divorce were also indicated as a cause of stress. This affects the people who are divorcing and the children of those people which in turn affect the children at school and also their life in general. The student’s life away from the school can also cause stress at school.

The findings reveal that unemployment and financial problems are the major causes of stress. Unemployment rate is very high among the graduate people and as a result people are stress because they are not finding a job after their education. Financial problems is one of the causes of stress (Scott 2014). When parent do not have money for their children fees it stress both the parents and the student.

The finding of this study shows that the death of a spouse or family member also results

to stress. When breadwinner dies the dependence suffers from stress, thinking of the way they are going to live and continue with their education without the present of the person who was supporting them. Sudden changes in our life situations are at the roots of stress for many of us (Pastorino et al. 2006). Many life changes are school-related—a change of school, death of a family member and retirement of parents (Feldman 2011; Pastorino et al. 2006). Life changes, such as a change in marital status need readjustment failure to adjust causes stress.

Participants show that the changing of the environment can also cause stress, when a student is moving from one school to the other they are more likely to suffer from stress. It becomes difficult for them to live with new people and to adapt to new friends and teachers. The participants indicate that the victims of abuse live in a stressful situation. Peer pressure was also identified as a cause of stress. Students suffer a lot from peer pressure, some time they are even forced to do the things that their peer are doing or they isolate themselves from their friends. Pressure involves expectations or demands that one behave in a certain way (Wagas et al. 2015; Welten 2004).

CONCLUSION

Students experience a lot of problems that cause stress such as unplanned pregnancy, family problems, school problems and illness. Students are pressurised by their friends to do a number of things such as going to night club, which they end up going because they want to be recognized by their friends. University fees and activities are also a cause of stress to students. Some of the causes of stress lead students not to attend their classes and also to drop the university.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that the university provide counselling for student who faces academic, financial and social problems. University should also arrange workshops for educating students about stress, its symptoms, causes and ways of helping people with stress.

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