



# Causes of Stress and Coping Strategies among Final Year Students in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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## Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author LIA designed the study, wrote the first and second draft of the manuscript, author GCN managed the literature search. Author ALI further performed and managed the analysis of the study, wrote the protocol. All Authors read and approve the final manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims:** The study determined, the causes of stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The study further determined coping strategies used in managing stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

**Study Design:** Descriptive survey research design

**Place and Duration of Study:** Final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, between 2019/2020.

**Methodology:** Stratified disproportionate random sampling was used to select 360 final year student's 2019/2020. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled causes of stress and coping strategies questionnaire. Cronbach alpha formula which yielded correlation coefficient of 0.70. Out of 360 copies of the questionnaire administered, 351 were correctly filled and returned giving a percentage return rate of 0.98. Data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The criterion mean was set at 2.50 and above as agree and below 2.49 as disagree.

**Results:** results presented in Table 1 reports that out of 11 causes of stress listed, respondents rated all the items agreed with mean score ranging from 2.74 to 3.77. Similarly, the grand mean score of 3.16 indicates that final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that the items

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listed are causes of stress among students. The standard deviation is heterogenous, this implies that the respondents' scores are widely apart from the mean rating scores. The study further revealed that that out of 11 items listed on coping strategies used in managing stress, the respondents agreed that items 12, 15, 16, 17, 20 and 21 are coping strategies for managing stress while they disagreed on five items as coping strategies used in managing stress. The grand mean score of 2.56 indicates that final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that majority of the items listed are coping strategies used in managing stress. From the standard deviations scores recorded, there is homogeneity in respondents' ratings.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, stress exist and is caused by so many factors such as academic pressure, social problem, family stress, financial burden, management skills, uncomfortable classroom, adjustment to new environment among others. It is also concluded that students adopt and employ various coping strategies in managing stress. These strategies range from going for sporting activities when stressed, listening to music, and hanging out with friends and relatives for extra social activities.

*Keywords: Stress; coping; strategies; students; tertiary; institution.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term stress is a state of physical or mental tension and feeling of pain by an individual. Historically, the Latin word stress has been a common language since the seventeenth century and was used to address hardship, adversity, or affliction. However, stress is best described as a situation where environmental demands exceed the capacity effective response by the individual and can potentially have physical and psychological consequences [1]. Stress is a form of indirect interaction between a person and the environment. A person appraised the environment as being tasking or exceeding their personal resources. This disrupts their daily routines [2]. [2] viewed stress as a state of psychological pressure influenced by three main sources or domains: personality mediators (time pressure, driven behaviour, attitude posture, relaxation potential, and role definition); environmental factors (constituting of vocational satisfaction, domestic satisfaction, and health posture); and emotional responses (such as hostility, anxiety, and depression).

Stress can manifest itself in either positive or negative form [3]. It is positive when a situation offers an opportunity for one to gain something, but when constraints of demands are placed on individuals, then it is negative [4]. School authorities more often than not concerned when students experience low to moderate levels of stress. Such levels may lead to higher academic performance. But, high levels of stress can lead to reduced students' learning and academic performance. In the view of [5], low level of stress does not necessarily mean that students will perform better, but in fact, when low level of

stress is sustained over a long period of time, students would perceive the task as unchallenging and may be bored as well. Though, certain levels of stress push students towards optimum performance, when it is not managed efficiently due to inadequate resources to cope with the stress, it can have dismal consequences for the student as well as the institution. Buttressing further, students have unique cluster of stressful experiences or stressors. There are several explanations for increased stress levels they find themselves, due to pressure from studies, stress of interpersonal relationship and changes in life style. Furthermore, stress among students could be as a result of financial problems, test pressure, failing tests, peer rejection, dissolution of relationships, depression and feeling of low self-esteem. As reported by [6], some of the possible causes of stress in academic setting include excessive assignments, poor time management and social skills, and peer competition. In confirmation, [7] stated that academic stress among students have long been researched on, and researchers have identified causes as too many assignments, competition with other students, failures, lack of pocket money, poor relationships with other students or lecturers, family or problems at home. Others are overcrowded lecture halls, semester system, and inadequate resources to perform academic work.

Coping with stress is important for human survival and can be defined as the process of managing external and internal demands that are perceived as tasking on personal capacities and resources. Coping refers to the thoughts and actions used to deal with a threatening situation. [8] view coping in psychological terms as

constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised. Coping strategies on the other hand refers to the specific effort (behavioural and psychological) that people employ to master, reduce, tolerate or minimize stressful events. It must be bore in mind that strategies may differ. However, students who are under stress may adopt various strategies which include counselling, talking with friends, and mediation in religious activities. Similarly, [9] highlighted coping strategies of stress such as calming coping strategies (meditation, breathing exercises and aromatherapy), emotion-focused coping strategies which include; maintaining a sense of humor and cultivating optimism, practicing loving-kindness meditation to increase self-compassion and using visualization strategies to increase positive feelings, solution-focused coping strategies which include; using time-management strategies when one feel overwhelmed by a busy schedule, talking to guidance counsellors if one feel overwhelming demands or harassment at class and using conflict-resolution strategies to mitigate the stress in a relationship. Furthermore, [7] enumerated the following coping strategies; watching movie with friends, playing games, talking with friend(s), talking to family member(s), going to picnic/excursions, using internet (social networking sites - Facebook, Google+) or other sites, listening to music, doing exercise/yoga, reading self-help books, and attending cultural programmes.

Stress activities has become part of students' academic. This is due to various internal and external expectations from them. Students are faced with enormous activities in school such as going to early morning lectures, doing assignments, registering their courses and many other activities. These students are also seen trying to make good grades, please their parents and meet up with other school/social activities, all these and many more causes stress on students. Although, certain levels of stress direct the focus of students towards optimum performance, when it is not managed efficiently it could influence the learning outcome and lead to poor eating habits, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and poor academic performance. This poor academic outcome has prevailed due to stress despite efforts by government and many educational organizations to create a conducive learning environment for learning such as getting the students to cooperate, creating a communal environment, and finally maintaining a positive

classroom climate. This factual background directs the delimitation of the study to final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, this is due to the fact that among other students, final year students in tertiary institutions are faced with numerous academic and recreational activities within and outside the school environment.

### 1.1 Purpose of the Study

The study determined;

1. The causes of stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria,
2. Coping strategies used in managing stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

### 1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the causes of stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?
2. What are the coping strategies used in managing stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

## 2. RELATED LITERATURE REVIEWED

In a study carried out by [10], they sort to identify the causes and sources of stress among students of high and low academic performance. The study adopted survey research design. The questionnaire was administered on 656 pure science and applied science under graduate students from Bangalore city. The tool used for the present study was Stressful Life Events Inventory - Student form (Rao, 1986). Data analysis was carried out using mean and t-test. The findings of the study showed that majority of the students' perceived education as more stressful. High and low academic performing students as well as pure and applied science course students differed significantly on sources of stress. Implications and suggestions of the study were discussed with teachers and an enrichment program on stress management was employed. The relationship between the two studies is that both covered using survey research design, used mean to answer research questions. They both differed in the area of the study and the fact that the present study did not test hypotheses while the former did. More so, [9] carried out a study of causes of stress and stress management among youth. Three research questions guided the study. The study adopted

survey research design. The sample is collected from the young male and female from the area Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttarpradesh and Gujarat region of India on random basis. The questionnaire was distributed among 300 young people and got 225 responses. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection and data collected analyzed using frequency and percentages. The researcher found that the stress mainly comes from academic tests, interpersonal relations, relationship problems, life changes, and career exploration. Such stress may usually cause psychological, physical, and behavioral problems. The study also found the causes of stress among youth. The researchers recommended that; that more emphasis can be given to development stage of child into adolescence. They should be brought up in the positive environment.

[11] carried out a study of learning stress and stress management strategies of the students of postgraduate level: A case study of Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. The study was designed to study Learning Stress and Stress Management Strategies for University Students. The objectives of the study were to find out the common symptoms of stress, causes of stress and to suggest stress management strategies used by students for coping with stress. For collecting data, survey method was adopted. This study was completed by following the procedure of descriptive method of research. 39 questions were used for data collection. 200 students from different departments of The Islamia University of Bahawalpur were chosen as a sample of the study. This study concluded that majority of students felt fatigue during stress. Burden of study, assignments were major causes of stress and they agreed that they reduce stress by watching TV/Movies, listen to music or take part in other leisure time activities. It was recommended that burden of study may be reduced by conducting co-curricular activities in academic area. [12] carried out a on stress and coping strategies among university students: A phenomenological study. The present study explores the general stressors as perceived by the first year postgraduate students of Physical Sciences as well as Social Sciences in the different aspects of post-graduate education, covering the domains career related stress, interpersonal relationships, expectation from self and others, stress from emerging challenges and time management, as well as their coping strategies. Data was collected invoking top-of-the-mind responses about the issues in question

and was analyzed through content analysis involving inductive coding. Qualitative analysis revealed the major stressors in each area. Subjects reported being assailed by mostly psychological consequences of stress – such as tension, anxiety, worry, temper tantrums and hopelessness. Most subjects reported employing problem focused coping to deal with stress. Several interventions were suggested, based on the data obtained, to bring improvements in the current scenario.

[13] carried out a study on coping with stress: strategies adopted by students at the Winneba Campus of University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Two research questions guided the study. The study adopted descriptive survey research design. Four hundred students who were selected based on stratified random sampling technique from all the departments at the Winneba Campus of the university were involved in the study. The questionnaire which was adapted to suit the study environment was pre-tested at the University of Cape Coast. Data were analyzed using frequency and percentage. The results of the study showed that among the ten strategies used, active coping and positive reinterpretation and growth were the two most predominant for problem-focused and emotion-focused styles of coping respectively. The study also indicated that students of the Winneba Campus of UEW used more of emotion-focused strategies than problem-focused strategies in managing stress. Among the recommendations is that the counseling unit of UEW should strengthen its services by having social support groups that consist of lecturers and students, so that supportive skills, such as talking and sharing, can be developed and students may then become very comfortable to let out their feelings.

On the other hand, [14] conducted a study on students, stress and coping strategies: A case of Pakistani medical school. A cross sectional study using a semi-structured self-administered questionnaire was carried out over four weeks, using a small sample of students of all categories and classes of a medical college. Frequency and percentage and chi-square were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that a total of 264 students out of 300 (88 percent) filled in the questionnaire. Inability to cope, helplessness, increased psychological pressure, mental tension and too much workload are 'stress factors' for students. A considerable majority (90 percent) think that they have been stressed at one time or

another. Ninety-four percent of males have experienced stress. The senior students of the fourth and final year feel more stressed (95 percent and 98 respectively). Low moods, inability to concentrate, loss of temper are most common symptoms. Females report more symptoms. Academics and exams are the most powerful stressors. Sports, music, hanging out with friends, sleeping or going into isolation are various coping mechanisms. Stress can affect the academic performance. If needed, students prefer to talk to a peer. They demand more recreational activities on campus, revised schedule of academics and exams, better counselling facilities and improvement in student-teacher relationship. [15] assessed the prevalence of stress, stressors and coping strategies among medical students in a Nigerian medical school in the University of Calabar, Nigeria. A cross-sectional descriptive survey of 451 medical students was conducted on available classes during the study period. A semi-structured self-administered questionnaire was used to elicit information from respondents. Data were summarized using proportions, and Chi-square test was used to explore associations between categorical variables. Level of significance was set at  $P < 0.05$ . Findings showed that majority (94.2%), of undergraduate medical trainees perceived the training as stressful. The major stressors identified were excessive academic work load (82.3%), inadequate holidays (76.4%), and insufficient time for recreation (76.2%). Feeling depressed, sleeping problems and anxiety were the most common effects of stress reported by the respondents. The coping strategies adopted by the students were mainly positive. Perceived stress was significantly associated with being in the clinical level of study, residing on campus and a higher monthly allowance ( $P < 0.05$ ). It was concluded that majority of the students interviewed perceived their training as stressful. There was, therefore, an urgent need for medical educators to introduce of stress management courses or programs into the curriculum.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey design. Descriptive survey research design according to Nworgu [16] is one in which the entire population or representative sample is studied by collecting and analyzing data from a group of respondents through the use of questionnaire. This study was carried out among final year students in tertiary institutions

in Nigeria. The accessible population of the study consisted of 3,568 final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The sample for this study consisted of 360 final year students were selected from the three faculties. A simple random sampling technique (balloting without replacement) was used to select one department from each of the three faculties giving a total of three departments. Stratified disproportionate random sampling was used to select 120 final year students from each of the selected departments, making a total sum of 360 final year student's 2019/2020. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled causes of stress and coping strategies questionnaire (CS-CSQ). The instrument was validated by two (2) experts. Cronbach alpha formula which yielded correlation coefficient value of 0.70 and is considered reliable. The researcher personally administered copies of the questionnaires to the respondents with the help of one (1) research assistant from each faculty. The research assistants were adequately briefed on the method of administration and retrieval of the questionnaires. Out of 360 copies of the questionnaire administered, 351 were correctly filled and returned giving a percentage return rate of 0.98. Therefore, 351 copies of the questionnaire were used for data analysis. Data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The criterion mean was set at 2.50 and above as agree and below 2.49 as disagree. The analysis was computed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 23).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Research Question 1:** What are the causes of stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

Data presented in Table 1 reports that out of 11 causes of stress listed, respondents rated all the items agreed with mean score ranging from 2.74 to 3.77. Similarly, the grand mean score of 3.16 indicates that final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that the items listed are causes of stress among students. The standard deviation is heterogenous, this implies that the respondents' scores are widely apart from the mean rating scores.

The finding of this study revealed that final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that causes of stress are pressure from academics, social problems, inability to meet needs financially, pressure to earn good grades, worries about previous performance in

examinations among others. This finding is in line with that of Bhargava and Trivedi [7] who reported that poor relationships with other students or lecturers, family or problems at home, overcrowded lecture halls, semester system, and inadequate resources to perform academic work remain major causes of stress among students. The finding further agrees with the findings of Veena and Shailaja who submitted that academic stress such as social and family issues affect the learning ability and academic performance of students. Furthermore, Kohn and Frazer revealed that causes of stress among final year medical students include uncomfortable classrooms, weekly test and assignment, pressure to earn good grades and receiving a lower grade than expected also contributes to stress among university final year students. These could be as a result of numerous issues earlier highlighted.

**Research Question 2:** What are the coping strategies used in managing stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

Data presented in Table 2 shows that out of 11 items listed on coping strategies used in managing stress, the respondents agreed that items 12, 15, 16, 20 and 21 respectively are coping strategies for managing stress while they disagreed on five items as coping strategies used in managing stress. The grand mean score of 2.56 indicates that final year students in

tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that majority of the items listed are coping strategies used in managing stress. From the standard deviations scores recorded, there is homogeneity in respondents' ratings.

Findings of the study revealed that final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria agreed that the coping strategies used in managing stress are withdrawing from stressors, going for sporting activities when stressed, listening to music, and hanging out with friends among others. This finding concurs with the findings of Yelkperi and Esia-Donkoh which showed that active coping and positive reinterpretation and growth were the most predominant for problem-focused and emotion-focused styles of coping respectively. Furthermore, in the study of Babar, Arsalan, Muhammad, Hamza, Nadia and Saadiya they found that recreational activities on campus, revised schedule of academics and exams, better counselling facilities and improvement in student-teacher relationship are coping strategies used in managing stress. Buttressing further, Oku, Owoaje, Oku and Ikpeme [15] reported that coping strategies adopted by students were mainly positive. This could be because students avoid stressors to enable focus on academic related activities within the school environment. This in turn will improve academic achievement in tertiary institutions in Nigeria and beyond.

**Table 1. Mean and standard deviation on the respondents rating of causes of stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria**

S/N	Items on causes of stress	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remarks
1	Pressure from academics	3.21	0.80	Agreed
2	Social problems	3.12	0.68	Agreed
3	Problems from the family brings stress to the students	3.15	0.71	Agreed
4	Inability to meet needs financially	3.54	0.66	Agreed
5	Lack of time management skills	3.20	0.69	Agreed
6	Uncomfortable classrooms	3.77	0.47	Agreed
7	Pressure to earn good grades	3.19	0.57	Agreed
8	Adjustment to new environment	2.78	0.57	Agreed
9	Mastering new skills	2.74	0.69	Agreed
10	Worries about previous performance in examinations contributes to stress among students	3.07	0.54	Agreed
11	Failed relationship	3.00	0.69	Agreed
<b>Grand Mean</b>		<b>3.16</b>		<b>Agreed</b>

**Table 2. Mean and standard deviation on respondents rating of coping strategies used in managing stress among final year students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria**

S/N	Items on coping strategies in managing stress	$\bar{X}$	SD	Remarks
12	Withdrawing from what give me stress	3.01	0.90	Agreed
13	Use of alcohol	1.62	0.71	Disagreed
14	Accepting what I cannot change	1.88	0.98	Disagreed
15	Going to sport when stressed	3.19	0.62	Agreed
16	Listening to music	3.26	0.74	Agreed
17	Hanging out with friends	3.45	0.85	Agreed
18	Going in isolation when I am stressed	1.80	0.84	Disagreed
19	Praying when stressed	2.21	1.03	Disagreed
20	Visiting a counsellor when I am stressed	3.15	0.68	Agreed
21	Watching cartoons or comedies	2.98	0.81	Agreed
22	Smoking when stressed	1.66	0.63	Disagreed
<b>Grand mean</b>		<b>2.56</b>		<b>Agreed</b>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, stress exist and is caused by so many factors such as academic pressure, social problem, family stress, financial burden, management skills, uncomfortable classroom, adjustment to new environment among others. It was also concluded that students adopt and employ various coping strategies in managing stress. These strategies range from going for sporting activities when stressed, listening to music, and hanging out with friends and relatives for extra social activities.

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#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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