PREDICTORS OF STRESS, ANXIETY AND COPING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

by

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Abstract
Stress and anxiety are very common among college students. Every student leaving home for the first time is expected to go through some changes and subsequently make the necessary adjustments to cope with pressures from academics and social demands from friends. The nature of emotional and psychological problems of college students are clearly stated with emphasis on how to cope with stress and anxiety. The paper recommended having mentor program on all the universities. Furthermore there should be regular seminar and workshop for teachers and college students on stress, anxiety and coping strategies.

Introduction
Stress and anxiety often occurs during adolescence or after the college age and can be precipitated by both developmental and psychological determinants. Kessler (2005) opines the onset of early adulthood can precipitate anxiety among students especially those attending college or leaving home for the first time. College students frequently have more complex problems today than they did over a decade ago. Common stressors in college include greater academic demands, being on your own in a new environment, changes in family relations, changes in social life, exposure to new people, ideas and temptations.

Some of the salient problems specific to college students are time pressure, fear of failure; struggle to establish identity, pressure from academic work and how to achieve excellence and competence. Emotional problems such as feeling inferior...
to others, not able to think properly, worrying too much, feeling life is not worth living and feeling anxious without any apparent reason can equally trigger off anxiety among college students.

Student reacts to college in a variety of ways. For some, college is stressful because it is an abrupt change from high school. For others separation from home is a source of stress. Although some source of stress is necessary for personal growth to occur, the amount of stress can overwhelm a student and affect the ability to cope. Another source of stress is the difficulty of achieving social intimacy. Fear of academic failure is a definite Stressor (Spielberger, 1983).

The university period is important for the evolution of self-sufficiency and the first years of university education overlap the late adolescence period, which is frequently described as a stressful period to be survived. Studies suggest that dissatisfaction with social activities' related to stress, relations with opposite sex, worry about examination success, accommodation problems, fear of wrong career choice and, worry about the future were all consistent predictors of anxiety and anxiety levels.

The levels of stressful experiences varied significantly from the transition period to young adulthood. During the transition period, students had problems especially concerning their new environment, but when they adapted to the new environment educational problems started to rise to the surface. (Sarah, Dixon, Sharon, Robinson, 2008).

It is a known fact that anxiety is common among college students. Anxiety is a phenomenon experienced by undergraduate students.’ Anxiety is often associated with phobic feelings and how to make the adjustments required during the freshman years (Kadison, 2004).

Anxiety is a psychological and physiological state characterized by physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components. Anxiety means trouble; in either presence or absence of psychological stress. Anxiety can create a feeling of fear, worry, uneasiness, and dread (Cattel 2008).

Anxiety is a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the nervous system (Spielberger, 2009). Cattel 2008,
opines that anxiety levels differs between persons and can fluctuate remarkably from one person to another.

Anxiety has three components namely state anxiety, trait anxiety and situational anxiety. State-anxiety is a transitory emotional state characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension and heightened autonomic nervous activity. Situational anxiety falls in the middle of the continuum, representing the probability of becoming anxious in a particular type of situation, while trait-anxiety is an individual’s predisposition to respond to stress in a more stable way and consistent with the personality of the individual experiencing the anxiety(Snyder,1999).

Prolonged stress makes the individuals vulnerable to various disturbances and anxiety disorders. These disorders may range from generalized anxiety disorders, phobic disorders, obsessive – compulsive disorders to post-traumatic anxiety disorders (American Psychiatric Association ,2013).

Symptoms of anxiety can be psychological or physical. The symptoms includes excessive worrying, excessive fear, restlessness and emotional out bust. Some students when anxious experience palpitations of the heart. Anxiety manifests itself through headache, sweating and other symptoms like panicking, feeling weak and going blank during examination. When students are undergoing stress or anxiety due to pressure from home to achieve academic excellence or experiencing anxieties from forming new heterogeneous relationships, they need coping strategies to help make the necessary fit from home to school. Coping helps students adjust to life after leaving the family nest.

Coping is a psychological response to reduce the effect of physical and emotional burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles. Coping involves making psychological as well as social-cognitive and emotional adjustments to demands that are extremely difficult for the individual (Lazarus, 1988).

Coping is either adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive coping is the extent to which the individual can adjust psychologically and socially to debilitating events in the environment (Canaan, 2000). Adaptive coping involves accepting ones shortcomings and seeking emotional and social support. Conversely, maladaptive coping involves denial, self-blame and giving up easily. Making adjustments seems too difficult for the individual.
Predictors of stress, anxiety and coping among university students in Nig…

There are different coping strategies used in ameliorating anxiety among university students. Anxiety among university undergraduates can be caused by a number of factors. It is against this background that the paper examines predictors of stress, anxiety and coping among university students.

Sources of Stress and Anxiety among Students
Academic and personal concerns may cause stress or anxiety for students. Anxiety may occur along with other disorders such as depression, attention-deficit, eating disorders, irritable bowel syndrome, sleep disorders and drug addiction. Some college students with anxiety may experience panic attacks, heart palpitations, chest pain, choking sensations, dizziness, tingling, hot flashes, trembling, nausea and depersonalization (Lazarus, 1988).

College students with stress or anxiety may worry incessantly about grades, assignments, health, family, money and relationships with the opposite sex. Those with obsessive compulsive disorder anxiety may be obsessed about insignificant things, experience intrusive, disturbing thoughts and complete repetitive actions such as hand-washing or checking locks (Kessler, 2005).

Types of Anxiety

Test Anxiety
Lan (2009) state that test anxiety or performance anxiety often includes such cognitive, affective and behavioral responses that will result in poor performance and probably failure in an evaluative situation. Cohen (2008) argued that performance anxiety especially, test anxiety may adversely affect students of all ages who are to be evaluated, assessed and graded with regard to abilities, achievements and interests. Test anxiety is a serious problem for many students.

According to Spielberger (2008) test-anxious students are more prone to react with excessive anxiety such as worry, negative thoughts, nervousness and physiological arousal across evaluative situations. Test anxiety is an overwhelming feeling of distress among students. It is a type of performance problem just like when some people get nervous speaking to large crowds or when trying something new. Test anxiety can be a devastating problem for many college and university students because it may impair their performance and well being (Culler and Holahan, 2013; Rafiq, Ghazal and Farooqi, 2007).
Lan (2009) and Cohen (2009) argued that performance anxiety (especially, test anxiety) may adversely affect people of all ages who may be evaluated, assessed and graded with regard to their abilities, achievements or interests.

Dusek (2010) describes test anxiety as an unpleasant feeling or emotional state that has both physiological and behavioural components and that is experienced in formal testing or other evaluative situations.

Carver and Scheier (2010), argues that test anxious persons are likely to have strong chronic doubts about producing adequate performance on examinations. Test anxiety is a serious problem for many students. It has been described as the most powerful obstacle to learning in an educational setting.

Social Anxiety
Social anxiety, also called social phobia, is characterized by a marked and persistent fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur (DSM-IV-TR, 2013). People with social anxiety worry persistently about being watched and negatively viewed by others and display a myriad of anxiety related symptoms and behaviors before, during, and after a social event (Clarke, 2007). Common themes across all variations of this phobia include fear of interacting socially, fear of appearing socially weak or incompetent, and fear of being judged or scrutinized by others.

The National Institute of Mental Health (2006) report that the most common physical symptoms associated with social anxiety include blushing, profuse sweating, trembling, nausea, and difficulty talking. Common features of social anxiety disorder include a hypersensitivity to criticism, a fear of negative evaluation or rejection, difficulty being assertive and low self-esteem or feelings of inferiority (DSM IV-TR, 2008).

Impact of Stress and Anxiety on Students
Stress and anxiety has a substantial negative impact on students social, emotional and academic success (Essau, 2010). Specific impacts include poor inter and intra personal relationships with others, which often leads to avoidance of social interactions (Albano, 2009).

Students coming from different backgrounds have to adjust themselves for the first time to life outside their home. They carry their frustrations, tensions, conflicts
Predictors of stress, anxiety and coping among university students in Nig…

and anxieties to the university. Some of the anxiety has to do with students’ inability to concentrate on studies and not being able to submit assignments on time.

Students with stress and anxiety exhibit passive attitude in their studies such as lack of interest in learning, poor performance in examinations and on assignments. There seems to exist a possible association between high level of anxiety and low academic performance among students. Students with high level of anxiety have reduced memory span; lose concentration and lack confidence in them (Sena, 2007).

Woolfolk (2007) highlights that anxious student’s feel the need to divide their attention between learning and finding time to socialize. Many highly anxious students have poor study skills and lacks the ability required for academic success. When it comes to tests, many students find it hard to demonstrate the knowledge required for academic achievement due to freezing-up or lacking the skills necessary for effective test-taking (Naveh, 2007).

Models of Coping

Bio-Behavioural model
Stress is a multidimensional phenomenon resulting from interaction between gene and behaviour. The Hypothalamus-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) provides a regulatory feedback between the brain and the body’s physiological response to stressors. In response to a stressful situation, the cerebral cortex evaluates the perceived information regarding the situation and provides cognitive interpretation whether this situation is a threat or not. The cortex then sends messages to the hypothalamus which integrates this cognitive message with emotional content from the limbic system.

If the situation is interpreted as a threat, a specific part in the hypothalamus, the amygdale, releases the corticotrophin releasing hormone (CRH) which travels through the portal vessels to the anterior pituitary gland where it stimulates the release of the adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH).

Cognitive-Behavioural Model
Anxiety is not directly caused by stressors. Rather, it is an individual's reaction to the perception of stressors. Stressors are physical, emotional, or social stimuli that an individual face in daily life and may produce feeling of tension and strain.
(McKenzie, 2008). According to Beck and Clark (1997), cognitive model involves negative interpretation of stressful situations which may lead to maladaptive coping behaviours. On the other hand, a positive perception of a stressful situation promotes constructive thinking which is strategic thinking that provides the opportunity for more reality-based reappraisal of the stressful situation and leads to adaptive coping behaviour such as problem solving.

Transactional Model of Coping

Lazarus & Folkman (1996), differentiates between two main anxiety-coping mechanisms namely adaptive and maladaptive coping. Through these two mechanisms an individual displays certain behaviours that are thought to moderate the effect of stressful stimuli.

Adaptive coping behaviours involve defining the stressful situation, actively seeking support, reflecting on possible solutions, and taking actions to resolve the situation. Such actions resolve the stressful situation and result in psychological and emotional adjustment.

Conversely, maladaptive coping behaviours include efforts to withdraw from the stressful situation or avoid seeking solutions which may result in failure to resolve the stressful situation and can be associated with anxiety. Negative thinking predicts maladaptive coping behaviours (Moulds, 2007). In addition, maladaptive coping behaviours such as avoidance and denial were found to predict the anxiety level of young adult college students (Blalock & Joiner, 2000).

Lazarus and Folkman (1996) propose that adaptive coping involve active coping behaviour to resolve a stressful situation and are a buffer that neutralizes the impact of stress and promotes psychological well-being while maladaptive coping is unsuccessful resolution of stressful situations and is associated with negative feelings. When compared to older adults, young adults use more maladaptive coping (Blanchard-Fields, 2007). Maladaptive coping behaviours can be precipitated by negative thinking.

Psychologists made a distinction between two basic types of coping strategies which include problem focused strategy and emotion focused strategy ((Beck & Clark, 1997). Problem focused strategy attempts to deal with those aspects of the environment that are responsible for stress and anxiety expression, that is dealing
Predictors of stress, anxiety and coping among university students in Nig…

directly with the stress situation while emotion focused strategy tends to change the way a person thinks about a stressful situation.

It is when anxiety is in its severe form that some students experience genuine problems. Their minds go blank, they experience the shakes, hands go numb and they suffer from a number of sudden disabilities associated with anxiety.

**Psychological Implications of Anxiety and Coping**

Stress and anxiety impacts negatively on academic success of college students especially when they are leaving home for the first time. Although there are a few benefits of stress, its effect on mental well-being of the student has been associated with poor academic achievement, low social skills and depression.

Anxiety can affect the students’ ability to speak in public. It can also affect the test taking ability of the student. If stress and anxiety is not checked, it may lead to the student dropping out of school completely.

Coping becomes the best alternative measures to reduce the impact of stress and anxiety among students. Positive coping helps the student to make the needed adjustments to the environment and may be remove the stressors that are impinging on the well being of the student.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

The paper examined the predictors of stress, anxiety and coping among university students. During college years, young adults leave home for the first time to go to the university. This sudden transition from home to school is often characterized by symptom of stress and anxiety, which impact negatively on their academic and social lives.

Coping is used to ameliorate the negative impact of stress and anxiety among students. The paper recommends that social support and mentoring are required so that stress can be identified early and dealt with appropriately. A reduction in information overload can be important strategies to enable undergraduates cope better with the demands of university education.
References


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