

Impact of Stress and Mental Health on Students' Academic Performance in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

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ABSTRACT

Students in tertiary education settings face a wide range of ongoing stressors related to academic and societal demands. The effects of these stressors have affected students' performance negatively, according to previous research, as the World Health Organisation reported that in 2019 and 2020, more than 900,000 deaths were recorded due to suicides orchestrated by stress among individuals aged between 15 and 29 years. In a bid to address this social phenomenon and contribute to knowledge, this study investigated the impact of stress and mental health on students' academic performance in Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka. Structural Strain theory by Robert Merton 1938 served as the theoretical framework. It also employed a cross-sectional survey design and multi-stage sampling technique where a total of 400 respondents who are students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, were randomly sampled using a structured questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Data collected were presented and analysed using descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequency distribution tables, and charts. Interviews were transcribed and analysed with the use of the thematic method of data analysis. The study hypotheses were tested using the chi-square (χ^2) test of statistics. The study findings revealed that most students, especially final-year students, experience stress. It was also found that financial continued prevalence of stress among students. Also, it was observed in the study that stress has an impact on students' mental health and academic performance, especially a decline in reading culture. Further, it was noted that family background has significant influence on the experience of stress among undergraduates and that there is a positive relationship between stress/mental health challenges and poor academic performance. Concluding, from the findings, it is glaring that stress and mental health challenges are social problems affecting a significant number of students in Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Hence, there is a swift need for stakeholders in the education sector (i.e., parents, guardians, teachers, lecturers, the ministry of education, the government, etc.) to join hands and work out a model to reduce the prevalence of stress and mental health challenges among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and beyond. The study recommended, amongst other things, that there be a need for awareness creation on ways students can overcome or manage stress and mental health challenges in a bid to achieve their desired academic goals.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Mental Health, Stress, Students.

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of challenges for children and adults alike. Everyone faces stress in his or her own way. Stress is a natural event that people experience in their lives (Aihie and Ohanaka, 2019). Stress evolved from the Latin word "stricture", meaning "strict". The exact meaning of stress is distress, hardship, and coercion (Adekale et al., 2022). The term "stress" was first employed in a biological context by the endocrinologist Hans Selye in 1930. Later, the concept was broadened and popularised to include inappropriate physiological responses to any demand. In his usage, stress refers to a condition and stressor to the stimulus causing it (Adekale et al., 2022). Stress arises from internal or external events of life, which may be physiological, psychological, physical, mental, spiritual, or behavioural, and describes individuals' responses to a force (Adekale et al., 2022). According

to Kania (2014), stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demand exceeds the personal and social resources the individual can mobilise. Stress may be defined as any factor acting externally or internally that makes adaptation to the environment difficult and induces increased effort on the part of the individual to maintain a state of equilibrium between themselves and the external environment (Richlin-Kisky & Hoe, 2003; Aihie & Ohanaka, 2019). According to Banerjee and Chatterjee (2012), stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or suspense, and it affects individuals irrespective of their developmental stage.

On the other hand, mental health is associated with students' weak, poor quality of life; lower well-being; and, most crucially, their overall health. This constant social and emotional pressure makes university students more vulnerable to mental health problems (Zada et al., 2021). Mental health is defined as a state of harmony among emotional, social, and psychological well-being (Keyes, 2012). Mental health is a vital component of the total health of an individual because the entire thought process takes place in the mind; ideas originate in the mind, and all kinds of directions are issued from the mind that guide, shape, and regulate communication, conduct behaviour, and determine personal and social functioning as well as adjustment (Bhargava and Raina, 2017). One's body and mind function harmoniously; it is said that a sound body presupposes a sound mind, and a sound mind exists in a sound body in so much as any understanding of personality requires analysis of body and mind (Obumnse & Egenti, 2021). According to Obumnse and Egenti (2021), it is too well known that the goals of social development in the context of modern welfare are to produce social well-being and educational quality, and these have become the central pivots for many education systems in developing countries, including Nigeria. The world is becoming more and more competitive, and quality of achievement is the key factor for personal progress. Moreover, education is a lifelong process that enables the continuous development of a person's capabilities as an individual and as a member of society. It is central to the development of young people as it prepares them for the world of work and life. In educational institutions, success is measured by academic performance, or how well a student meets standards set by the institution. Sophie et al (2011) averred that student with higher mental ability, as demonstrated by IQ tests, tend to achieve highly in academic settings. Thus, academic performance is how students deal with their studies and how they cope with or accomplish different tasks given to them by their teachers (Sophie et al 2011). Stress has become an unavoidable part of life for students. Although higher education is often regarded as a period of fun with few responsibilities, the stark reality is that learning in higher institutions can be very stressful. University students experience stress connected to changes in lifestyle, increased workload, new tasks, a lack of pocket money, interpersonal relationships, and a lot of other things (Abdulrahman and Kawthara, 2019). In Nigeria, tertiary education has become increasingly complex; students are faced with more academic programs that are to be covered within a short period of time. For instance, in Nigeria, university students receive lectures for several hours, coupled with tests, practicals, examinations, projects, and other school requirements that may exceed their abilities. These activities are strenuous and affect their mental health (Abdulrahman and Kawthara, 2019). From the foregoing, it is evident that this social malady is still posing a strong threat to the academic performances of students in Nigeria. It is therefore against this backdrop that this study aimed at providing a comprehensive insight and assessment on the impact of stress and mental health on students' academic performance in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Statement of the Problem

Stress is an inevitable condition that is widespread and occurs in various aspects of every human endeavour. Vuai (2021) posited that stress, and its effects are common phenomena that affect all manner of people regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic status, political orientation, ethnicity, faith, and career. University students represent a unique sample with concerns, burdens, and worries that differ from other groups of people. According to Kaumi and Ali (2018), stress leads to depression and several other illnesses. The demands of everyday life have caused the development of diseases in children and adolescents more and more frequently, where both endogenous and exogenous demands combine to adversely affect academic performance and student achievement (Pozos-Radillo, 2014). In the same vein, study schedules, especially in universities, are very challenging, and students who cannot cope with or manage this academic stress may fall into depression, which will lead to losing concentration in studies, thereby resulting in poor academic performance (Menec, 2010). Oduwaiye, Amadi, and Tamiyu (2017) noted that stress is known to be a causative agent for some dominant psychological problems

such as loss of appetite, memory loss, absentmindedness, depression, frustration, nervousness, and blood pressure, which are common in Nigeria. Stress adversely affects the academic performance of students through frequent absenteeism. Excessive stress among students can reduce the effectiveness of their studies and contribute to long-term negative results, including absenteeism and poor academic performance (Alzukari & Gallo, 2023). Statistically, the WHO survey estimates that mental disease, including stress-related disorders, will be the second leading cause of disability by the year 2020. Globally, about 110 million people die annually due to stress (Voltz, 2013). This means that seven people all around the world die every two seconds. In Nigeria, the negative impact of stress among students appears to be common and on the rise. Oduwaiye et al. (2017) reported a 94.7 stress level among Kwara State University undergraduates. Also, Jayasankara et al. (2019) reported over 48% stress prevalence among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. According to the statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau, there is one student every hour who commits suicide (Saha, 2017). The bureau registered a 1.8% rise in suicide rates during a one-year time frame. With the above statistics, it is glaring that stress is prevalent among university students, and it seems to be increasing in Nigeria, with the number of reported cases growing worse with the arrival of every dawn. Studies have also further linked the continuous prevalence of this social malady to numerous factors. According to Ezepe et al. (2022), the leading stressors among university students include financial issues, academic issues, emotional and relationship issues, family and parental issues, issues of students' welfare, and municipal amenities. Similarly, according to Adegboyega (2020), academic stress among students has long been researched, and researchers have identified various stressors, which include having too many assignments to complete, competition with other students, failures, a lack of pocket money, poor relationships with other students, lecturers, or family, and problems at home. University-level stressors include overcrowded halls, the semester system, and inadequate resources to perform academic work.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Stress

Numerous scholars have attempted to define stress from different viewpoints. Ahmed et al. (2016), for example, defined stress as a normal psychological and physiological reaction to events that make an individual feel threatened, overwhelmed, or uncertain. It is a state of tension that occurs when someone perceives a discrepancy between resources and the demands placed on the person. Stress is a natural part of life, and learning to manage it can improve our resilience and overall quality of life (Ahmed et al., 2016). Bilgel and Bayram (2018) viewed stress as a combination of physiological and psychological reactions of the body when it is subjected to heavy demands. Based on the definitions, stress as a phenomenon is subjective and multi-faceted and occurs when an individual's physical, emotional, and attitudinal attributes do not match with the job demands, constraints, and opportunities. According to Awadalla, Davis, and Glazebrook (2020), there are two types of stress, namely *eustress* (good stress) and *distress* (bad stress). *Eustress* helps individuals experiencing moderate or low stress levels to increase positive work-life balance. It is also true that the increasing diversity and dynamic nature of modern-day learning in the university pose enormous stress on students (Nwakoby, 2019). Today, university students are increasingly exposed to stress from diverse sources, prominent among which is academic-related stress (Adewuya, 2016). Features of stress, though ubiquitous, differ from one student to the other (Bransford, 2019). Hammen (2021) observed that stress is cumulative; it builds up gradually with telltale symptoms that all is not well. While examining the nature of stress, Ezeugo (2022) enumerated the following as the features of stress: it is universal, inevitable (unavoidable), and transferable. Its manifestations vary from one person to the other. For instance, some undergraduates under stress lose their appetites, eat more, and become depressed, while others become hyperactive (Ezeugo, 2022).

Concept of Mental Health

Mental health refers to the well-being and functioning of an individual's mind, emotions, and behaviors (Bransford, 2019). It encompasses various aspects, including emotional well-being; this is the ability to recognize and manage emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger (Bransford, 2019). Psychological well-

being: This is the ability to cope with stress, trauma, and adversity. Cognitive functioning: the ability to think, learn, reason, and solve problems. Behavioral functioning: This is the ability to engage in productive and fulfilling activities. Social connections: this has to do with the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships (Okorie, 2019). Self-awareness, the ability to understand one's own strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and resilience, which is the ability to adapt and bounce back from challenges (Bransford, 2019; Okorie, 2019).

Good mental health is characterized by positive self-image, healthy coping mechanisms, strong relationships, a sense of purpose and meaning, the ability to manage stress and emotions, and a healthy work-life balance (Umejesie, 2020). Poor mental health, on the other hand, can lead to various mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders (e.g., depression and bipolar), personality disorders, psychotic disorders (e.g., schizophrenia), and trauma-related disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) (Umejesie, 2020).

Many scholars have attempted to trace the origin of stress among young people. Adewuya (2016) posits that when students are unable to imagine a future where they can truly live out their passions, they tend to experience a deep helplessness that can develop into stress. Hence, Nwakoby (2019) encouraged accepting stress as part of the human experience rather than denying its existence. For the record, stress is a mental condition with serious psychological and physiological consequences, including lack of interest in learning, low academic performance, disturbances in routine work, and sleep disorder.

Concept of Academic Performance

Academic performance is the measurement of student achievement across various subjects (Olowu 2019). Owens et al. (2021) explained that teachers and education officials typically measure achievement using classroom performance, graduation rates, and results from standardized tests. The term "academic performance" (also known as "academic achievement") refers to the extent to which a student has been able to achieve their short- and long-term educational goals. Cumulative GPA (Grade Point Average) and completion of educational benchmarks, such as secondary school certificates and bachelor's degrees, all represent academic performances (Owens et al., 2021). Nolan et al. (2022) noted that academic performance is commonly measured through quizzes, examinations, or continuous assessments, but there is no general agreement on how it is best evaluated, or which aspect is most important in the measurement of academic performance. It is for the above reasons that Ugochinyere (2021) observed that there are unclear results over which individual factor(s) can successfully predict academic performance, although elements such as nature of preparation, test anxiety, environment, study habit, motivation, financial stability, shelter, and emotions are likely determinants; more studies need to be conducted to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of such claims (Ugochinyere, 2021).

Furthermore, individual differences in academic performance have been linked to variations in intelligence, home circumstances, and personality type (Nnadozie, 2019). For example, students with higher mental ability, as demonstrated by intelligence quotient (IQ) tests, and those who are higher in conscientiousness (linked to effort and achievement motivation) tend to achieve highly in academic tests and examinations (Novotney, 2015). Literature also shows that mental curiosity has an important influence on the academic performance of students. For this reason, parents' academic socialization was a term coined to describe the way parents influence students' academic performance by shaping students' skills, behaviors, and attitudes towards school at an early stage. Thus, parents can significantly influence the academic performance of their children through motivation, positive interaction and timely provision of adequate learning aids and lesson instructors or teachers (Ikejiuba, 2020).

Factors Influencing the Prevalence of Stress among University Students

Literature suggests that there are no clear-cut factors influencing the prevalence of stress among students. This is because different people experience it in different ways at various levels and forms (Abubakar, 2021). Stress among students is caused by various factors, which may include family instability, assignment deadlines, and financial pressures (Castro & Rice, 2017). Field (2020) explained that stress is regarded to be a relative term in the sense that what is irritating and stressful to one person may make no difference to another. Stress is a highly

personalized phenomenon and can vary widely even in identical situations for different reasons (Nigerian National Institute of Mental Health, 2018).

Obi (2021) defined stress as the response that occurs in the body because of what is called a stimulus. This suggests that there is an environmental factor that brings out the manifestation of stress, causing an individual to behave in a particular way in response to such a stimulus or stressor. Obi (2021) further argues that stressors may be physical, psychological, or social in nature, and they may be negative or positive. There are basically two schools of thoughts about stress: the first is a challenge that helps an individual to achieve more than he or she would without any stressor. The second is a negative state that leads to undesirable situations. To support this perspective, Clifford and McKay (2020) conceptualized two categories of stress as desirable stress and undesirable stress. He added that "desirable" is pleasant and can produce positive effects such as the maximization of output and creativity.

People considered stable perceive stressful situations as challenging instead of threatening or overwhelming (Owens et al., 2021). Stress is a normal human reaction that happens to everyone (Cranford et al., 2020). In fact, the human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. When you experience challenges (stressors), your body produces physical and mental responses to ease the stress. It is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation (Cranford et al., 2020).

Stress is caused by complex interactions between social, psychological, and biological factors (Owens et al., 2021). Life events such as difficult times in school and loss of one's parents, siblings, or loved ones contribute to the intensity of stress among students (Owens et al., 2021). According to Umejesie (2020), when students get worried about their poor family backgrounds, horrible life experiences, journeys in life, and academic performance, they may begin to feel like they have achieved nothing; such students are likely to feel stressed.

Stress, Mental Health and Academic Performance of University Students

Learning abilities such as the ability to focus on details; to listen and understand lecturers, able to read and comprehend etc, are some of the predictors of academic excellence (Ahmed et al., 2016). However, when supposed intelligent students suddenly start to lose focus on school activities, allow themselves to get distracted during lecture hours, quiz, examinations etc, then stress and mental health problem such as depression is likely to have set in. There are many negative impacts of stress on academic performance. Ahmed et al. (2016) noted that students' success is negatively related to stress and emotional pain. This is why students with poor mental health spend less time on their books and minimum time on homework. Stress and mental health challenges have negative impacts on the behaviour of students leading to loss of interest in school, poor academic performance and declining level of social interactions with their peers (Ezeilo, 2019). Studies show that stress is the 11th leading cause of death in Nigeria, which occurs approximately every 16 minutes. Through positive mood people feel good, which has positive effects on their daily activities but when reverse is the case acute stress may have occurred (Awadalla et al., 2020). According to Awadalla et al. (2020), common despair, past horrible experience and low immune system can harm the emotions of students thereby leading to severe stress levels and death. Another major negative effect of stress among university students is poor academic performance. History of family instability, rejections, denials, disappointments, failures to meet up with individual expectations contribute to the high rate of stress among university students in Nigeria (Bilgel & Bayram, 2018). Ugochinyere (2021) posited that university students with history of happy and secure attachments may also fall into prolonged experience of stress because of the loss of a beloved one. When depressed and non-depressed people are asked to recall happier times, non-depressed people cheer up, but depressed people feel even worse, as if the happy memory makes them feel that they will never be happy again. Depressed people exhibit negative explanatory style than non-depressive people. This is because depression has always been linked with a negative, pessimistic way of explaining and interpreting failure. Stress as a predictive variable amongst depressed people can cause negative emotions and affect human health. It is also true that depressed people are anger prone people (Ugochinyere, 2021). Stress distorts the person's self-concept or self-esteem. It changes human behaviour, modifies the person's pattern of thinking from divergent (consideration of many alternatives) to convergent

(consideration of only one solution). Stress causes physical, social and psychological changes (Uchegbu, 2021). It is a cause and effect reinforcing and reciprocal phenomenon. Its intensity differs from person to person (Uchegbu, 2021). Oyeagu (2022) argued that stress is not physiological, in that we are not born with it but rather it is sociological and subjective because it comes because of the need to meet societal expectations and differ from person to person. Stress could also be infectious (Oyeagu, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structural Strain Theory

Social strain theory was propounded by Robert Merton in 1938. The structural strain theory was greatly influenced by Emile Durkheim's work on (anomie) suicide which explains the condition where the cultural norm of the society breaks down because of the inability of the society to regulate or restrain the goals and desires of its individual members. Merton adopted this idea to develop a macro understanding of the social structure and pattern of norm-violating behaviour in American society. For Merton (1938), the society consciously defined a set of (cultural) goals or desires that serve as the dominant culture instilled in its members and created an institutionalized (socially accepted) means to attain these goals. In relation to the present study, strain theory assumes that undergraduates experience various levels of stress as they try to achieve their academic goals (i.e. to graduate and become successful). The theory also assumes that these variations will in turn; produce some pressures that typically result in various negative outcomes such as mental health concerns like depression among university students especially when the accepted means to achieving these goals are blocked. Thus, the mode of strain adaptation of overwhelmed or overstressed students is "innovation" because according to Merton, if a student is prevented in his or her efforts to achieve academic excellence, the person may be tempted to achieve them through a variety of illegal means. Therefore, undergraduates who could not achieve academic success following due process, may feel overburdened and stressed and thus, engage in examination malpractice to pass their examinations. For some students, symptoms of stress and depression start when they are caught engaging in examination malpractice and then rusticated in their final year. This is when the sense of hopelessness, guilt, shame and frustration lead to severe and acute stress among such university students.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods research design was adopted for this study. Nnamdi Azikiwe University came into being as an offshoot of the defunct Anambra State University of Technology (ASUTECH). ASUTECH, which was established through law No. 7 of 30th July 1980 by the government of the old Anambra, operated as a multi-campus university, with campuses in Abakiliki, Enugu, Awka, and Nnewi. In 1991, following the split of the old Anambra state into Anambra and Enugu states, the Awka and Nnewi campuses of the former ASUTECH were combined into Nnamdi Azikiwe University by the Anambra State Edict No. 5 of November 26, 1991. The university was taken over by the federal government by decree No. 34 of July 15, 1992, and named after Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first president of Nigeria. The main campus of the university is located at Awka. The motto of the university is "discipline, self-reliance, and excellence." Nnamdi Azikiwe University offers a wide range of courses and is made up of fourteen (14) faculties, namely, Agriculture, Arts, Basic Medical Sciences, Biosciences, Education, Engineering, Environmental Science, Health Sciences and Technology, Law, Management Sciences, Medicine, Physical Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Social Sciences. According to the Office of Director of Academic Planning at NAU, the population of the undergraduates as of the 2025/2026 academic session is thirty-seven thousand, one hundred eighty-two (37,182) students. The population was made up of 19,162 males and 18,020 females. Additionally, the study sample included 400 persons aged 18 years and above who are undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. The sample size was calculated using Yamane's (1967) statistical method. The study used both nonprobability and probability sampling techniques. To maximize the study's results, the researchers used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Structured questionnaires and the In-Depth Interview (IDI) were tools utilized to gather quantitative and qualitative data for this study. The Test-Retest Reliability Technique was used in the investigation. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was employed to manage and analyze the data

collected for this study. Descriptive statistics, encompassing fundamental percentages, charts, and frequency distributions, were employed to organize, display, analyze, and interpret the data.

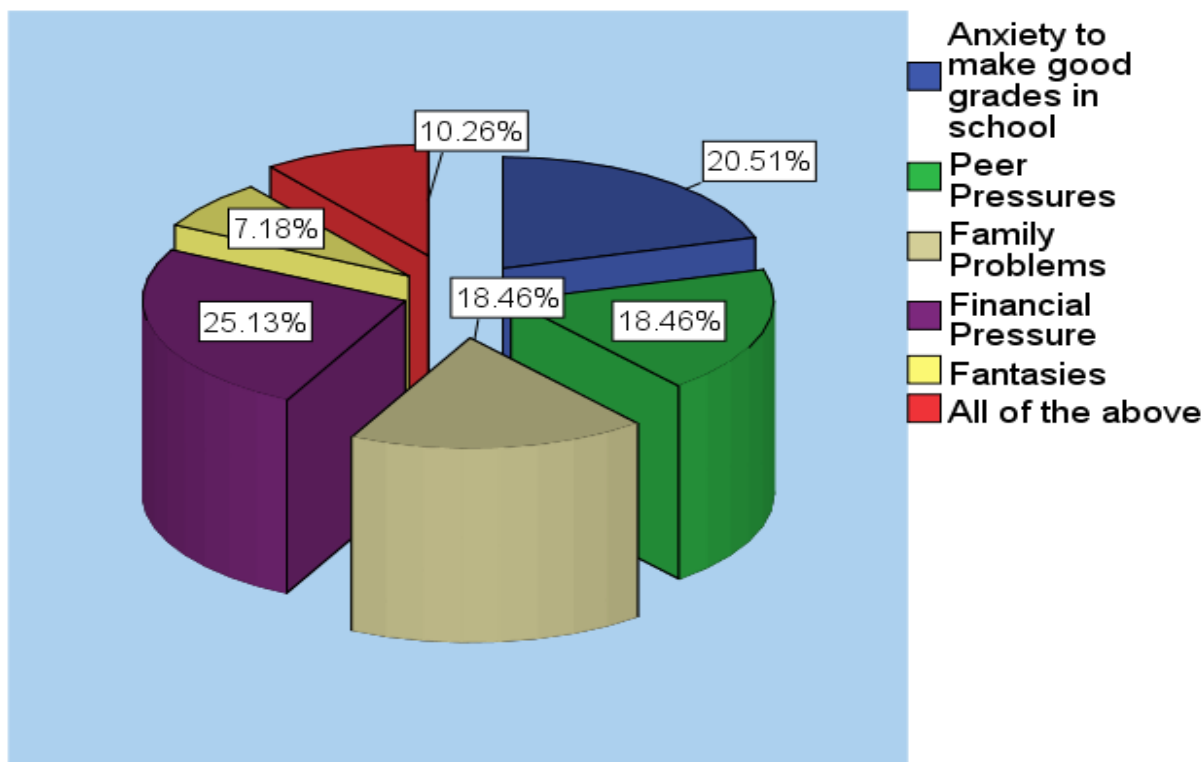
RESULTS

Table 1: Respondents' views on students' level that encounter stress the most

Responses	Frequency	Percent (%)
100 level	86	22.3
200 level	60	15.5
300 level	70	18.1
400 level	170	44.1
Total	386	100.0

Field Survey, 2026

In table 1, the study sought to find out the level of study where students encounter major stress in their academic pursuits, and 170 (44.1%) indicated that final-year students are the most vulnerable set of students exposed to stress. Arguably, 60 (15.5%) of the respondents opined that 200-level students are also exposed to all forms of stress as they struggle to cope and get used to the school system. From the results, it is obvious that various levels of study show various shades and forms of stress; however, final-year students are mostly affected because, in addition to regular lectures, assignments, and financial pressures, they are also faced with the difficulties of combining school activities with their project works.



Field Survey, 2026

Fig.1: Respondents' views on the most prevailing factor influencing the prevalence of stress among students

Fig. 1 shows that the respondents were asked to identify prevailing factors influencing the prevalence of stress among students, and 25.13% of the respondents attributed it to financial pressures. Similarly, 7.18% of the respondents indicated fantasies. This implies that financial pressures, inflation, cost of living, and varying degrees of hardship, particularly in this current administration, are enough reason for university students to get stressed out. This agreed with the IDI data. One of the interviewees stated:

There are many causes of stress and poor mental health. In fact, I can tell you for free that the list is endless. Worrying over everything and lack of pocket money to buy food or academic materials can make mean a lot of stress for many students. For others, a mere breakup or heartbreak can send serious panic down their stomach and the next thing is that they have lost appetite and cannot do anything on their own again (Undergraduate, 22 years, Female, Married, 300 Level, Business Administration).

Another participant stated:

Stress and poor mental health can be genetically induced. There are people that whenever you see them, they are always angry. During my second year in this school, I used to have one friend like that, at first, I thought it was because of hardship, little did I know that Michael came from a rich home. Again, you see those students with light heart but would still not read their books, few carryovers can affect their mental health and stress levels (Undergraduate, 24 years, Male, Single, 400 Level, Theatre Art).

Similarly, another interviewee had this to say:

Yes, lack of school fees or house rent can affect one's mental health and lead to stress. Unfortunately, over thinking does not solve problem. I can tell you for free that there are many students in this school that are stress personified. Students easily attribute stress to many reasons, but the actual truth is that many stresses related symptoms are caused by being broke (Undergraduate, 19 years, Female, Single, 100 Level, Business Administration).

Table 2: Respondents' views on whether they see stress having an impact on students' mental health and academic performance

Responses	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	386	100.0
No	0	.0
Total	386	100.0

Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 shows that all (100.0%) of the respondents agreed that stress has enormous impacts on students' mental health and academic performance. This is a statement of fact because stress is not a respecter of colour, body size, ethnicity, religious affiliation, influence, family background or level of education.

Table 3: Respondents' views on the major impact of stress and mental health on the academic performance of students

Responses	Frequency	Percent (%)
Lack of concentration in academic activities	133	34.5
Suicidal thoughts	54	14.1
Earning of low grades	70	18.2
Multiple carryovers	42	10.9
Truancy/absenteeism	52	13.5
Decline in reading culture	14	3.6
All the above	21	5.2

Total	386	100.0
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Field Survey, 2026

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to state the major impact of stress and mental health on the academic performance of students and 133 (34.5%) of the respondents said that stress and mental health lead to lack of concentration in academic activities. Similarly, 14 (3.6%) remarked that another impact of stress and mental is that it leads to decline in reading culture. This obviously means that one of the major concerns about stress and mental health is their tendency to distract and affect the concentration levels of students in school. This aligned with the IDI data. One of the interviewees stated:

Personally, I feel that men and, in this case, male students are more likely to become overstressed because the society see a man complaining as being lazy, and so, many male students would rather keep straight face and be dying in silence. But when it comes to the females, a simple post on social media would attract rich people competing for her attention in her inbox or DM (Undergraduate, 21 years, Male, Single, 300 Level, Theatre Art).

Another participant stated:

For many students that I have interacted with, I can tell you that many of them are overstressed because of their poor academic records. This poor academic records or performance has also pushed many students into engaging in examination malpractice. In fact, as funny as it may seem there are students who would even contemplate committing suicide because of what their parents will tell them when they get home. This situation is especially true for students from strict parents (Undergraduate, 20 years, Female, Single, 200 Level, Business Administration).

Another male participant said:

There are many effects associated with stress and poor mental health. Apart from the fact that stress and poor mental health, particularly, over thinking does not solve problem, some students used to believe that by staying indoors and not attending classes they would somehow get over mental stress. Well, that is not correct. Amongst other things, overstressed students usually lose interest in learning and can be harmful to people around them. Because to them, they have nothing to lose, after all, life has no meaning anymore (Undergraduate, 23 years, Male, Single, 400 Level, Theatre Art).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this subsection, all the findings of this study were reviewed in line with the study objectives. This is to give clarity and meaning to all the data and results gathered during the field study. Firstly, it was discovered that most of the respondents, especially final students at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, have experienced stress. This indicates that there is a high prevalence of stress among students in the study area. This is consistent with the study by Ikejiuba (2020) carried out among undergraduates in Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. Results indicate that there is a high prevalence of stress among undergraduates of Ebonyi State University. Another study by Ameh (2019) investigated the prevalence of stress among students in the University of Benin (UNIBEN). Results found a high prevalence of stress among students, and this high stress level was attributed to incessant cult clashes and reprisal attacks in the study area.

Moving on, it was found that there are factors influencing the prevalence of stress among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Financial pressure was found to be the most prevailing factor influencing the prevalence of stress among students. Other factors influencing the prevalence of stress among students include anxiety about making good grades in school, peer pressures, family problems, financial pressure, and fantasies. This agrees with a previous study by Uchegbu (2021), which reported that stress is a complex illness with many contributory factors, some of which include family background, medical history, anxiety to succeed in school, peer pressures, financial problems, and family problems. In the same vein, a similar study by Olowu (2019)

found that stress is common among university students because of financial pressures, negative peer influence, curiosity, and youthful fantasies.

In conclusion, the majority of the respondents indicated that stress has an impact on students' mental health and academic performance. Lack of concentration in academic activities was found to be the major impact of stress and poor mental health. Other negative impacts associated with stress and poor mental health among students, in no order, include truancy, absenteeism, decline in reading culture, suicidal thoughts, earning of low grades, and multiple carryovers. This resonates with a previous study by Nnadozie (2019), which found that stress contributes to lack of concentration among students at Paul University, Awka. In a related development, Obi (2021) found in his study carried out in Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) that consequences of stress among undergraduates include suicide thoughts, lack of concentration in school activities, carry-overs, and school dropout.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a high increase in the number of students exposed to stress-related issues and poor mental health in Nigeria. Stress is one of the major mental health illnesses with serious psychological and physiological consequences. For students, it is usually caused by financial pressures, peer pressures, family problems, fantasies, and hopelessness. It is prevalent among students in Nigerian universities. Symptoms of stress and mental health illness include tiredness, frequent sadness, and mood swings. Untreated stress and poor mental health usually interfere with day-to-day activities of students and may last for a long time. Stressed and mentally challenged students usually ignore their own successes and good traits, while exaggerating their faults and failures. Stress and mental health challenges are social problems affecting a significant number of students in Nigerian universities. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is a need for awareness creation on ways to overcome stress and mental health challenges among students. University management should organize programs to educate students on easy steps to manage stress and mental health illnesses.
2. Promotion of sporting activities and recreational facilities in school. There is a need for interdepartmental competition to keep university students healthy and in high spirits.
3. Provide counseling and free medical services for overstressed students. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, should create a special unit in the admin bloc to attend to overstressed students and those in need of counseling therapy. This measure will help to identify the root causes of stress and mental illness on time and then manage them as quickly as possible before they become severe.
4. Parents should build strong relationships with their children. Parents should establish good rapport with their children. This attachment and sense of belonging (i.e., being loved) will help to reduce both the prevalence and impacts of stress and rising mental health concerns among students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

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