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## Stress Factors and Coping Strategies among Nigerian University Students

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### **Abstract:**

*Stress is a part of life for not just working class individuals but every student's daily life. It adds flavour, challenge and opportunity to life. It is not out-of-place to say that without stress, life would be dull and unexciting. However, it is also a well-known fact that stress when pushed too far can seriously affect student's physical and mental well being. The purpose of this paper is to identify part-time students' major sources of stress, examine signs and signals and how they try to cope with stress. One hundred (100) undergraduate part-time students from the department of Business Administration, Secretarial Studies and Education. Part-time undergraduate students from AmbroseAlli University, Ekpoma, Edo state in Nigeria served as the sample for this study.*

*Data collected with Student Stress Checklist and Occupational Stress Coping Inventory were analyzed using frequency, Wilcoxon, Wald-Wolfowitz's Run's Test and Chi-Square test. The results from the study revealed that students' perception of stress did not differ significantly. They also managed stress using similar coping strategies but they experienced the highest stress from academic and social situations.*

**Keywords:** *Stress, Coping, Strategies, Nigeria.*

### **1. Introduction**

The issue of stress among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions today is receiving increasing attention. University students in Nigeria are daily stressed within their learning environments which are still not optimally conducive for learning. Outside the learning environments, many of them still have to face the challenges from their homes- parental pressures to succeed. Stress means how one reacts to increasing external pressure. In general, stimulation and arousal are two factors that are necessary for the normal functioning of the human body. As the body's arousal increases, the performance increases until a limit known as the 'fatigue point' is reached. Beyond this limit (which varies from person to person and also changes over time for each person) performance will decline as the stimulation increases, leading to exhaustion and ill health. Eventually, a person will become so fatigued that even a small push can result in a breakdown (Edwards, 2002). It is pertinent however to note that stress is not necessarily a negative force, but can be stimulating or energizing, in which case it is positive and beneficial. Suffice it to say that the amount of stress which a person can withstand is dependent on the individual level of tolerance (Ellison, 1990). Some students can cope within certain stress levels while some others become emotionally wrecked in the process.

Stress has been assumed as part of every student's daily life. The personal stress requirements and the amount which a student can tolerate before he/she becomes distressed. This however varies with the life situation and the age. As a university student, the greatest sources of events he/she experiences as stressful are assumed likely to fall within some categories: relationships, academic and social situations, environment and life style (Fremont [www.utexas.edu](http://www.utexas.edu)), leaving home or community daily, managing finances, living with roommates, juggling a job, going to classes and having relationships. All these can contribute to the normal stress of being at the university. Within the school also, it is not uncommon for students to feel overwhelmed and anxious about wasting time, meeting high standards or being lonely. In addition, stress can also come from exciting or positive events. It is not strange to say that even the process of falling in love, preparing to travel and study abroad, or buying a new car can just be as stressful. Less happy events can also be stressful.

Recurrent physical and psychological stress can diminish self-esteem, decrease interpersonal and academic effectiveness and create a cycle of self-blame and self-doubt. Stress is unique and personal to each student. What is relaxing to one may be stressful to another. One person may find "taking it easy" at the beach relaxing while another may find it boring. The top five most frequently reported stressors were academic workload, too many tests, difficult courses, exam grades and lecturer characteristics. In contrast, personal stressors reflected the students' previous educational background. Each individual perceives and copes with stress in different ways. In Lazarus and Folkman 1984 cited in Ong and Cheng (2009), they posited that a person's response towards stress depends on whether

an event is appraised as a challenge or a threat. This is when the concept ‘individual differences’ comes into play. The effects of stress on academic achievement cannot be over emphasized. Many students stress themselves up and cannot even manage it either through practicing some personalized strategies or assistance through some university resources. Coupled with this, some of these universities do not have functioning counselling centre due to poor funding.

It is often said that stress is the “wear and tear” of the body’s experience as one adjusts to one’s continually changing environment. Stress is diametrical in quality: physical and emotional effects. The physical and emotional effects it has on people can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help push or compel humans to action but it can also result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. On the other hand, stress as a negative influence can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as fatigue, headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. It also suppresses the body’s immune system.

Stress could be experienced with the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship. It is also experienced as one readjust to life. It has been affirmed that in adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder one depending on how one reacts to it (Georgia Reproductive Specialists [www.ivf.com](http://www.ivf.com)). According to Fremont (retrieved from [www.utexas.edu](http://www.utexas.edu)), “stress signals” among students fall into four categories: thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical symptoms. When one is under stress, he/she may experience the symptoms shown in the table below.

<b>FEELINGS</b>	<b>THOUGHTS</b>	<b>BEHAVIOURS</b>	<b>PHYSICAL</b>
Anxiety, Irritability, Fear, Moodiness Embarrassment	Self-criticism, Difficulty concentrating or making decisions, Forgetfulness or Mental disorganization, Preoccupation with the future, repetitive thoughts, fear of failure.	Stuttering or other speech difficulties, crying, acting impulsively, nervous laughter ‘snapping’ friends, teeth grinding or jaw clenching, increased smoking, alcohol or other drug use, being prone to more accidents or decreased appetite.	Tight muscles, cold or sweaty hands, head-ache, back or neck problems, sleep disturbances, stomach distress, more colds and infections, fatigue, rapid breathing or pounding heart, trembling, dry

Table 1

Source: [www.indiana.edu](http://www.indiana.edu)

Indiana University Health Center on signs of stress indicates some factors that one may be experiencing: general irritability, elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure, increased accident proneness, floating anxiety-anxious feeling for no specific reason, trembling and insomnia are some of them. Headaches, pain in neck and/or lower back, changes in appetite or sleep pattern, depression, smoking more than usual, apathy, loss of concentration are still others that students often manifest. On predisposing factors Edwards (2002) said the following are responsible; work, relationship difficulties or conflicts with partners, friends, family, colleagues or neighbours. Others according to him are illness and/or disability, being a prime career for a relative, holidays, even a merry global season like Christmas!, moving house, divorce or separation, violations of the law example speeding tickets, bereavement and retirement.

The implications of stress factor, incidentally, is often underestimated. Quite apart from what students claim to be inhumane factors, stress reduces one’s sensitivity to the needs of the school and also the capability for appropriately flexible response when needed. According to Indiana University Health Center, “As the body responds to various forms of physical or psychological stress, certain predictable changes occur. These factors include increased heart rate, blood pressure (systolic and diastolic) and secretions of stimulatory hormones.”

According to findings, the results of continuing stress may cause disruption in one or more of the following areas of health: physical, emotional, spiritual and social. Strategies of coping with stress conditions pointed to relaxation and engagement in leisure-time activities for palliating stress. Shaikh, et al (2004) revealed that several forms of coping mechanisms used by students include sports, music, hanging out with friends, sleeping or going into isolation. In coping with stress, others may resort to avoidant coping: alcohol/drug, denial and behavioural disengagement while others according to Sreeramareddy, et al. (2007) may include coping activity through self-acceptance, planning and positive reframing as well as taking the necessary steps to overcome the necessary steps to overcome the academic stress. It is worth-noting that much of the literature on management of stress has suggested intensive or palliative strategies/measures at the individual level rather than trying to resolve it definitively.

The significance of this study on stress factors and coping strategies among Nigerian undergraduate students will be beneficial to the students, youths, government, community, family or individuals in the area of what stress is; recognizing stress; eliminating stress from their lives; tell what is optimal stress for them and managing stress better rather than constant dependence on palliative measures. Thus, the need to identify these stressors and examine some coping strategies these undergraduate students adopt in trying to manage it.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Stress is a part of every student’s daily life. It adds flavour, challenge and opportunity to life. Without stress, life would be dull and unexciting. However, too much stress can seriously affect student’s physical and mental well being as several literature on it have

revealed. It is not in doubt that recurrent physical and psychological stress can diminish self-esteem, decrease interpersonal and academic effectiveness and create a cycle of self-blame and self-doubt when one is too stretched out with day-to-day task. Stress is unique and personal to each student and interestingly what is relaxing to one may be stressful to another.

Recently in Nigeria, there have been lots of agitations from outcomes of present elections, constitutional reforms, unemployment, poverty, bad governance, corrupt practices, sensitization of issues from social media and uncondusive school learning environment, and salary/wage default. The effects of these stressors on not just the citizens but part-time learners and their academic achievement cannot be over-emphasized. Observation from visits to many of the Nigerian universities reveal that many students on their own stress themselves up by engaging in deadline multi-tasks as a result of improper time management. They often battle with school activities and personal interests and are unable to be equilibrated. Equilibration is said to occur with practicing some personalized strategies or assistance through some university resources centred in counselling unit, social work and clinical psychology units. Unfortunately, many undergraduates in this case study often look stressed and agitated.

Thus, the need to identify these stressors and examine some coping strategies these part-time university undergraduate students adopt in trying to manage them.

### 1.2. Research Questions

To guide the study, vital research questions are raised to be answered:

- a) What are the perceptions of stress factors among the part-time university undergraduate students?
- b) Will the coping strategies among the part-time university undergraduate students in the school differ significantly?

### 1.3. Hypotheses

Some null hypotheses are stated to be tested in this study

- i. The perceptions of stress factors among the part-time students will not differ significantly.
- ii. The coping strategies among the part-time undergraduate students in the school will not differ significantly.

## 2. Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was case study. This is because it deals with examination and analysis of the perception of stress factors and the coping strategies among students in a Nigerian tertiary institution. The population for this study consisted of all the part-time university undergraduate students in Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Nigeria. In the area of study, sixty (60) males and sixty (60) females were selected for the study using a stratified random sampling method. In all, one hundred and twenty (120) undergraduate students were used for this study.

A valid standardized test item titled "Student Stress Checklist" by Suzanne Fremont, Ph.D was adopted and used for this study. This comprised of 36 sources of stress which the students were expected to tick '✓' beside the items which they experienced in the past six months or were likely to experience in the next six months. On the issue of coping with stress, the researchers developed an inventory titled "Occupational Stress Coping Inventory" for students which consisted of 20 items of statements which they were expected to indicate their responses by ticking against their choices.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, it was administered to twenty (20) students (10 boys and 10 girls) outside the area of study. The instrument was however tested for reliability by using the split-half reliability method. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.70. Direct approach was used in the administration of the questionnaires on the targeted sample subjects. The completed questionnaires were also personally collected by the researcher. The responses to the 36-item and 20-item instrument were converted to qualitative values and put in tables and thereafter interpreted. The questionnaire responses were tallied and put into tables. Frequency and Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test were used to answer the research questions, while Wald-Wolfowitz's Run's Test and Wilcoxon Test were used to test the hypotheses. The study is focused on part-time undergraduate studies of Ambrose Alli University, Edo state. It is also delimited to Education, Secretarial studies and Business Administration Part-time students within the area of study.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Research Question One

→ What are the perceptions of stress factors among the part-time students?

From an overview table in this study, the order of male and female part-time undergraduate students' 'positive' response ratings to the Student Stress Checklist reveals as follows; Failed important course (82), Financial problems (79), Sexual concerns (76), Increase in course load or difficulty (73), Too many missed classes (72), Lower grade than expected (70), Relocating to another state (66), Raising children (65), Working more than one job (57), Elected to leadership position (55), Breaking of relationship (54), New romantic relationship (54), Change in living conditions (46), Roommate problems (41), Argument with instructor (39), Marriage (38), Major personal injury or illness (38), Argument with family member (38), Long commute to work and school (34), Serious argument with close friend (28), Changes in alcohol and / or drug use (27), First semester in college (26), Lost job (23), New job (22), Pregnancy (22), Change in sleeping habits (21), Divorcee of parents (21), Death of a loved one (20), Change in health of family member (20), Change in social life (20), Encounter with the legal system (19), Transfer to a new school (16), Chronic car trouble (14), Change in eating habits (11), Outstanding achievement (8) and Impending graduation (8).

The order of the students' responses to the Occupational Stress Inventory revealed as follows; I share my problem with someone (64), I consume a lot of food (52), I lose myself in thought (52), I try to relax myself when stressed up (49), I try to plan ahead(49), I exhaust myself with reading (46), I take a long walk to help me relax (42), I try not to abuse drug intake (41), I fight a lot to ease off tension (36), I turn my back on work (32), I try to fake happiness (31), I try not to engage in argument (29), I eat well balanced meals (27), I form friendship with others (25), I take a deep breath (21), I avoid drinking too much (20), I engage in casual sex (20), I avoid smoke as much as possible (16), I avoid friends or relations (14) and I avoid friends or relations (14).

These frequency responses from the Student Stress Checklist had indicated the various views of the part-time university undergraduate students on the different stressors within their environment that cause them stress which can affect their academics. The students hold diverse views on the factors that cause them stress.

### 3.2. Research Question Two

→ Will the coping strategies among male and female part -time undergraduate students in the school differ significantly?

Variables	C/R Total	Calculated value	df	Critical value(0.05)
Part-time students	681	0.5	1	3.84

Table 2: Analysis of students' coping strategies

From the Chi-square test analysis which revealed 0.5 as the calculated value, with df 1 and critical table value as 3.84 at 0.5 level of significance, the analysis shows that the coping strategies among male and female students in the school will not differ significantly using the phi-coefficient.

#### 3.2.1. Hypothesis One

→ The perceptions of stress factors among the students will not differ significantly.

Variables	N	Calculated Z	Table Value (-1.96)	Decision
Part-Time students	36	-0.95	P>-1.645	Accepted

Table 3: Analysis of perceptions of students' stress factors

From the Wald-Wolfowitz's runs test analysis of the two-tail test, the calculated value was -0.95. The critical table value revealed P>-1.645. Thus, the hypothesis was accepted. The result shows that the perceptions of stress factors among the students will not differ significantly.

#### 3.2.2. Hypothesis Two

→ The coping strategies among male and female part time undergraduate students in the school will not differ significantly.

Variables	N	Calculated ZC	Calculated t (1-96)	Decision
Part-time Students	20	-0.46	P>-1.96	Accepted

Table 4: Analysis of coping strategies among students

The Wilcoxon's test analysis reveals ZC to be -0.46. The critical value with a two-tail test showed P>-1.96. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted that the coping strategies among male and female undergraduate university students will not differ significantly.

## 4. Discussion

In an overview table tabulated after the administration of the Student Stress Checklist, the findings depict that there are various factors that cause stress to part-time undergraduate students in Nigerian university. From the findings, "failed important course", "financial problem", and "sexual concerns" are tops on the list of the events that cause the greatest stress to them. On the other hand, "change in eating habits", "outstanding achievement", and "impending graduation" are least on the reasons they are stressed up. The checklist responses thus reveal that the perceptions of stress factors among the students would not differ significantly. This is in line with what Fremont (retrieved from www.utexas.edu) said about stress signals falling into four categories. This shows that the students' stress signals can fall into either feelings, thoughts, behavioural and physical symptoms. The same predisposing factors as enumerated by (Edwards, 2002) are manifested by the students irrespective of their sexes. This was shown in the manner of their responses to the test items.

Table 2 shows that the coping strategies among male and female part-time university undergraduate students in the school would not differ significantly. The table value 3.84 as against the calculated frequency 0.5 revealed that it would not differ significantly. This indicates that the students use similar coping strategies to handle stressful conditions. The responses to the Occupational Stress Inventory give credence to this finding.

Table 3 shows that the students share similar views on the events that make them to be stressed up. From the checklist response result, the different predisposing factors of stress are stated. Most of these identified factors are in line with those of Edwards (2002) when he narrated the factors that are responsible.

Analysis of data in table 4 indicate that the coping strategies among Male and Female part-time university undergraduate students in the school will not differ significantly. This result backs up what Shaikh, et al.,(2004); Edwards(2002) and Georgia Production Specialists (retrieved from [www.ivf.com](http://www.ivf.com)) gave on some tips on management of stress. This management ranges from reducing the intensity of their emotional reactions to stress to the students becoming aware of stressors and one's emotional and physical reactions; managing time etc. How well these students are managing their stresses will be another area for concern. The implication of this is that students should learn to appreciate that the first critical step in coping with stress is taking stock of the stressors in their lives. It is crucial to recognize stressful situations, address them, and develop strategies to manage them. The key to stress reduction is identifying strategies that fit one as an individual. There is need to recognize individual differences when looking at stressful conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the perception of stress factors and coping strategies among students in the area of study do not differ significantly. Stress when not identified and managed is bound to lead to decline in academic levels of students bearing in mind that these students are working and schooling at the same time. This study also revealed that for university students, the greatest sources of events they experience as stressful generally fall into either academic or social situations. Stress is a process that builds. It is more effective to intervene early in the process rather than later. As have been discussed, positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and all humans thrive under a certain amount of stress. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave the students feeling bored or depressed or dejected. On the other hand, excessive stress may leave them feeling 'tied up in knots'.

Nigerian part-time undergraduate students are continually under some stressful conditions in the quest for education. These stresses range from personal, social and educational factors. Stress is a part of every student's daily life as had been witnessed in this study. The stress signals among students are either through thoughts, feelings, behaviour and physical symptoms which they are continually trying to manage in their respective ways.

## 6. Recommendations

1. Students through the help of established university resources like Counselling and Mental Health Centres should be helped to identify the sources of stress in their lives and practice some personalized strategies as well as definitive measures and not just rely on palliative measures alone.
2. Students should learn to express their mind instead of "bottling up" emotions on problem of exam failure, financial problems and sexual concerns. This will increase frustration and stress.
3. There is need to share feelings because a second party could help one see his/her problem in a different light.
4. There is need to manage time, create study and leisure time. In other words, plan ahead. Make a reasonable schedule for oneself and include time for stress reduction as a regular part of one's schedule.
5. Nigerian government should enact laws and design some programmes like study sponsorship that are student-friendly. The policies shall go a long way in benefiting students economically and education-wise.
6. Reformation of the entire Nigerian education system in terms of better teaching services, funding, re-training of teachers, improvement of infrastructure and secured learning environs.

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