

# HASSLE MANAGEMENT AMID THE PHD STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Stress is an unavoidable phenomenon in a PhD student life. Due to the contribution of many structural issues within the program, PhD students are susceptible to stress and anxiety during their academic experience. Students face lots of challenges during the period of research and when they fail to cope up with the challenges, they become stressed. Factors such as personal, academic, family and societal are the main sources of stress among the students. Stress may result in physiological, behavioural or even psychological effects. The study is aimed to focus on the stress perception, causes of stress and coping strategies among PhD students. The data was collected using questionnaire. Out of 300 questionnaires issued 260 filled in questionnaire were received. The data was analysed using tabulation and various suggestions on managing stress were provided.

Keywords— Stress, PhD students, causes, challenges, management

## I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is the response to a demand that is placed upon the person. In a normal reaction, when the brain recognizes a threat it results in stress. When the brain perceives the threat, body releases hormones that activate “fight or flight” response. This response is not limited to perceiving a threat, but in less severe cases, is triggered when we encounter unexpected events. Stress can be positive or negative. Stress can be positive when the situation offers an opportunity for a person to gain something. It acts as a motivator for peak performance. Stress can be negative when a person faces social, physical, organisational and emotional problems.

Doctoral students are unclear about their responsibilities and are unsure about what help they can ask from their supervisors. This is compounded by the lengthy isolation from peers that often occurs in the later stages of research. These factors can contribute to “imposter syndrome,” the sense that one is about to be “found out” for not really being smart enough. Some PhD students experience a sense of infantilization along with the conflicting expectation that they develop a professional identity.

The shortage of funding can lead to student debt and other financial difficulties as well as more intense competition for grants and pressure to complete sooner. This kind of competition can be depressing and stressful. And of course, alongside the professional pressures they also experience personal issues and events that affect everyone. This can throw one’s career off-track.

### A. Causes of Stress

Stressors are anything that cause or increase stress.

1. Academics –the biggest stressor for students
2. Environment –discussing heated topics, slow moving traffic, finding a parking spot, etc.
3. Extracurricular – extracurricular activities a part of the daily routine
4. Peers – peer pressure is a major stressor
5. Time Management – not knowing how to plan and execute daily activities
6. Money – some students think more about money than they do anything else
7. Parents –Pressure from parents to succeed

### B. Effects Of Stress

**Physiological** –prolonged stress increases the tension that is put on the arteries. In turn the immune system is affected resulting in cold and flu illness usually during seminars

**Behavioural** –some students may drink or smoke heavily, neglect exercise or proper nutrition, or overuse either the television or the computer.

**Psychological** –decrease the ability to work or interact with others, and be less able to make good decisions.

### **C. Signs Which Should Not Be Ignored**

- Constant feeling of unable to work hard
- Feeling overwhelmed by the workload
- Inability to focus
- Feeling that even easy things have become difficult
- Fear of failure
- Feeling like they don't belong to a PhD program
- Physical or mental exhaustion

### **D. Stress Management**

Many times even if we are under the influence of a stressful condition we fail to realize that we are reacting under stress. The body constantly tries to tell us through symptoms such as rapid palpitation, dizzy spells, tight muscles or various body aches that something is wrong. It is important to remain attentive to such symptoms and to learn to cope with the situations. Students should not load themselves greater than their capacity. They should think rationally while solving issues and they should feel free to express their feelings. Alcohol/cigarettes are short term remedies, students should avoid going behind them. Students should eat healthy food and exercise frequently to burn off stress. For the optimum functioning of the brain, a minimum of 7 hours sleep is essential. PhD students should have good set of friends with whom they can share their problems. The students should manage time effectively by appropriate planning. Financial problems should not become a hurdle for the research, they should plan their expenses.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Increased stress has been identified as a predictor of unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking, drinking, eating poorly, infrequent exercising, and obtaining inadequate amounts of sleep (Von Ah, Ebert, & Ngamvitroj, 2004). Hudd et al. (2000) found that students who are more stressed will more likely exercise infrequently and eat junk food, while less stressed students will have healthy habits, such as eating nutritious foods.

More stressed students were found to have lower self-esteem and less awareness of their health (Hudd, Dumlao, & Erdmann-Sager, 2000). There was also a correlation between stress and time management, with increased management skills leading to decreased stress levels (Misra & McKean, 2000).

Stress can affect a student's grades, health, and personal adjustment. Students perception with the immediate environment, their personal lives, and tasks confronting them serves to define, in a unique manner, people and events as potentially dangerous or relatively innocuous (Roberts & White, 1989). If stress is not dealt with effectively, feelings of loneliness and nervousness, as well as sleeplessness and excessive worrying may result (Wright, 1967).

If students experience stress as a challenge, it can be a positive aspect of learning (Roberts & White, 1989). Many experiences distress rather than challenge, which can lead students to feel threatened and helpless. Some students may be older and are starting PhD after working for several years. They find it more difficult to return to student status, especially when the teachers are the same age or younger than they are (Arnstein et al., 1999).

When students have financial troubles, their outlook on life may be dramatically affected. Many studies (Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Arnstein et al., 1999 and Saunders & Balinsky, 1993) have found that financial problems during PhD study were strongly related to psychological distress. Financial constraints are a reality for almost all PhD students.

Having good social support from family and friends can help to alleviate some of the stress that students may be experiencing. Strong social support is associated with low to moderate effects on stressors (Nelson et. al, 2001). Sapp (1996) found in his study that for worry and anxiety, relaxation therapy was the most effective treatment for graduate student stress. Research has shown that "relaxation procedures are useful in reducing test anxiety in students" (Sapp, 1996, p. 83)

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research is used in this study. A well- structured questionnaire is framed. Data is collected from the PhD students across various universities in India. Out of 300 questionnaires issued 260 filled in questionnaire were received. The data was analysed using tabulation and various suggestions on managing stress were provided.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE I  
STRESS SURVEY

S.No	Item	Often	Few Times A Week	Rarely
1	Anxious and Nervous	101	123	36
2	People around cause tension	118	121	21
3	Eat/drink/s moke	72	131	57
4	Cannot turn off thoughts in night	142	80	38
5	Difficult to concentrate	139	112	9
6	Less time to relax	113	141	6
7	Hard to relax	96	121	43
8	Many deadlines	18	142	100

The results of the stress survey reveal that most of the PhD scholars feel difficult to concentrate and do their work and they are not able to turn off their thoughts even during nights due to stress. They are tensed and nervous due to stress. They feel that they have less time to relax and even if they have time the work related thoughts prevent them from relaxing. And this is because they are under stress

TABLE 2  
CAUSES OF STRESS-ACADEMIC

S.No	Item	No Stress	Minimum Stress	Average Stress	Maximum Stress
1	Course work	31	43	89	97
2	Presentation	22	88	74	76
3	Guide conflict	96	49	50	65
4	Library visit	114	96	26	14
5	Selecting thesis topic	22	16	82	140
6	Literature collection	4	6	89	161
7	Asking guide's	17	15	96	132

	help				
8	Part time	45	25	53	137
9	Complete research paper	0	0	77	183
10	Difficult to motivate	3	18	92	147

The results indicate that the PhD scholars are more stressed during the period when they are writing research papers. PhD scholars are stressed in choosing the topic for their research. The scholars are stressed when they are collecting literature relating to their topic. Part time scholars are facing more stress as they have to manage both work and research.

TABLE 3  
PERSONAL CAUSES

S.No	Items	No Stress	Minimum Stress	Average Stress	Maximum Stress
1	Budgeting money	7	9	83	161
2	Lack decision making	17	14	96	133
3	Being alone	24	86	92	58
4	Shyness	5	32	96	127
5	Tension	14	40	64	142
6	Depressed	15	19	101	123
7	Fear of failure	20	21	106	113
8	Change in personal habits	8	12	96	144
9	Concern over physical health	12	30	97	121
10	Lack self confidence	9	18	101	132

The results show that the PhD students are mainly stressed due to the lack of financial aid. The work tension and change in personal habits are causing stress. Fear, shyness and lack of self-confidence are some of the causes that results in stress among PhD students.

TABLE 4 SOCIAL CAUSES

S.no	Title	No stress	Minimum stress	Average stress	Maximum stress
1	Friend death	10	47	123	90
2	Problems with friend	13	31	75	141
3	Meeting new people	83	72	90	15
4	Room mates	17	90	71	82
5	Maintaining Friendship	67	97	86	10
6	Lack of social activities	43	72	96	49
7	Alone	2	80	72	106
8	Discrimination	115	82	23	40
9	Hostel	16	29	73	142
10	Rules	5	153	70	32

The results reveal that PhD students staying in hostel are more stressed. Students who are alone and who are having problems with friends face stress.

TABLE 5

FAMILY CAUSES

S.no	Item	No stresses	Minimum stress	Average stress	Maximum stress
1	Health problem of a family member	10	47	123	90
2	Lack of phone calls/visits by family members	13	31	75	141
3	Family pressure for marriage	83	72	90	15
4	Feeling homesick	17	90	71	82
5	Parental separation /divorce	67	97	86	10
6	Death of a parent	3	12	96	149
7	Conflict with parents	2	80	72	106
8	Illness in my own children	115	82	23	40
9	Child care arrangements	16	29	73	142
10	Fear to meet family expectation	5	153	70	32

The results show that the students who have conflicts with their parents face more stress. The death of a parent acts as a cause for the student's stress. PhD scholars who are married face more stress due to the arrangements they have to make for childcare.

TABLE 6  
STRESS MANAGEMENT

S.no	Items				
	Fun	Lots	Few	Occasional	Serious
1		42	132	58	28
	Exercise	Everyday	Alternate day	Once in a week	No
2		32	39	73	116
	Handle stress	Take action	Escape	Take a break	Don't believe in action
3		21	47	94	98
	Pressure	Buzz to perform	Relax and recharge	No let up	When bored

4		32	46	103	79
	Guide feedback	all times	Once in six months	Only when I do wrong	No feedback
5		26	89	123	22
	Atmosphere	Dynamic	Good	OK	Politics
6		35	76	56	93
	Help/suppose	Not afraid to ask help	Will not ask often	Ask under extreme situation	Helpless
7		45	78	93	44
	University environment	Fairly relaxed	Not always relaxed	Not particularly safe	Unsafe
8		81	112	60	27
	University role in stress management	Various initiative	Some formal mechanism	Poor mechanism	No mechanism
9		42	61	92	65
	Pride	Proud & guide recognises	Proud but no recognition	Don't feel proud	Guide undervalues skills
10		82	72	86	20

The results of stress management survey among PhD students show that many students don't take any effort in managing their stress. Most of them do not perform any exercise to reduce stress. They feel that there is no way to avoid pressure in their work. Many students think that the guide gives feedback only when they are doing something wrong. Many PhD students feel that there are lots of politics and backstabbing which acts as a barrier to discuss issues with other research scholars.

## V. SUGGESTIONS

PhD students should learn to identify the symptoms of stress (getting irritable, tensed, neck pain etc) and control them as soon as they encounter stressful situation. There may be many blocks hindering the performance things may turn out different than we expect. But if we fix a goal and work towards achieving it there won't be any barriers.

Although stress can be reduced by talking with friends, exercising, and seeing a counselor, yoga can help to reduce stress as it promotes relaxation, which is the natural antonym of stress. People who do a little bit of yoga each day often find they're better able to handle things when life gets a little crazy. Laughter and laughter therapy allows students to look at a situation with a different perspective and this changed perspective can influence the amount of stress. Humour and laughter therapy lighten the burden and help students to connect with others

PhD students should start writing down every week-end what they have accomplished during the preceding week. This is very important as it motivates students. Sometimes in the middle of the week if they realize that they hadn't accomplished anything to be recorded at the end of the week and they would make sure that something is done. They give a satisfaction of seeing their

accomplished. During a Ph.D. you often try something and it doesn't work in the end. That can be frustrating but tracking what you have done helps to overcome this frustration. The path to success has unexpected twists and turns in a PhD and while a failed attempt looks like no progress it really is.

A best work is done when scholars work on a topic that they really care about. It is better to come up with own thesis topic rather than having supervisor finding a thesis topic. It will be easier to care deeply about a thesis topic that they came up with themselves. **Healthy** eating habits, exercise, taking breaks are really important. PhD researchers are highly driven people they find it difficult to switch off from academic work. Breaks are periods that help students to work more effectively in the long run. PhD students often complain about feeling isolated, which is not surprising given the number of hours spent facing a computer screen or conducting lab or field tasks which require steady concentration. So they should actively seek supportive people to surround themselves. PhD not only develops the research skills, but also the personal skills. The research process can test patience and determination, so the students should make effective strategies to manage themselves and their research. If the task is big then they should break them into manageable portions which in turn save time. If there are large volumes of books/journals to read then they should try reading review articles which gives an overview of the subject area. Devoting some time and effort to developing skills makes life much easier in the long run.

## VI. CONSLUSION

Stress can be both positive and negative, which have an impact on the student's performance. If taken positively, the results are positive, and if taken in a negative way, may yield disastrous results. For most of the people, low to moderate amount of stress enable them to perform better. However, a high level of stress or for that matter even a low level stress spread over a long period, eventually takes its toll, and the performance declines. Though stress cannot be prevented, the PhD students should be smart enough to identify the symptoms of stress and practice the stress management techniques to cope up with stress and succeed in their research.

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