**Forum:** World Health Assembly

**Issue:** Addressing the problem of rising levels of academic stress

**Student Officer:** Geon Park, George Xu

**Position:** Assistant Presidents

**Introduction**

Stress is defined as the body’s “non-specific response of the body to any demand for change” in its environment. According to research done by college of medicine in Saudi Arabia, “among medical students has reached up to 63%, with 25% considered to be of severe type.” The amount of stress can determine whether it is positive or negative outcomes of stress; adaptive stress enables humans to tackle challenges in life. While negative stress prevents us from relaxing, eventually resulting in a permanent state of stress, challenges become threats, doubting one’s ability to do even simple things along with mental and physical issues. Multiple studies have demonstrated that parental pressures and teachers’ expectations were associated with students' academic stress levels and only worsened during test and examination periods. A report submitted by Hancock and Hembree suggests when “students underestimate their own abilities, or overestimate the consequences related to their failure” are often accompanied by higher anxiety levels and poor performance.

With the estimate that “10-30% of students experience some degree of academic stress during their academic career,” academic stress for students attending institutions with high academic standards and highly competitive environments has a significant impact. While the Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID -19) pandemic further complicates the stress levels, students often report stress related physical symptoms including headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, depression, anxiety, and more as a result in reducing performance and productivity. Research also suggesting that stress can also bring on or worsen specific symptoms or diseases.

Due to the widespread prevalence and outstanding health costs of academic stress, the World Health Assembly (WHA) must seek to understand the factors that are driving such harm to the large proportion of the global population. Left unchecked, levels of academic stress will only continue to rise, endangering the health and well-being of more individuals and further burdening the world's future.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Stressors**

Stressor is the term for stress inducing elements, in the environment around the individual or otherwise. The term has been in use since the first paper which defined mental stress. Stressors such as parental pressure and worries about the future are two of many different causes of academic stress.

**Coping / Coping Mechanism**

Coping mechanisms have been keenly studied. In terms of stress, coping mechanisms mean how students are reducing the amount of stress or limiting its symptoms. Two coping methods exist: Active and Passive. Active coping consists of actively participating in a certain activity, such as listening to music or using drugs for which the individual perceives a decrease in stress, although they may be harmful to the body. In the two examples, music is a positive coping mechanism while drug use is a negative method.

**Clinically Significant Depression**

Clinically significant depression represents a mental state which demonstrates symptoms that strongly correlates with depression or is depression. This state of depression is the most concerning as it represents stress levels which directly inhibit brain function, which will be explained below.

**Welfare**

Welfare contains national services that do not include education and healthcare, which are separate national policies. This includes services such as electricity, water, unemployed support. These services not only benefit the poor but are vital for many other people. Countries with high standards of welfare generally have lower depression and stress.

**Standard of Living**

The standard of living is a primary method by which a nation’s happiness is measured. The standard of living is the quality of life an average person can achieve, and it is generally measured in GDP/C (Gross Domestic Product per Capita) and often compared to the cost of living.

**Youth Unemployment**

Youth unemployment is a primary issue which causes great levels of academic stress among high school and university students. Due to the current economic downturn, new graduates are having problems with finding jobs. This is termed youth unemployment and results in great levels of stress. Many of those aware realize that by the time they try to find employment, there might not be enough jobs to accommodate them.

**Background**

In the mid-1930s, Selye’s discovery of “stressors”, which are formed when the body is exposed to a perceived threat, broadened the definition of stress to include mental stresses. This discovery also brought in significant evidence of the dangers of stress, with the thymus, which produces many of the immune cells, decreasing in size. Additionally, the discovery found that after 48 hours of exposure to stressors, the regular brain function of the exposed subjects ceased to function.

One contemporary issue that has arisen is problems with employment. In many countries, many high school students can no longer get jobs. Due to COVID-19 and the recent Great Recession, the unemployment rate has skyrocketed. This is especially concerning for high school students as there is a risk that, in the future, there might not be enough new jobs for university graduates, which will cause students to become even more stressed as they might not be able to get a job even if they get into university. Furthermore, good jobs will be even more scarce, meaning those who want to live a higher-income life will have to work harder, increasing stress.

A few countries with more success in academic stress include Norway, Germany, Finland, New Zealand, Australia, etc. Research into these nations may be of some significant use, considering the varying styles of education and employment.

**The Current Stress Inducing Situation at Schools**

Here, information from studies pertaining to academic stress and stress in general is listed.

***Data from NYU Study Regarding Academic Stress in Private Schools***

New York University created a study in 2015 focusing on two private schools with high difficulty entry requirements. The study was two-parted: the first part involved discussions with staff regarding how the students cope with stress and how much stress they appear to have. The second part involved direct communication between the students and the researchers, with 128 juniors selected to be part of the study. Based on the first part of the study, most juniors appear to use music, computer games, and meditation as viable active coping methods. Teachers also gave a few suggestions, particularly participation in sports/exercise, learning how to prevent stress-inducing situations, and having a healthier outlook on how grades and school matter. When asked about stress, most students seemed to have similar symptoms to what Selye described in his original discovery of stressors: active brain function and development appears to cease, constant tiredness (attributed to a weakened immune system), and others.

However, two significant concerns were discovered: substance abuse and clinically significant depression. Described as “endemic”, substances and drugs are commonly used as stress relievers in the schools studied. Cannabis and prescription drugs were both commonly used to reduce stress. Although cannabis is effective in minimal doses (≤ 2.5mg), the amount used by most people is far higher, resulting in more dangerous effects. The second issue, clinically significant depression, has been found in over 25% of individuals, a significant portion. This is primarily attributed to stress and parental pressure. Additionally, parents, who largely believed in and feared possible stigmas which may prevent their children from succeeding in life, attempted to prevent their children from going to counselors or physicians. This stigma may be an important topic to discuss. However, researchers believe these issues are far more prevalent in public schools as there is still significant support in private schools concerning mental health.

***Data Regarding General Stress among Nations***

Generally, stress levels are lower in nations with more welfare and benefits. Nations in Europe and Oceania have extremely low stress levels, while nations in Asia and the Americas have higher stress levels. For instance, the cities of Reykjavik, Finland; Bern, Switzerland; Helsinki, Finland; Wellington, New Zealand; Melbourne, Australia; Oslo, Norway; Copenhagen, Denmark; Innsbruck, Australia; Hanover, Germany; and Graz, Austria have the ten lowest stress levels in the world. This average stress level can then be approximately translated to academic stress levels. Meanwhile, Shanghai, China, was 83rd out of 100 major cities worldwide. The ranking places one as the least stressed while 100 is the most stressed. In the same list, the United States consistently scored around 40th, while especially large cities such as San Francisco and New York City were 64th and 75th, respectively. This placement generally correlates to a few factors, though some will be left out as they are unrelated to academic stress. They include job opportunities, welfare, public services such as free/cheap healthcare, guaranteed access to living wage instead of minimum wage, exemplary standards of living, access to cheaper and better education, and more. When these are provided, academic stress, as well as general stress, decreases dramatically.

**Major Parties Involved**

**The World Health Organization (WHO)**

The World Health Organization is a major United Nations Organization (UNO) that focuses on developing and improving health services and seeks to help protect the right to healthcare and medicine internationally. The WHO has previously discussed matters of stress relief and published many documents on how to protect oneself from stress.

**United for Global Mental Health (UGMH)**

The UGNH is an organization that directly involves itself with Mental Health, particularly for younger people. One of its primary goals is to increase international funding for mental health assistance. Additionally, it seeks to provide education on coping with stress and reduce the negative stigma of going to psychologists.

**Youth Health Organization (YHO)**

The YHO is an organization that seeks to provide aid to international youth. They mostly achieve this by providing education, and future opportunities. Four of their primary goals involve limiting drug usage, promoting better nutrition and personal health, encouraging environmental awareness, and reducing mental stress.

**Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

The United Nations have not attempted to solve the issue as they focused more on PTSD and other forms of traumatic stresses. Most of the effort has been made by private organizations or national governments, particularly those based in the US and in Europe. These organizations mostly assist in providing monetary aid to help with therapy as well as diminishing the effects of negative stigmas. However, the impact that they bring is insignificant, largely because of a lack of more international collaboration, too little funding, and little government support. A few efforts stand out. In China, where stress is one of the highest in the world, the government passed a policy limiting tutoring after school. Many students in China spend hours in specialized training centers to help them get good grades. Not only is it extremely expensive, meaning those in the lower economic castes cannot participate, but it is also extremely stressing for students, who will not have time to take a break from learning. This ultimately led to the banning of most tutoring after school. Meanwhile, government in Europe and in North America have focused on providing public assistance in dealing with stress, such as publishing guides on mindfulness and mental wellbeing.

**Possible Solutions**

* The solutions have been divided into two parts. The first is school/family related, while the second is societal.
* Regarding school-related solutions, one of the most important things which can be done is to provide education on time organization. Procrastination and other problems with time management often result in cramming and are significant causes of stress. Furthermore, stress is a cause of procrastination, as research shows stress reduces active brain function. This issue with time management can be solved by providing public lessons online and offline to teach the youth how to organize their time.
* A second part of the solution is to decrease the emphasis on standardized testing. Standardized testing is already wildly inaccurate at measuring actual knowledge and often results in wealthier people scoring better as they can access tutors. The Scandinavian countries are good examples of education systems that are low stress and high quality. In Norway, for instance, most people only have a single test at the end of the year, with many having only one test throughout all high school. Additionally, most universities there do not look at SAT scores. Meanwhile, Norway is one of the most stress-free nations in the world, while its education is ranked nearly equal to that of the United States and China, which have some of the highest stressed populations in the world.
* The third part of the solution involved educating parents. Many students, especially in selective schools, have noted that they receive great parental pressure to do well at school. Educating parents, especially those without too much experience, is necessary for them to know more about what universities look at and what employers look for. This way, parents will understand how to educate their children and ensure ridiculous pressure is not put on them.
* Regarding societal solutions, one of the most important things to do is to reform the college ranking system. Many employers choose employees based on the college ranking system. However, most only use average ranking, so universities, especially specialized schools like engineering schools, may find it difficult for their students to find jobs. Consider the aerospace engineering field. There are a few good universities for aerospace engineering: MIT, Caltech, Cambridge, Imperial College, Georgia Tech, and Purdue. One can use Georgia Tech as an example. Georgia Tech is a generally middle-ranked STEM University, ranked 44 out of 443 national universities and even lower worldwide. However, it is ranked within the top 5 for aerospace engineering. If one were to go to Georgia Tech for aerospace engineering, they would have far more difficulty getting an engineering job, even though Georgia Tech is one of the best aerospace engineering schools. This situation is problematic as many students will have to go for the best of the best to get a job which they could get going to a more average university if the ranking system was reformed. This causes additional stress.
* The final problem which needs to be fixed is the employment issue. Many students are having trouble finding suitable jobs as they do not have access to job fairs and other means of getting employed. One solution to this is for universities to provide more opportunities for university students to help them find occupations suitable to their interests. Additionally, schools can promote education on entrepreneurship to ensure people will have some knowledge on starting their own companies if they wish to.

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