

Academic Stress and Coping Strategies of Neet Aspirants: A Study in Kamrup District

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Abstract

Childhood is the period of visualizing dreams and building aspirations, while adolescence is the period of conceptualizing those dreams and stepping up to make them a reality. India's youth population is large and growing, around 367 million in 2026, and they are potential sources of innovation and creativity and contributors of the economy and nation-building. But what strikes here is that with increasing academic and career pressure, expectations and fierce competition, the overall well-being of the students, specially the ones preparing for competitive examinations such as JEE and NEET, are at stake. The present study aims to study two such psychological variables i.e., academic stress level and level of stress coping strategies among the higher secondary science students preparing for NEET examinations. For this, the investigators have employed descriptive survey method on 100 NEET aspirants, studying in five coaching institutions of Kamrup District (Metro) of Assam. A questionnaire consisting 50 items i.e., 30 closed-ended items measuring the level of academic stress and 20 closed-ended items measuring the level of stress coping strategies are used which are adapted from two standardized psychological scales-- Academic Stress Scale (ASS-KKSSN) developed by Satish Kumar Kalhotra and Narendra Singh, and Stress Coping Strategies (SCSS-SKMSS) developed by Manish Kumar Sharma and Dr. Surabhi Sharma. The study shows average to high level of academic stress among the aspirants, while, also seeing average to above average level of stress coping, mostly inclined towards healthy coping mechanisms, while a few also exhibiting unhealthy coping strategies.

Keywords: academic stress, stress coping strategies, NEET aspirants, competitive examination

1. Introduction:

In India, education is viewed as a pathway to success and upward mobility, making educational aspiration a significant determinant of student motivation and effort. However, the pursuit of these aspirations frequently results in substantial stress. Research indicates that a large proportion of students experience high levels of academic stress, with factors such as parental expectations, peer competition, and the demands of coaching institutions contributing significantly to this pressure. The competitive nature of examinations like the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) or National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) further amplifies this

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stress, as students navigate their way through rigorous preparation while balancing their academic commitments. Competitive exams in India are high-stakes tests used to filter candidates for admission into prestigious institutions (e.g., IITs, medical colleges) or jobs based on merit (Agarwal, 2007). The National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET), formerly known as All-India Pre-Medical Test (AIPMT), is national-level entrance examination for admission in undergraduate medical education (MBBS), dental sciences (BDS) and other allied health science courses in all medical institutions-- central and state as well as private institutions in India. Earlier, AIPMT was conducted by Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), but from 2019 every year it is conducted by National Testing Agency (NTA). Students prepare for this three-hour duration test based on their Class XI and XII NCERT syllabus for Physics, Chemistry and Biology (Botany and Zoology), with all total 180 questions and maximum 720 marks. The mode of the test is pen & paper using OMR sheet. In terms of number of applicants registering and appearing in these examinations, NEET is claimed to be India's biggest competitive examination. In May 2025, more than 22 lakh students appeared in NEET. However, the examination was canceled due to paper leak and again conducted on 21st June, 2026.

Sadly, in Indian society, there is a common belief that pursuing the science stream in higher secondary education is the only way to secure high-paying jobs, particularly in fields like engineering, medicine, and technology. This perception is largely influenced by the importance placed on competitive exams like JEE and NEET, which are seen as pathways to prestigious institutions such as IITs and AIIMS. As a result, many students and their families tend to prioritize science, while other streams like commerce and arts are often viewed as less valuable or offering fewer career opportunities. However, this view overlooks the growing potential in fields such as business, finance, law, and creative industries, where success and career satisfaction are also attainable. This mindset can restrict students' choices and push them toward science even if their true interests or strengths lie in other areas. Now, this notion might not hold true for those who already aspire to choose this stream or always had an interest in science subjects at school, but for those students who are directly or indirectly pressured by parents, peers, or society into believing that their dream jobs can be attained only through studying science. The thing is, many students are unaware of the struggles faced by students in the medical and engineering fields.

Academic stress is a psychological condition experienced by students due to the pressure and challenges associated with their educational environment. There can be multiple reasons as to why students might feel stressed all the time. Students often face expectations from parents, teachers, and peers to excel academically, plus the anticipation of exams and the pressure to perform well can induce stress, particularly if students feel unprepared or fear not meeting their own or others' expectations. Nowadays, the volume of assignments, projects, and study material can overwhelm students, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety about meeting deadlines. The competitive nature of academic environments can lead students to compare themselves with their peers, increasing anxiety about their performance relative to others. Pre-existing physical and mental health conditions, poor relationships with classmates or teachers, and more factors like these contribute to academic stress.

Generally, all individuals in order to cope with such daily life stress explore different strategies to bring conscious changes in their behaviour. It is a psychological as well as behavioral effort taken by the individual in order to manage their stressful situations and difficult emotions. One of the most foundational theories in the field of stress coping strategies was done by Lazarus and Folkman, who in 1984 developed the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. They recognized two categories of coping, viz. Problem-Focused Coping, which employs problem-solving skills to remove or minimize the source of stress, known as the stressor, from the environment such as identifying the stressor, planning the line of action, prioritizing tasks, putting goal-oriented efforts. This is considered the most effective strategy when something can be changed or managed about the stressful event. The second category is Emotion-Focused Coping, which refers to self-directed responses to the emotional distress caused by the stressor, usually employed when the stressful situation cannot be managed or changed. Here, the aim of an individual is to reduce the level of stress, rather than addressing the stressor directly. Some people may distance themselves, put blame on others for their situation, vent to others, some might exercise and meditate, resort to spirituality, share their feelings with others. In 1990, Endler and Parker put forward the Three-Factor Model by recognizing three dimensions of stress coping: task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping and avoidance-oriented coping. Criticizing the Transactional Model, they argued that avoidance needed to be treated as a fully independent third factor rather than considering it as a subset of emotion-focused coping. This style of coping shifts an individual's attention away from the immediate problem by diverting the focus to somewhere else.

The present study focuses on academic stress experienced by the NEET aspirants studying in various coaching institutions of Kamrup (M), Assam and their stress coping strategies, thereby understanding the dynamics for developing effective interventions that can alleviate academic stress while fostering psychological well-being among students in this region.

2. Literature Review:

In a study titled, '*Sources of stress among students preparing in various competitive exams for job*' by Prajapati and Singh (2017), they found three dimensions of sources of stress, namely, self-inflicted, peer-inflicted and parent-inflicted stress. The findings revealed that students experience significant levels of stress due to internal pressure to succeed (95% out extra effort), peer comparisons (77.66%) and parental expectations (93%). Parental inquiries about peers' performances and futuristic plans further exacerbate stress.

Baiju, M & Rajalakshmi, V. R. (2021) in their study titled, '*Academic Stress and Psychological Well-Being among College Students*' found a significant positive correlation between academic stress and psychological well-being and a significant difference in gender related to academic stress as it was noted that females had higher academic stress levels compared to male students. On the other hand, there was no significant difference in psychological well-being among college students based on their gender.

In their study titled, '*Stress, Pressure & Anxiety of Competitive Exams—An Empirical Study on Students' Psychological Approach*', Pratima M. et. al., (2024) found that such exam-related stress, pressure and anxiety can significantly affect a student's psychological well-being,

leading to symptoms like insomnia, agitation and reduced productivity. The study highlights the need for reform in our examination system and use of effective coping strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of competitive examination stress.

Sharma, A. (2025) in her research study titled, '*The Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing: Investigating the Effects of NEET/JEE Pressure on Students' Mental Health and Well-Being*' found that academic stress has a statistically significant and direct impact on students' mental health. Regression analysis showed that academic stress accounts for approximately 31.1% of the variance in mental health outcomes, indicating that increased stress is strongly associated with poorer psychological well-being. Male students reported higher academic stress than female students, while female students demonstrated slightly better mental health scores compared to males.

Niharika, P. B. et.al., (2025) in their study titled, '*An examination of perceived pressure among NEET and JEE aspirants*' investigated perceived parental and peer pressure among NEET and JEE aspirants, with a particular focus on gender differences. Among NEET aspirants, approximately half perceived high parental pressure, while the remaining reported medium levels. Among JEE aspirants, a greater proportion perceived high parental pressure compared to medium pressure. Most boys perceived medium parental pressure, the majority of girls experienced high parental pressure across both NEET and JEE groups.

3. Need of the Study:

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage, marked by quick changes in one's physical, mental, emotional and social makeup. Students experience academic hurdles too at this time, including as deciding on a course to study, getting ready for boards examinations, and competing in high-stake tests like NEET. The present study, therefore, aims to study the level of academic stress and stress coping strategies among the higher secondary science students preparing for NEET examinations. The study intends to offer insights from this investigation that can guide educational policies and create encouraging surroundings for students, teachers and parents negotiating the challenges of competitive examinations.

4. Objectives of the Study:

On the basis of the need of the study, the following objectives have been identified:

- a) To find out the level of academic stress among the NEET aspirants.
- b) To find out the level of stress coping strategies among the NEET aspirants.
- c) To identify major sources of academic stress among NEET aspirants.
- d) To identify healthy stress coping strategies adopted among NEET aspirants.

5. Delimitation of the Study:

The study is delimited to the higher secondary science students, preparing for NEET examination, studying in five coaching institutions of Kamrup Metro District of Assam.

6. Methodology of the Study:

6.1 Research Design: The study is quantitative in nature, based on primary data collected from the NEET aspirants studying at five coaching institutions of Kamrup Metro District of Assam to find the level of academic stress and coping strategies by employing descriptive survey method.

6.2 Population and Sample: The study is targeted to all higher secondary science students preparing for NEET examination 2026. However, the study is based on data collected from 100 NEET aspirants from five coaching institutions of the district using convenience sampling.

6.3 Data Collection Tools: The investigators prepared a questionnaire consisting 50 items-- 30 closed-ended items measuring the level of academic stress, and 20 closed-ended items measuring the level of stress coping strategies was adapted from the following standardized psychological scales:

- a) **Academic Stress Scale (ASS-KKSSN):** Developed by Satish Kumar Kalhotra and Narendra Singh and published in 2024, the scale originally consists of 40 items divided into four dimensions: Academic frustration, Academic conflicts, Academic anxieties and Academic pressure. After adaptation, 30 questions have been used in the final questionnaire by adapting the items according to the objectives of the present study. Participants have to respond from the given options, i.e., 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Neutral' (3), 'Disagree' (2) or 'Strongly Disagree' (1). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability statistics for the 30 items is 0.845.
- b) **Stress Coping Strategies Scale (SCSS-SKMSS):** Developed by Manish Kumar Sharma and Dr. Surabhi Sharma, and published in 2025, the scale originally consists of 39 items divided into five dimensions: Avoidance, Diet Control, Psycho-Medicinal therapy, Most liked activities, Outerwall strategy and Reducing Physical stress. After adaptation, 20 questions have been used in the final questionnaire by adapting the items according to the objectives of the present study. Participants have to respond from the given options, i.e., 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Uncertain' (3), 'Disagree' (2) or 'Strongly Disagree' (1). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability statistics for the 20 items is 0.73.

6.4 Data Collection Procedure: The investigators approached various coaching institutions in Kamrup Metropolitan district offering NEET coaching and proceeded with five such institutions for the study. After permission was granted, the investigators approached the students of different institutions and explained the purpose of the test and the data collection procedure. The students were ensured that the data collected from them would remain confidential and used only for research purpose. Upon receiving their consent, the tests were administered and a duration of 20 minutes was provided to each student to record their honest opinions.

6.5 Data Analysis Procedure: The collected quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, z-scores) via SPSS software 27.0 version to identify the level of academic stress and stress coping strategies.

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation:

The present study aims to find the level of academic stress and stress coping strategies among 100 NEET aspirants in Kamrup Metro District of Assam, out of which 43 are male students and 57 are female students. As shown in Table no. 1, in most coaching institutes, female students outnumber male counterparts in NEET batches. This section analyses the findings of the two psychological scales administered on the students.

Table no. 1: Male-female distribution

	Frequency	Percent
Male	43	43.0
Female	57	57.0
Total	100	100.0

7.1 Level of Academic Stress among NEET aspirants:

Objective no. 1 aims to find the level of Academic Stress among NEET aspirants using the adapted Academic Stress Scale with 30 items/ statements based on the 5-point Likert Scale viz. ‘Strongly Agree’ (5), ‘Agree’(4), ‘Neutral’ (3), ‘Disagree’ (2) or ‘Strongly Disagree’(1).

Table 2: Mean and SD of Academic Stress of NEET Aspirants

Variable Name	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Stress	100	66	130	100.96	13.74

Table no. 2 shows that the mean score of academic stress of NEET aspirants is 100.96 and the standard deviation is 13.74. The level of academic stress was determined by the raw scores as well as standardized scores received by each respondent to fulfil Objective no. 1.

Table 3: Showing the level of Academic Stress of NEET Aspirants

Level of Academic Stress	Range of Z score	Range of raw score	Frequency	Percent
Very High	+1.40 & above	121 & above	5	5.0
High	+0.47 to +1.39	108-120	28	28.0
Average	-0.46 to +0.46	95-107	37	37.0
Low	-0.47 to -1.39	82-94	17	17.0

Very Low	-1.40 & below	81 & below	13	13.0
Total	100%	100	100	100.0

Table no. 3 presents the level of academic stress among the 100 NEET aspirants based on their raw scores and corresponding standardized Z-scores. The levels are classified into five categories, namely Very High, High, Average, Low and Very Low levels of academic stress.

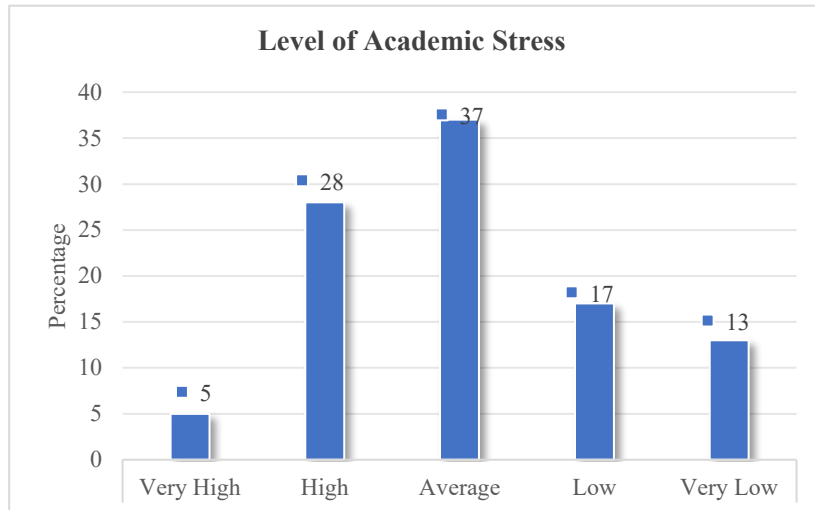


Figure 1: Showing the percentage of Academic Stress of NEET Aspirants on different levels

Interpretation

Table 3 and Figure 1 show that the largest proportion of NEET aspirants (37%) out of 100, falls under the Average level of Academic stress. However, a substantial proportion i.e., 33% of the aspirants experience high to very high academic stress. This suggests that two-thirds of the respondents (70%) are at the average or above-average level of academic stress, while only 30% are in the low/ very low categories.

If a simple comparison was to be made between the male and female students, based on the available data, most male aspirants (N=43) are recorded to experience Average level of academic stress (37.2%) and High level of academic stress (27.9%). Female students (N=57) are also shown to experience Average (36.8%) to High (28.1%) level of academic stress as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Gender-wise Level of Academic Stress

			Level of Academic stress					Total
			Very High	High	Average	Low	Very Low	
GENDE R	MALE	Count	2	12	16	6	7	43
		% within Gender	4.7%	27.9%	37.2%	14.0%	16.3%	100.0%

FEMALE	Count	3	16	21	11	6	57
	% within Gender	5.3%	28.1%	36.8%	19.3%	10.5%	100.0%
Total	Count	5	28	37	17	13	100
	% within Gender	5.0%	28.0%	37.0%	17.0%	13.0%	100.0%

The difference in academic stress across genders is very small, suggesting that the overall distribution of academic stress is quite similar.

7.2 Level of Stress Coping Strategies among NEET aspirants:

Objective no. 2 aims to find the level of stress coping strategies among NEET aspirants using the adapted Stress Coping Strategies Scale with 20 items/ statements based on the 5-point Likert Scale viz. 'Strongly Agree' (5), 'Agree' (4), 'Uncertain' (3), 'Disagree' (2) or 'Strongly Disagree' (1).

Table 5: Mean and SD of Stress coping strategies of NEET Aspirants

Variable Name	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Stress coping strategies	100	54	92	73.1	6.901

Table no. 5 shows that the mean score of stress coping strategies of NEET aspirants is 73.1 and the standard deviation is 6.901. The level of stress coping strategies was determined by the raw scores as well as standardized scores received by each respondent to fulfil Objective no. 2.

Table 6: Showing the level of Stress coping strategies of NEET Aspirants

Level of Stress coping	Range of Z score	Range of raw score	Frequency	Percent
High	+1.66 & above	85 & above	4	4.0
Above average	+0.56 to +1.65	77-84	25	25.0
Average	-0.55 to +0.55	70-76	47	47.0
Below average	-0.56 to -1.65	62-69	19	19.0
Low	-1.66 & below	61 & below	5	5.0
Total	100%	100	100	100.0

Table no. 6 presents the level of stress coping strategies among the 100 NEET aspirants based on their raw scores and corresponding standardized Z-scores. The levels are classified into five

categories, namely High, Above average, Average, Below average and Low levels of stress coping strategies.

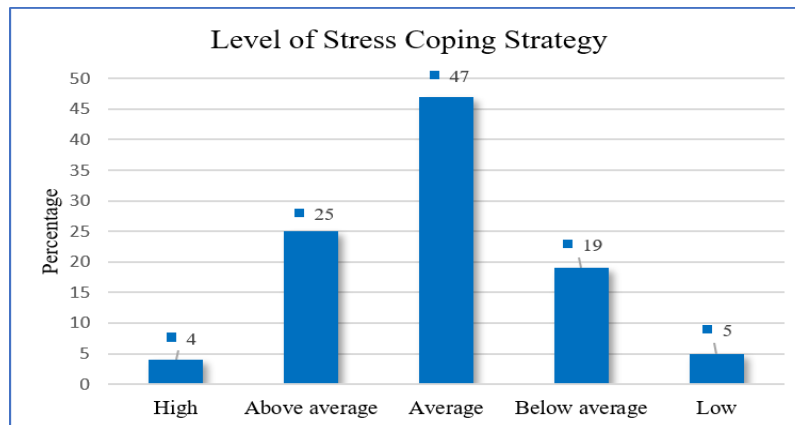


Figure 2: Showing the percentage of Stress coping strategy of NEET Aspirants on different levels

Interpretation

Table 6 and Figure 2 show that the largest proportion of NEET aspirants (47%) out of 100, falls under the Average level of Stress coping strategies. A substantial proportion i.e., 29% of the aspirants employs above average to high stress coping strategies. In an aggregate, 76% of the participants demonstrate functional to strong stress coping capacity. Only 24% demonstrate inadequate or lower than average coping mechanism (19% =Below average, 5%=Low) suggesting they require targeted psychological support or intervention to improve their coping skills.

If a simple comparison was to be made between the male and female students, based on the available data, most male aspirants (N=43) are recorded to experience an average level of stress coping (48.8%) and high level of stress coping (23.3%). Female students (N=57) are also shown to experience average coping (45.6%) to high coping (26.3%) level of stress coping strategy as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Gender-wise Level of Stress coping strategy

			Level of Stress Coping Strategy					
			High	Above average	Average	Below average	Low	Total
GEN DER	MALE	Count	1	10	21	10	1	43
		% within GENDER	2.3%	23.3%	48.8%	23.3%	2.3%	100.0 %
		Count	3	15	26	9	4	57

FEMA LE	% within GENDER	5.3%	26.3%	45.6%	15.8%	7.0%	100.0 %
Total	Count	4	25	47	19	5	100
	% within GENDER	4.0%	25.0%	47.0%	19.0%	5.0%	100.0 %

9. Findings and Discussion:

Students studying for the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) are one of the most academically challenged populations of adolescents in India. These exams have low selection ratios, long preparation cycles of several years, rigorous schedules at coaching institutes, and high familial and societal expectations leading to chronic academic stress. Examination pressure, fear of failure and expectations from parents and society are major contributors to psychological stress among these aspirants. This section deals with shedding light on the main sources of academic stress (Objective no. 3) and healthy coping strategies among aspirants (Objective no. 4).

9.1 Main sources of academic stress:

Some research identifies both intrinsic stressors (fear of failure, high personal expectations, cognitive overload) and extrinsic stressors (parental pressure, societal expectations, peer competition) that create a high-pressure environment. (Sarkar, 2024) Adolescents also experience high levels of perceived parental pressure due to their parents' high expectations for academic performance and comparisons to their peers, which cause anxiety and lead to poor academic performance and poor general well-being. (Pienyu,et. al., 2024) Stress stemmed more from regret and unmet expectations than nervousness. Problem-focused strategies like planning and active coping were most common, alongside emotion-focused approaches such as emotional support and acceptance (Nagle & Sharma, 2018). The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman) helps explain how these students perceive academic challenges as threats, rather than manageable stressors, leading to anxiety, depression, and, tragically, suicide. (Gupta, et.al., 2025)

The main reason for academic stress among the NEET aspirants is the examination itself. It is an all-India examination, with lakh of aspirants competing for the same medical seats. There is also an identity mechanism at play. Clinical psychologists working with the students describe about how many students internalize the belief that failing NEET equals failing at life, which is what turns an academic setback into something that feels existential rather than temporary. Some of the major sources of stress as highlighted by the students are:

- i. 85% students opined that the NEET examination syllabus is excessively demanding in certain subjects. 51% of them find it difficult to grasp the subject matter.
- ii. 56% agreed that examination papers are becoming more challenging with every consecutive year.
- iii. They feel uncertain about the examination preparation (39% agreed, 32% stayed neutral) and feel like lagging behind in keeping up with the curriculum (44% agreed).

- iv. 72% of the aspirants feel the pressure of succeeding in their first attempt and 67% positively responded that their self worth is tied with them clearing the entrance examination.
- v. 74% opined that their sleep cycle gets affected worrying about examinations. Again, 74% of them feel anxious during or before appearing in mock tests.

Secondly, another big reason behind high level of academic stress among the NEET aspirants is parental expectations and pressure. In Indian societies, career choices are rarely made by the individual alone, it is mostly shaped by the family's expectations, gender roles, socio-economic and financial status, perceived security and prestige attached with a profession. Also, most students have to relocate to prime cities having more coaching opportunities, live in hostels or PGs (Paying guests) with questionable living and studying conditions. And slowly, the concern is not just limited to academic stress, but all other factors that directly or indirectly contributes to it, such as, strained relationships at home, lack of proper communication with family members, unhealthy competition among peers, language and cultural barrier, financial difficulties, personal struggles, and so on. Most students feel indebted to their parents who might have taken educational loans to pay for their child's coaching and overall education. Some students have reported that-

- i. 42% responded that they are unable to communicate about their academic failures to their parents, while 34% refused it.
- ii. 69% responded that they do not get enough time to pursue their hobbies and spend quality time with their families due to studies.

The physical, mental and emotional demands of coaching life is a prime stressor that most aspirants report. Tight schedule, continuous assessment and evaluation, strict or unapproachable teachers, lack of cooperation among classmates, inability to match pace with the syllabus, lack of required digital infrastructure in the classroom, and so on. Some of the other sources of academic stress highlighted by the students are:

- i. Lack of proper communication between teachers and students. (20%)
- ii. Some students do not find the teaching style of certain teachers very conducive to learning. (32%)
- iii. Some students feel that there is insufficient discussion in the classroom. (33%)
- iv. There is limited or no access to counselling or mentorship in some institutions. (47%)
- v. Some students feel that the teachers and the institution impose excessive academic demands on them. (41%)
- vi. Some students feel that the study materials provided by the institution are very extensive and confusing. (33%)

While collectively preparing for an identical goal alongside hundreds of peers might seem to develop solidarity and mutual support, empirical evidence suggests that most of the times, aspirants feel a sense of loneliness in their academic journeys. Stratification of students into batches based on their test performances, publicly displaying their test scores, unfair treatment to certain group of students, teachers' judgments in the classrooms often places peer groups in a paradoxical role, where they are, on one side, sources of mutual support and on the other side, direct competitors. These dynamics can be a plausible explanation for why peer competition turns into isolation rather than camaraderie. Some students reported that-

- i. 64% feel stressed when they compare their progress with the peers in coaching.
- ii. 52% feel that they receive limited mutual cooperation from classmates.
- iii. 56% feel that there exists unhealthy competitive environment in the classroom.
- iv. 37% find it difficult to interact with the opposite gender in their class.
- v. 58% feel that teachers sometimes make judgment based on students' abilities.
- vi. 52% students find it difficult to balance schoolwork and coaching classes.
- vii. 65% students struggle to complete assignments/ daily practice sheets on time.
- viii. 52% students feel stressed to speak up in class due to lack of fluency in other languages except their mother-tongue.

Research says that aspirants who have taken the examination at least once show much more examination-related anxiety than the first-timers because they may have a cumulative psychological burden or fear of failure (Sundarapandiyar & Kalaiyarasan, 2026). Most students (around 70%) feel that examination stress takes away daily joys of life.

9.2 Healthy stress coping strategies for aspirants:

Endler and Parker put forward the Multidimensional Coping Inventory (MCI) which identifies three coping styles: task-oriented coping, emotion-oriented coping and avoidance-oriented coping. Earlier theories saw coping as unconscious defense mechanisms, but this research treats coping as a conscious response for stress. Task-oriented coping deals actively with the problem or stressor, using one's problem-solving skills to remove or minimize the effect of the stressor from the environment. These strategies require active planning, prioritizing tasks, goal-directed efforts, some level of self-awareness and acceptance. Based on these categories, many students showed inclination towards task-coping strategies such as:

- i. An aggregate of 72% of the respondents analyze what is causing them stress and try to solve it.
- ii. Half of the respondents (50%) agreed on working in groups to distribute tasks and reduce stress.
- iii. 52% agreed on making a study/work plan to handle academic stress.
- iv. iv) An aggregate of 45% positively responded about trying different learning methods when one doesn't work.

Emotion-oriented coping strategies usually focus on minimizing the distress when events cannot be changed. Therefore, an individual uses internal, self-directed responses to the emotional distress caused by the stressor, rather than addressing the stressor itself. Most respondents agreed about:

- i. 45% agreed about allowing oneself to rest when felt overwhelmed.
- ii. ii) 44% agreed about this strategy of motivating oneself with self-talk, and another 36% strongly agreed.
- iii. iii) 33% agreed about consuming food, many times in small quantities to reduce stress.
- iv. iv) An aggregate of 70% positively responded to talking to someone (friend, family, mentor) about their feelings.
- v. v) 44% agreed upon trying to maintain a positive attitude even during difficult times.

- vi. vi) An aggregate of 78% of the aspirants remind themselves time to time that stress is temporary and manageable.
- vii. vii) 34% agreed upon using relaxation techniques like deep breathing or meditation. However, 39% of them were uncertain.

One of the most theoretically novel contribution of the Three-Factor Model is the inclusion of 'avoidance-oriented theory' as a fully independent category. This strategy shifts a person's attention away from the problem and diverts the focus somewhere else. Endler and Parker noted that avoidance-coping can be of two types, one is Distracted Coping where a person engages in substitute tasks to take their minds off the stressor, and the other is Social Diversion, where the person in stress seek company of others, not to share problems, but simply avoid confrontation with the stressor.

- i. Only 32% of the aspirants agreed about employing Yoga practice techniques and 39% agreed (also, 25% strongly agreed) upon using physical activities like walking, skipping, running to reduce stress.
- ii. 56% of the respondents agreed, while 21% strongly agreed that they alter heavy work with light work when felt stressed.
- iii. 53% of the respondents take out time for leisure activities or pursue hobbies to reduce stress. However, 26% of them are uncertain regarding this strategy.
- iv. 38% agreed on avoiding painful memories to reduce stress, while 23% strongly agreed.
- v. Only 28% prefer to participate actively in social gatherings, while 25% disagreed to this and another 25% of the respondents were uncertain.
- vi. 55% agreed about procrastinating even when one has important work to do.
- vii. 76% responded affirmative about abnormal eating behaviour like overeating or skipping meals when stressed.
- viii. 44% of the aspirants prefer not to talk about the stress and keep everything to themselves, while 25% were uncertain.

However, the question arises-- How healthy are they? As students, not only they have to deal with examination-oriented stress, but regulate their emotions amidst all interpersonal relationships. In the NEET scenario, healthy coping would normally involve a combination of the two categories rather than considering these two as mutually exclusive. A student who develops a well-planned study schedule (task-focused) and also seeks peer support and indulges in relaxation methods (emotion-focused) is usually better shielded against chronic stress than a student who uses only one of these strategies. Khan and Qasim (2024) noted that academic stress can be more effectively managed by giving importance on developing the emotional intelligence of the aspirants, and partly its responsibility goes to the teachers.

One of the healthy stress coping strategies is re-framing setbacks as information to improve one's own performance, rather than evaluating themselves fully based on the setback. Many students regard their mock test scores or batch placements as judgement or verdict on ability, while some see them as opportunities to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Also, seeking social support from family, friends, peers and teachers is one of the most consistently regular stress buffer. This sits on top of the foundational stress-buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which argues social support protects against the pathogenic effects of stress

specifically under high-stress conditions. Protecting the physical and mental health starts from protecting one's sleep cycle and nutrition because it is seen in many studies that students involuntarily indulge in unhealthy coping such as skipping meals, emotional eating, less than 4-5 hours of sleep, relying on only power naps, abandoning extra-curricular activities, etc. when facing academic stress. Time management, as a coping mechanism, is useful for efficient learning in addition to its practical significance. Classic research (Macan et al., 1990) demonstrated that it was college students' perceived control of time, not hours spent studying, that predicted lower work/life strain and greater self-rated performance.

10. Conclusion:

The study demonstrates that stress is a significant concern among students preparing for NEET, indicating that prolonged academic and examination-related stress can adversely affect students' academic performance as well as motivation and emotional well-being. The results show that maximum number of the students exhibit average to high academic stress due to factors related with the nature of the competitive examination, difficulty level of the course, problems pertaining to the coaching institute, financial difficulties or difficulties related to their own study habits. However, the study also finds that maximum number of the students exhibit average to above average level of stress coping, mostly inclined towards healthy coping mechanisms, while a few also exhibiting unhealthy coping strategies. Teachers and parents should focus on providing an emotional shield to the students/wards so that they become better suited to deal with their stress constructively. They should also check for behaviour indicating reliance on avoidant or maladaptive coping mechanisms among the aspirants. Creating a positive learning environment, access to mental health counselling and stress management programmes and encouraging healthy study practices can go a long way in addressing stress among the NEET aspirants.

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