

**SOURCES OF STRESS AND ITS MANAGEMENT AMONG THE DISTANCE
EDUCATION STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA. THE
CASE OF ACCRA STUDY CENTRE IN GHANA**

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ABSTRACT: *The study investigated sources of stress among distance education students of the University of Education, Winneba and the strategies they employ to manage it. Quantitative methodology which made use of questionnaire was employed to collect data from 105 students at Accra study centre, selected through stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The study found that the main sources of stress among the students were travelling over long distances to attend tutorials, financial challenges, and multiple responsibilities, coping with studies, lack of study skills and poor attitude of their tutors. The study has also shown that the students employ variety of stress management strategies some of which are regular exercises and being humorous. Based on these findings it was recommended among others that comprehensive workshop on stress and its management should be organized for the students at the start of every semester and also that periodic training should be organized for the tutors to equip them with the skills of handling distance education students effectively.*

KEYWORDS: Distance Education, Stress, Stress Management

INTRODUCTION

The life of an adult is naturally characterized by increased stress as a result of competing demands. Therefore managing stress becomes a life coping skill which every adult is expected to acquire in order to lead a successful life. According to Bee and Bjorklund (2004), life is stressful for adulthood journey and that stress in life can be both healthy and unhealthy. Further, they argue that while stress triggers emotional instability, it can also lead to the development of resilience and how to face adversities in life especially pursuing academic path through the distance education (DE) mode. DE has proved to be the most convenient method of reaching the adult learner because of the competing priorities of work, home, and school, adult learners desire a high degree of flexibility. The structure of DE gives adults the greatest possible control over the time, place and pace of education.

Most people who take up DE courses are workers, married people, socially active individuals, and want to improve themselves academically. However, DE can be stressful because the stress

of working on time schedules and meeting deadlines can be overwhelming. In view of this, DE students suffer as they combine social life, working life, and academic life together. This therefore means that DE students are to develop skills on how to manage the stress levels very well in order to succeed in their academic ambitions.

Statement of the Problem

Most of the people involved in DE in UEW are adults engaged in other activities that can be stressful towards achieving academic excellence. The problem of stress is daunting and can affect the academic performance of the students if not properly managed.

In spite of the tremendous effect that stress can have on the achievements of DE students, the problem of stress and how it is managed by DE students of the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is yet to be fully investigated. It is this knowledge gap that this study seeks to fill.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate causes of stress among UEW DE students of Accra study centre and how they manage it.

Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following two research questions

1. What factors contribute to stress of Distance Education students in Accra who are enrolled at the University of Education, Winneba?
2. What stress management skills are used by Distance Education students in Accra who are enrolled at the University of Education, Winneba?

Significance of the Study

With the upsurge in the use of DE in Ghana, the findings and recommendation from this study will inform DE administrators and managers to know what to do in terms of strategies for helping DE students in UEW.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Stress

Stress is a complex issue. It is as old as humankind. Some psychologists believe that stress is perhaps the most common problem of everyday life. It is a subjective experience which is not necessarily easy to identify in another person. In other words a very high percentage of stress is highly individualized producing entirely different reactions in different individuals. (Colbert, 2008).

Robbins and Judge (2011: 641), define stress as “a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand, or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important”.

Colbert (2008:7) opines that “stress is the pressures of life and how one perceives, believes, reacts and copes with these pressures”. To him, all forms of stress produce a very well-documented physical reaction in the body. For most people, the daily stress hassles are the most damaging to the body. They may show up as little stressors but add up over time and have a devastating effect on the individual later on.

From the definitions presented so far, it may be conveniently concluded that stress comes as a result of pressures or excessive demands faced by individuals which produce physical and psychological reactions of which the individual requires an adaptive response. The implications are that DE students tend to have lots of challenges with reference to stress and they need to develop strategies to manage it.

Different forms of Stress

Stress is a normal component of the body’s response to demands that are placed on it. When an individual is frightened or angry, the body responds to this stress with a number of physical reactions that prepare it for action. Factors that trigger these stress responses are known as *stressors*. Goodman, (1993) and LeRoy, (1988) categorized stressors affecting students as academic, financial, time or health related and self imposed. However, as distance education students are adults who combine work, family and community responsibilities and academic work, they experience a wide range of stressors which include physical, work related, health related, personal, academic related and even environmental stressors.

Physical Stressors

Stressors are encountered in almost every aspect of one’s life. Physical stressors are agents such as noise and extreme temperatures that the body experiences. They can be harmful because they force the body system to continuously compensate for conditions that are outside the normal range. Students or workers working on rotating shifts may place the body under physical stress because the body’s natural cycles, known as the circadian rhythm are forced to readjust (Kubo , Kanehisa, Kawakami & Fukunaga 2000). Several days may be needed for this adjustment to take place when workers or students change from one shift to another. In the meantime, their appetite, sleep, body temperature and blood pressure may be affected.

Work-related Stress

Work-related stress is caused by things such as job satisfaction, an increased workload, insufficient pay, office politics and conflicts with bosses or co-workers. These factors could be related to the experiences students go through in their academic-driven society. In our career - driven society, work can be an ever-present source of stress. Work place stressors can lead to distress because they are, in many cases, beyond the individual’s control (Santrock, 2008).

Health Related Stress

It is a well known fact that excessive release of stress hormones damages body cells, tissues and organs, thereby compromising our health. Health psychologists have investigated the psychological factors related to wellness and illness, including the prevention, diagnosis and

treatment of medical problems. They sought to find out how illness is influenced by psychological factors such as stress, as well as being concerned with issues of prevention by means of a healthier behaviour. The health psychologists take a decisive stand on the enduring mind-body issue that philosophers and later psychologists have debated since the time of the ancient Greeks. In their view, the mind and the body clearly link rather than representing two distinct systems, (Theorell, 1996).

Personal Stressors

Personal stressors, as another major category of stressors have been identified by psychologists. These include daily hassles such as rushing to work, battling in traffic, arguing with family members, worrying about finances on a daily basis, unemployment and overcrowding. Research indicates that routine hassles may have significant negative effect on our mental and physical health (Delongies, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Conflict

Like frustration, conflict is an unavoidable phenomenon of everyday life. Conflict is another cause of stress. It refers to situations where two or more incompatible motives are aroused. The satisfaction of one motive leads to the denial of the other. For instance, in a scenario where a student who often postpones his studies, finally decides to stick by his books the day before the examination, is invited to a friend's birthday party that day. Here conflict sets in as this student has to choose between preparing for his examination and attending the party. Conflict arises when two inner needs or motives are in opposition, especially conflicts that are difficult to resolve. Research evidence indicates that role conflict is significantly related to emotional exhaustion; work-family conflict is significantly related to both emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction; and, that emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction are related to salesperson propensity to leave (Boles, Johnston & Hair Jr. 1997)

Academic-related Stress

People experience stress at a high rate when there is so much pressure on them. Some of the stress factors young people face include academic pressure, career decisions, pressure to wear certain types of clothing or hairstyles, pressure to try drugs, alcohol or sex, pressure to fit in with peer groups and measure up to others, adaptation to bodily changes, family and peer conflict, difficulty in school, moving to a new school and even deciding on one's future (Sax, 1997). According to Carveth, Gesse & Moss, (196), academic stressors include students perception of the extensive knowledge base required and the perception of inadequate time to develop it.

Environmental Stress

Environmental stressors which include physical surroundings can set off the stress response. Living in unsafe neighbourhood, pollution, noise (barking dogs next door, sirens waking you up at night etc.) and uncomfortable living conditions such as living in crime-ridden areas or war-torn regions are some of the stresses which may be unrelenting and posses health risk(Goodman,1993, LeRoy, 1988 & Sax, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Descriptive research design with the quantitative approach was adopted for the study. The target population for this study comprised 700 distance education students enrolled in the University of Education, Winneba, in the Accra study centre. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were adopted for the study to select 105 participants for the study. Firstly the DE students were categorized into year groups and through proportional sampling technique the students from each year group were randomly selected. The Accra study centre was selected because the centre is one of the most populous centers that has majority of the students moving from long distances to the centre. Again the hustle and bustles nature of the live and people in Accra makes it a relevant centre for the focus of the study.

Research Instrument

Questionnaire was the instrument used. It was chosen because it covered a number of areas the researchers wanted to have information about. The questionnaire used was closed and principally focused on causes of stress among the students and how they manage it.

Reliability and validity of instruments

To ensure the reliability and validity of the research instrument in relation to the topic, colleagues views were sought to ascertain the content validity before being administered.

The questionnaire was piloted using twenty (20) Distance Education students in the Winneba study centre. The reliability coefficient recorded was 0.87 using the split half analytical procedure.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to respondents and they were given a week to complete them. The researchers explained the purpose of the questionnaire to the respondents. All the seemingly difficult and technical terms were explained and respondents were made to understand that there was no right or wrong answer in their responses as a result they had to complete them as sincerely as possible.

Ethical Consideration

Participants consent were sought for after getting access to the study centre. the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as they were told that their names would not be mentioned in the study.

Data Analysis

In this research quantitative methods were used in line with modern trends in social and educational research. The choice of the method has been seen to offer excellent possibilities for developing a deeper and better understanding of social and educational processes (Cresswell, 2008). The data obtained from the questionnaire were quantitative, that is, it was in numerical form. The data was checked for consistency and organized in tables according to research

questions. SPSS version 20 and excel was used to analyze quantitative data which were presented using simple percentages.

RESULTS/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Research Questions

Research question 1: What factors contribute to Stress of Distance education (DE) students in Accra who are enrolled at UEW.

Table 2: Contributing Stress Factors of DE students

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Insecurity in making frequent travels to learning centres for face-to-face lectures	39(37.2%)	26(25%)	6(6%)	15(13.4%)	19(18.4%)
Difficulty in combining house management with studies	34(32.3%)	30(29%)	14(13%)	18(17.1%)	9(8.6%)
Suspicion of spouse	10(9.5%)	5(4.8%)	30(28.7)	33(30.9%)	27(26.1%)
Pressure from career obligations	48(45.7%)	24(22.9%)	17(16.2%)	9(8.6%)	7(6.6%)
Difficulty in meeting deadlines for submission of assignments	34(32.3%)	40(38.3%)	5(4.8%)	12(11.6%)	14(13%)
Difficulty in paying my fees for the DE programme	58(55.2%)	31(29.4%)	2(2%)	8(7.6%)	6(5.8%)
My financial problems affect my studies	49(46.6%)	39(37.2%)	1(1%)	9(8.6%)	7(6.6%)
I feel worried about coping with my studies	31(29.5%)	24(22.9%)	10(9.5%)	23(21.9%)	17(16.2%)
I feel lecturers are not considerate of students' feelings	27(26.1%)	35(33.1%)	9(8.6%)	15(13.6%)	19(18.6%)
I am afraid to speak or discuss in the lecture room	8(7.6%)	5(4.8%)	5(4.8%)	37(35.7%)	50(47.6%)
I am not sure I am interested in reading	0(0%)	8(7.6%)	23(21.9%)	33(30.9%)	41(39.6%)
Easy access to educational information for course of study	12(11.6%)	37(35.6%)	8(7.6%)	25(23.6%)	23(21.6%)

Source Fieldwork data (2014)

Table 1, shows that slightly over one-third (37.2%) of the respondents strongly agreed that making frequent travels to learning centers for face-to-face lectures is insecure which contributes to stress among students in the distance education mode. A quarter (25%) of them agreed to the view, while 6% were uncertain, with less than one-fifth (13.4% and 18.4%) disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. It is an undeniable fact that adults experience stress at a high rate when there is varied pressure on them. Some of the stress factors adult learners in DE may face include academic pressure and travelling from distance places to meet face-to-face lectures.

Responding to difficulty in combining house management with studies as a stress factor, as indicated in Table 1, about one-third (32%) of the students indicated strong agreement with the fact that they have difficulty in combining house management with studies, slightly below one-

third (29%) agreed, less than one-fifth (13%) were uncertain, while 17% and 9% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. It is clear from the table that majority of the students maintained that combining household management to their education is a source of stress to them making it generally true that adults struggle with many stressful events every day.

On the issue of “pressure from career obligations” as one of the factors leading to stress in distance education students, about half (45.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed, while about one-fifth (22.9%) agreed, with 16.2%, 8.6% and 6.6% representing uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree respectively. This finding corroborates a related study by Weiten (1989) which found that career decisions, setting high goals for ourselves in our endeavours and our inability to attain such goals make us see ourselves as failure which can cause frustration.

Regarding, “difficulty in meeting deadlines for submission of assignments” as shown in Table 2, about one-third (32.3%) of the sample size strongly agreed, and about two-fifths (38.3%) agreed, whereas those who are uncertain represent 4.8%, with 11.6% and 13% of the participants also disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. A similar research by Selye (1979) found that frustration and stress often arise when we fail to meet our obligations and achieve set targets. He concluded that conditions beyond one’s control can keep an individual from achieving a desired goal. Two common sources of significant frustration are failure and loss, a position which have been confirmed by the findings of this study.

Again, from Table 1, slightly more than half (55.2%) of the sample population strongly agreed that they have difficulty in paying their school fees. About one-third (29.4%) of the respondents also agreed to the view expressed with 2% being uncertain, while 7.6% and 5.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Financial challenges of students and adults obviously contribute significantly to stressful situations which we go through in our daily lives. For instance, failure to meet financial obligations in the home such as the payment of school fees or utility bills and other financial commitments as a result of inadequate funds may cause stress.

Furthermore, a follow up on how financial problems affect one’s studies as shown in Table 1, nearly half (46.6%) and a little above one-third (37.2%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively while less than 15% were not in agreement. This finding is consistent with that of Owusu-Mensah (2007) who found that financial challenge features prominently among the challenges of UEW DE students. Worrying about finance is physical stressor and can affect the students mentally (DeLongies, Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Again further analysis found in Table 1 shows that over half of the respondents 52.4% were in agreement to the fact that feeling worried about coping with studies is a major source of stress while, 9.5% were uncertain, with 21.9% and 16% of the respondents disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. The implication here is that majority of the students experience academic related stress as pointed out in the literature. This finding has implication for counseling.

To the statement “I feel lecturers are not considerate of students’ feelings” as a stressor, information in Table 1 shows that almost 60% of the respondents chose strongly agree and agree, while a total 32.2% disagreed and strongly disagreed. Less than a tenth (8.6%) were uncertain. What this finding means is that majority of the students are stressed by the attitude of the tutors. This is another academic related stress which points to organize pre service and in service training for the tutors on how to handle DE students.

In Table 1, it is clearly observed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (83.3%) did not agree with the view that fear of speaking during tutorials is a source of stress for them, only (17%) held a contrary view. This finding is not strange because most of distance education students are teachers and so it is expected that they will be confident to speak their minds on any issue without fear or intimidation especially in their area of training.

A similar observation was made on the issue of interest in reading as a factor contributing to stress among distance education students. Like the issue of speaking in class, almost two thirds (60.5%), did not consider reading as a source of stress. Only about one-fifth (21.9%) saw reading as a stressor (Table 1.) This highlights the point that the students understand the basis for the distance education which is reading.

Finally on Table 1, responses on “easy access to educational information for course of study” indicated that slightly over a third (35.6%) of respondents agreed with the view while more than two-fifths (45.2%) of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the issue. This finding implies that it is easy for DE students to access information. With the advent of Information and Communication Technology and the transmission of knowledge through the social media such as the internet, “Skype”, “whatsapp” and the like, students can now get information on almost any topic needed.

Research question 2: What stress management skills are used by DE students in Accra who are enrolled at UEW

Table 2: Stress Management by DE students

Items: I...	Always	Sometimes	Never
read books to get more information about my stressors.	43(40.7%)	54(51.6%)	8(7.6%)
normally take things easy and enjoy my work.	60(57.0%)	43(41%)	2(2%)
organize and manage my time effectively.	44(60.8%)	32(30.5%)	9(8.6%)
am compassionate, able to relax, and see the humorous side of life.	65(62.5%)	38(36.2%)	2(2%)
exercise on a regular basis	53(50.4%)	41(39.6%)	11(10%)
practice deep relaxation	26(24.6%)	34(32.3%)	45(42.9%)
listen to music	59(56.4%)	38(36.2%)	8(7.6%)
try to make myself happy	84(79.8%)	21(20%)	0
have a support system of friends, family, and/or other love interests.	53(50.5%)	51(48.5%)	1(1%)

Source Fieldwork data (2014)

Table 2 shows that slightly over half (51%) of the respondents indicated that they sometimes read books to get more informed about their stressors as a way of managing their stress. This is followed by 40.7% who reported that they always use this strategy. Only about 8% said they had never used it. This finding suggests that a good number of the students are well informed about their stressful conditions. Becoming aware of the stressor or distress, recognizing what can be changed, reducing the intensity of one's emotional reactions to stress, learning to moderate one's physical reactions to stress and maintaining emotional reserves can help manage the stress (Robert and Judge, 2011).

The table again shows that taking things easy and enjoying their work is another strategy which close to 60% of the respondents always adopts to deal with stress. This strategy is also sometimes employed by 41% while just 2% of them have never adopted it.

Another stress management strategy which the DE students employ was effective time management (Table 2). This strategy is always used by almost two thirds (60.8%) with about one third (30.5%) using it some of the time. Less than one tenth have never used this strategy.

Table 2 further shows that stress management strategies which are always used by majority of the respondents were being humorous (62.5%), exercising on regular basis (50.4%), listening to music (56.4%), making themselves happy (79.8%) and relying on support of family and friends (50.5%). Apart from the majority, an average of about one third of the respondents sometimes uses this strategy. Only about 3% on the average have never used these strategies to manage stress. Finally, the table shows that one particular strategy had less than one third of the respondents making use of and over 40% of them has never which employed by is relaxation as a strategy

From the findings in table 3, it is fair to conclude that the DE students employ multiple strategies to manage the stress they experience. A related study by Allan (2006) whose findings are confirmed by this current study revealed that just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. For instance, reading of favourite books, strolling, singing aloud and exercising are some of the possible ways of managing stress. However in choosing specific methods for managing stress, several alternatives have to be considered

One finding which worthy of note is the use of relation as strategy by a small minority of the DE students. This shows that practicing deep relaxation as a way of handling stress is not commonly used. However, a similar study by Cridal (1995) found that one very useful way to neutralize problematic emotions is to learn how to use some systematic relaxation procedures. The relaxation response is also sometimes known as deep relaxation. Deep relaxation is one end of a continuum of physiological arousal that stretches from the highly arousal state of stress reaction through the quiet state of ordinary relaxation to a state of extremely low arousal or deep relaxation. For example, whenever you feel tensed, slowly breathe in and out several times. He further asserts that in deep relaxation, the skeletal muscles become loose and supple and both the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system function at low levels of activity. The relaxation method can be used as a controlling method for stress-induced arousal, but there is the need for it to be acquired and this is mostly through practice. There are a number of techniques for learning the relaxation response. Some of these are hypnosis, meditation and progressive

relaxation. In hypnosis, deep relaxation is achieved by direct suggestions and by use of mental images.

CONCLUSIONS

The study results suggest that there is a perceived knowledge about stress among DE students who are all adults. The cause of stress among the students include travelling over long distances to attend tutorials, financial challenges, multiple responsibilities, coping with studies, lack of study skills and poor attitude of their tutors. The study has also shown that the students attempt employ a variety of stress management strategies some of which with differential emphasis. It appears, although arguable, that they have not been given orientation on stress management and that the strategies they adopt are based on trial and error.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions it is recommended that.....

- before the start of the programme, a comprehensive seminar, workshop or training on stress should be organised preferably at the start of every semester to sensitize students effective way of managing stress.
- to eliminate the stress associated with traveling long distances, more study centres should be build, preferably in every district so that they will be closer to the students
- tutors should be given periodic training on how to handle distance education students so that they can adopt positive attitudes to support the students learning.
- trained counsellors should be appointed at the study centres to offer appropriate help when the need arises.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In view of the results/findings, it is recommended that further studies can be conducted into how distance education students manage their time effectively to meet the stree challenges they encounter.

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