



Transformation from Brick and Mortar to Online Academic Counselling

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Introduction

Stress is a part of human life. No human being can escape from the clutches of stress. Where there are innumerable causes of stress, these may vary person to person. In other words, some causes may result in stress to someone while these may be a simple or day to day happening for another person causing no stress. Therefore, stress is multidimensional and difficult to define. Stress is defined as ‘any challenge to homeostasis or to the body’s internal sense of balance’ (Bansal and Bhawe, 2006, as cited in Waghachavare, Dhumale, Kadam and Gore, 2013). It refers to a condition or feeling experienced by a person when the person perceives that the demand is more than the personal and social resources that the person can mobilize (Bhargava and Trivedi, 2018).

The definitions of stress indicate an individual’s inability or some kind of psychological reaction to a particular situation. As causes of stress are varied, the reaction of stressed persons may also vary. It may be emotional outburst, laziness, lack of concentration, lack of interest, depression, fatigue etc. At the same time, stress cannot be labeled as bad altogether. Some amount of stress may prove beneficial for motivating individuals for performing a particular task. However, if it exceeds one’s capacity to bear the situation, then there will be negative consequences on the health, performance and the society at large.

The phrase "Brick and Mortar to Online" describes the process of moving a conventional brick and mortar establishment to an online or digital platform. This move entails creating an online identity and conducting the activities online, frequently via website or an online platform. Online education involves careful preparation and execution to enable a smooth and effective adaptation to the internet economy for the benefits of the student community, this shift can be a crucial strategic choice for educational institutions. When an educational institution maintains both physical location and online channel, it allows the students to have a continuous interaction with the institution, resources and the teachers. This omnichannel strategy highly benefits the open and distance learning systems. The omnichannel strategy is a student -centric strategy in which all channels are integrated to give the students seamless and uniform experience in their academic pursuit.

Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are-

- To analyze the causes of stress of learners in context of COVID- 19.
- To analyze the opportunities and challenges in transforming from brick and mortar to online counselling.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive study and based on secondary sources of data. Data have been collected from books, journals, newspapers and other web materials.

Stress for Students

While considering stress as an individual's ability or inability to deal with a situation, it is important to take into account the stress in student life. A student is also subjected to stress. The reasons may vary depending on the individual student and the situation. Generally, the causes of stress for students may include examinations, home assignments, class attendance, inability to finish the syllabus, public speaking in a particular subject or a particular class, loss of school days due to health issues, etc. For academic achievement, physical and mental health are very important. So far as the stress of students in a conventional schooling environment is concerned,

more specifically for K–12 students, parents and teachers can play an important role in diffusing the reasons for stress to a great extent.

Stress Related Literature Review

Bhargava and Trivedi (2018) classified different kinds of stress as academics, financial, relationship stress, career and psychological stress. The study pointed out different strategies adopted by students to reduce stress like, watch movie with friends, use of social media, listening music, talk to relatives etc. The study suggested certain strategies to reduce stress among youths like, workshops with motivating lectures for positive life style and be a part of academic curriculum, time management, up- to- date course work, set personal and professional objectives, build up competencies in terms of academic, social, life skills etc.

Hemamalini, Ashok and Sasikala (2018) finds students' workload and lack of support from the faculty contribute to students' stress. Stress creates different psychological problems in the form of decreased motivation, absenteeism for class and examinations, incompleteness of works etc. The

Michaela, Sarah and Alexandra (2020) highlighted that students commonly experiences high levels of academic related stress which impacts mental and physical health. It creates a wide a range of academic problems. Students' learning capacity, academic performance, education and employment attainment, sleep quality and quantity etc. are negatively influenced by stress. The study emphasized on students' stress management skills and abilities.

Waghachavare, Dhumale, Kadam and Gore (2013) finds that stress is common in engineering, dental and medical students with varying degrees. The female respondents of the study were found to be more stressed than their male counterparts. Academic factors are the most important stressors and the students residing in hostels are more prone to stress. The students under the study preferred stress management education as a part of their curriculum. The study suggested specific and targeted measures to reduce the burden of stress on students. Teaching techniques and college environments needs to be adapted according to the need of the students. Regular study habits and adequate preparation can help in reducing stress.

Stress in the Context of COVID- 19

On account of the spread of the coronavirus as a global pandemic, an emergent situation raised. Which threatened global health and economic systems. Almost all nations came to a standstill with the rapid spread of COVID-19. All sectors of the economy—agriculture, industry, and services—came under severe recessionary pressure due to the lockdown announced by the national governments. Restrictions were put on the movement of people as ‘social distancing’ was the only weapon to fight this global pandemic. The sudden closure of educational institutions also had created tremendous pressure, leading to a high level of stress for students. The sudden halt over ongoing and upcoming examinations, unsolved questions, lack of certainty, absence of communication between the students and the teachers, etc. were the reasons that lead to stress for students. When considering the system of open and distance learning (ODL), by nature, the learners were physically distant from the teachers or counselors and they meet occasionally to solve their study-related issues and for guidance in their academic pursuits. Counseling sessions made the learners more enthusiastic about completing the course. These sessions provided the basis for discussion on assignments, use of audio-video aids, clarification of doubts, and cover more content than the lesson (Sharma, Pandey, and Rajesh, 2004). However, face-to-face interaction between the learner and the counselor was not possible on a regular basis, which is in contrast with the conventional system of education. This situation, and particularly during any period of emergency, like the spread of COVID-19, will lead to a loss of confidence and create stress for the learners. The geographical dispersion of the students and the distance between the students and the ODL Institution resulted in low learning motivation, a low retention rate, a low attrition rate, and a low completion rate on the part of the students (Musika and Bukaliya, 2015). In such situations, it become important to resort to alternative ways to carry out regular activities. ‘Work from home’ thus, could find a new meaning, and people started moving to the online world as far as possible.

Transforming Brick and Mortar to Online Counselling

The learners of ODL are served by various Learner Support Services (LSS). The printed self-learning materials (SLMs) being the central point, learners are supported by counseling sessions, where face-to-face interaction among the peer learners and the counselor takes place. It not only supports academic activities but also provides a platform for socializing as learners meet their

peers, get to know each other, and learn from each other. Besides these, various audio, video, radio, and television broadcasts of academic programs are undertaken as LSS. With the development of information and communication technology (ICT) and the World Wide Web, tremendous changes occurred in the way people communicate. The advent of the internet and the development of mobile telephony changed the process of communication in terms of speed and cost. Access to such technology by common people gives it another milestone. The ODL system adopts developments in ICT in its endeavor to reach its distant learners. The ODL system evolves with time, and technology is very well integrated into its evolution. The result is that learners have easy access to teachers, fellow learners, and educational resources. Online learning, virtual learning, blended learning, learning management systems, and MOOCs are the results of technology integration in learning. Such an online platform connects learner to learner and the counselor on the one hand and gives the learners wide and speedy access to information, be it related to the parent institution or educational resources on the other. The increased use of social media to facilitate learning is another dimension of online learning.

In a situation of global emergency that raised due to the spread of COVID-19, so far as students and their academic activities in general, and more specifically the distant learners, are concerned, the situation was very serious in terms of delay in conducting examinations, result declaration, new admission, and the loss of regular academic days and activities. The absence of guidance from teachers or counselors at this critical moment caused stress for students. The situation called for a more comprehensive policy to reach the learners, and technology provided the best solution in such situations. The urgent necessity was to transform *brick-and-mortar* counseling into online counseling sessions.

As a policy to guide the learners in their academic activities and to burst any stress-related situations, both synchronous and asynchronous communications can play a great role. Online counseling sessions can be used for effective communication with learners. Online counseling sessions can replace face-to-face counseling sessions and provide other support services to learners, including audio, video, podcasts, OER, etc. Extensive use of social media platforms, like Facebook, blogs, wikibooks, etc., provides wider scope for collaborative learning.

Opportunities in online counselling sessions

Some opportunities of online counselling may be stated as under-

- The technology enabled learning will provide a new learning experience to the learners as well as the counsellors.
- The online counselling sessions can go beyond the printed SLMs in providing learning resources available on the web.
- Brick and mortar counselling sessions once lost by a learner, it becomes difficult to retrieve the same session. Live counselling sessions and other online support services, may be retrieved by a learner if the need arises.
- Online counselling sessions may prove more cost effective as compared to brick and mortar counseling sessions.
- Quality of education and access to education will be enhanced.
- Flexibility to learners in terms of time, place and devise of study.

Challenges in online counselling sessions

Certain challenges may be encountered in the process of transformation to online counselling-

- Motivating the counsellors to adapt to the changing environment and integrate technology in their teaching.
- Training the counsellors to make them aware and well-versed in technology enabled learning.
- Regular updating the counsellors on latest technology that can be used in teaching.
- Orientation to the learners for using technology in their learning.
- Lack of resources like, computer with internet access at the learners' end may be a limiting factor for online counselling.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may be put forwarded for online counselling so as to diffuse learners' stress –

- Regular communications between the learners and counsellors/ teachers.
- Use of ICT and social media platforms for synchronous and asynchronous communication.
- Quick response to the queries of learners.
- Regular updates regarding the examination schedule.
- Promoting technology enabled learning to facilitate regular academic activities.
- Framing organizational policy for providing online LSS.
- A policy framework towards providing computers and reimbursement of cost on internet access may prove to be a game changer in the direction of online counselling.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of stress is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is an inherent part of human existence. The causes of stress vary widely from person to person, and it can manifest in numerous emotional, psychological, and physiological reactions. While stress can sometimes serve as a motivating factor, excessive or chronic stress can have detrimental effects on an individual's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. It is essential to understand the nuanced nature of stress and its potential implications. As the world continues to evolve, so do the dynamics of commerce. The phrase "Brick and Mortar to Online" encapsulates the transformation of traditional physical operations into digital platforms. This transition, driven by shifts in consumer behavior and technology, offers both opportunities and challenges. By moving online, businesses can access a broader customer base, offer convenience, and potentially reduce costs. However, this transformation requires careful planning, adaptation to the digital landscape, and consideration of the customer experience. In the context of education, stress is a significant factor for students, with factors such as academic pressure, workload, and social expectations contributing to their experience. The outbreak of COVID-19 further exacerbated stress levels. The sudden disruption of academic routines and uncertainties surrounding exams and learning

processes caused stress among students. In response to such crises, leveraging online platforms emerged as a solution to maintain continuity in education and support services.

The transformation from traditional brick-and-mortar counseling to online counseling became a necessity during such emergencies. This shift presents opportunities for more flexible and efficient communication, wider access to resources, and cost-effective support services. However, it also poses challenges such as ensuring technological readiness among counselors and learners, addressing digital divides, and maintaining the quality of education in the virtual realm. In a rapidly changing world, where stress and technology play pivotal roles, embracing innovation while safeguarding well-being is paramount. By acknowledging the complexities of these areas, society can strive to create environments that nurture growth, well-being, and continuous progress.

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