

The Problem of Stress and Management Strategies Among Public Health and Allied Science (PHAS) Weekend Students

Ernest Boateng

Ghana Health Service, Atwima Nwabiagya District Health Directorate Technical Officer (Health Information / Disease Control)

Email: nanashelter2020@gmail.com

Ojo Luke

Catholic University College of Ghana, P.O. Box 363 Sunyani

Email: ojoluke@yahoo.com

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Abstract: The Catholic University operates a week-end degree programme, which has provided opportunities for workers to pursue degrees concurrently with work. Despite its positive effects, however, this phenomenon has exposed weekend students to socio-economic and academic stress in their attempts to combine both working and academic life. Consequently, this study seeks to explore factors associated with the problem of stress and its management strategies adopted by Public Health and Allied Science (PHAS) weekend students of Catholic University College of Ghana. A descriptive survey design is adopted. Questionnaire are developed and used to collect data from 150 PHAS weekend students, non-probability sampling technique is employed namely purposive and convenience sampling. A retention rate of 88% is achieved. Frequencies and percentages are used to analyses data with the aid of SPSS version 16. Tables and bar graphs are used to presents the results of the data. The findings suggest that majority of PHAS weekend students perceived stress at the workplace, had personal stressors and also school related stressors. It is also identified that students used more of constructive coping strategies to deal with stress instead of counter-productive strategies like the use of alcohol or drugs. However, the study also established that the perceived stress affected the academic performance of the students. It is recommended that the Administration and Management of Catholic University College should establish study centers across the country based on the regional and districts distribution of students to reduce the travel time of students.

Keywords: Stress, Public Health, Weekend Students, students, Catholic University College

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1. INTRODUCTION

Most human activities result in stress. Stress is an internal or external influence that disrupts an individual's normal state of well-being. Stress, according to Arnold, Cooper & Robertson (1995), is a word derived from Latin word "Stingere" meaning to draw tight. It is regarded as a force that pushes a physical or psychological factor beyond its range of stability, producing a strain within the individual. College students have many obstacles to overcome in order to achieve their optimal academic performance. It takes a lot more than just studying to achieve a successful college career. Different stressors such as time management, financial problems, sleep deprivation, social activities, and for some students even having children, can all pose their own threat to a student's academic performance. The way that academic performance is measured is through the ordinal scale of Grade Point Average (GPA) and a student's GPA determines many things such as class rank and entrance to graduate school. Much research has been done to ascertain the correlation of many stress factors that college students' experience and the effects of stress on their GPA. Olaleye (2002) refers to such stress factors as academic situational constraints.

Allied health literature seems to be replete with evidence of stress in its students (Grevin, 1996; Graham & Babola, 1998; Tyrell 1997). The students in allied health range from laboratory technicians and patient counsellors to paramedics and physical/occupational therapists. It can be concluded from many of the studies involving allied health students that like nursing students, allied health students appear to experience stress during their studies. The nature of the stress reported by allied health students appears to be related to the students' inability to cope with the learning environment.

Tyrell (1997) observed that the job schedules and other responsibilities of the part-time students especially Public Health and Allied Sciences (PHAS) university students usually interfere with their studies. He further expounded that most of these students combine studies with family responsibilities and occupational activities. All these responsibilities come along with their own stress so this calls for effective stress management. However, no studies have been conducted on stress among students at the Catholic University College. An attempt to bridge this gap necessitated the present study to explore factors associated with the problem of stress and its management (coping) strategies adopted by Public Health and Allied Science (PHAS) students of weekend school of Catholic University College of Ghana, Fiapre while pursuing their academic work.

Student's report experiencing academic stress at predictable times each semester with the greatest sources of academic stress resulting from taking and studying for examinations, grade competition, and the large amount of content to master in a small amount of time (Abouserie, 1994). Earning high grades is not the only source of stress for college students. Other potential factors include excessive homework, unclear assignments, unannounced quizzes and uncomfortable classrooms, carrying of chair from one lecture hall to the other to sit for lectures. In addition to academic requirements, relations with faculty members, occupational activities, family responsibilities, financial obligations, travelling distance and time pressures may also be a factor.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research Design/ Type

A descriptive cross-sectional design was used for the study. This design describes the variables in the study without subjecting them to any scientific tests. This design also has the advantage of providing a more accurate and meaningful picture of events and seeks to explain peoples' perception and behaviour on the basis of data gathered at a particular time (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Despite the advantages of the cross-sectional design there are inherent disadvantages. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) maintain that there is the difficulty of ensuring that the design is clear and not misleading. It may also produce unreliable results as it delves into private matters that respondents may be reluctant to provide answers.

Study Population

The population for this study consisted of students at the Catholic university who belong to the week-end school offering only Public Health. There are a total of 855 students in levels 200, 300 and 400 as at the 2011/2012 academic. Level 100 students were not included because they are new and may not have much to cover and therefore may experience less stress.

Sampling Techniques/ Sample Size

The study employed non probability sampling techniques utilizing purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select week-end public health students in levels 200, 300 and 400. This method was used primarily because the participants have been in the school for a year and above and would have developed some stress management or coping strategy. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents. Due to the fact that the weekend students have very tight lecture schedules on Saturdays and Sundays with about only an hour's break on each day, convenience sampling was the only method available

to the researcher because the respondents were readily available and willing to be involved hence there was saving of time and money.

By rule of thumb 150 respondents were used for the study.

Sampling size was calculated using the standard formula for estimated sample size as follows:

$n = N / (1 + N(x)^2)$ where n = sample size, N = sample frame (855) and x =margin of error (0.05) or 95% confidence level.

$$855 / (1 + 855 (0.05)^2)$$

$$855 / (1 + 855 (0.0025))$$

$$855 / (1 + 2.1) \text{ hence, } 855 / 3.1 = 276$$

Methods of Data Collection

Questionnaire was developed to collect data on causes, effects and coping strategies of Student-Health Workers. The questionnaire had more of closed-ended items for the students and few open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were set to afford the respondents the opportunity to supply other answers that were not in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was in four sections. Section A dealt with the bio-data of respondents, Section B sought to identify the causes of stress among the students, Section C was developed to determine the coping strategies of the students while the last section, sought to determine if the stress experienced had any effects on the academic performance of the students.

Interview was conducted to assess the effects of stress on the academic performance of students.

Data Analysis Plan

The researcher used the SPSS data editor software package (version 15) designed by IBM and Microsoft's office (excel) 2007 software to analyse the data collected from respondents. Data was analysed in the form of descriptive statistics. Results of the analysis were presented in tables, pie charts and bar graph. These provide the basis for interpretation and discussion using frequency distributions, percentages.

Study Limitations

There are a few limitations to be considered when making conclusions from this study, including the demographics of the participants. Although a participant group consisting entirely of weekend PHAS students is useful it lends to difficulty in making accurate generalization of the results. Further, the limitation of subjectivity should be taken into account. Perception of stress levels can vary among individuals and throughout times of the year. This could be as a result of respondents not being honest in responding to the questionnaire which may have affected the results. Another limitation to the study was the researcher's inability to cover the required sampling size of 276 participants. However, the type of research design chosen yielded robust results.

3. RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of respondents are depicted in Figures 1-4. They show the demographic distribution in relation to their level, age, professional status and years of working experience.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

		Number (132)	Percentage (%)
Academic Levels of Respondents	100	24	18.2
	200	82	62.1
	300	26	19.7
Sex of Respondents	Male	76	57.6
	Female	56	42.4
Age of Respondents	Below 20	8	6.1
	20-29	24	18.2
	30-39	61	61.4
	40-49	12	9.1
	50 and above	7	5.3
Professional Status of Respondents	Environmental Health Officer	7	5.3
	Nurse	53	40.2
	Lab Technician	8	6.1
	Technical Officer	35	26.6
	Others	29	22

Source: Field Data**Level of Respondents**

The majority of respondents (62.1%) who participated in the study were in level 400. The levels 200 and 300 had (18.2%) and (19.7%) respectively responding to the questionnaire.

Sex of Respondents

Table 1 shows that majority of respondents were males (57.6%). This result is not strange as it follows the trend of admission into tertiary institutions. The remaining 42.4% of respondents were females.

Age of Respondents

The majority of respondents fell within the 30-39 years group. They represent 61.4% followed by those in the 20-29 years age group. The least among the respondent fell in the age group 50 years and above representing 5.3% of the total respondent of 132.

Professional Status of Respondents

A greater number of respondents were nurses (40.2%), followed by 26.6% of Technical Officers (Figure 4). 6.1% of the respondents were Lab Technicians, 5.3% were Environmental Health Workers. The remaining 22% were others who were Dispensary Technicians, Radiologist and X-Ray Technicians etc.

Table 2 Work stressors

	No stress N (%)	Mild stress N (%)	Moderate stress N (%)	Extreme stress N (%)
Lack of participation in decision making	32(24.2)	44(33.3)	43(32.6)	13(9.8)
Lack of communication and consultation between Management and staff	25(18.9)	36 (27.3)	61(46.2)	10(7.6)
Lack of recognition for good effort	21(15.9)	32(24.2)	48(36.4)	31(23.5)
Lack of adequate salary	17(13)	46(35.1)	47(35.9)	21(16)
Lack of democracy in leadership	20(15.2)	44(33.3)	51(38.6)	17(12.9)
Having too many responsibilities	7(5.3)	31(23.5)	47(35.6)	47(35.6)
Attending workshops	20(15.2)	44(33.3)	52(39.4)	16(12.1)
Inadequate working materials	12(9.2)	39(29.8)	52(39.4)	16(12.1)
Writing reports	12(9.2)	39(29.8)	53(40.5)	27(20.6)

Source: Field Data

A cursory view of Table 2 indicates that most respondents perceive either a mild or moderate rate of stress under work related stressors. However, in relation to lack of participation in decision making and having much responsibility where more people perceived a mild or extreme amount of stress in relation to the other causes of stress. For instance 46.2% of respondents perceived a moderate amount of stress while 27.3% perceived a mild amount of stress in relation to lack of communication and consultation between management and staff. With the statement that having so much responsibility can contribute to stress 35.6% of respondents perceived mild and extreme amount of stress respectively. Only few respondents (5.3%) did not experience any amount of stress.

Table 3 Personal stressors

	No stress N(%)	Mild stress N(%)	Moderate stress N(%)	Extreme stress N(%)
Insufficient amount of Money to pay school fees and other expenses	21(16.0)	28(21.4)	47(35.9)	35(26.7)
Combining school, work and family life	4(3.10)	17(13.0)	37(28.2)	73(55.7)
Travelling distance to school	8(6.10)	23(17.6)	39(29.8)	61(46.6)
Financial responsibility for someone else	17(13.0)	29(22.1)	47(35.9)	38(29.0)

Source: Field Data

In the category for personal stressors (Table 3) most of the respondents (55.7%) perceived the combination of school, work and family to be extremely stressful while only 3.1% of respondents did not perceive it as stressful. The responses of respondents in relation to the insufficient amount of money to pay school fees and other expenses, travelling distance to school and financial responsibility for someone else expressed varied between mild to extreme amount of stress.

In Table 3 school or academic stressors are addressed. In this category of causes of stress 12.1% reported no stress, 28% mild stress, 27% extreme stress and the remaining 39.4 % reported moderate stress for assignment writing. Most respondents (46.2%) indicated that stress for learning for quizzes and examinations was moderate. However, just 7.6% of the respondents did not experience any form stress associated with learning for quizzes and examinations.

Table 4 School-related stressors

	No StressN(%)	Mild StressN(%)	Moderate StressN(%)	Extreme StressN(%)
Assignment writing	16(12.1)	37(28.0)	52(39.4)	27(20.5)
Learning for quizzes and examinations	10(7.6)	27(20.5)	61(46.2)	34(25.8)
Lack of adequate accommodation facilities	26(19.7)	32(24.2)	37(28.0)	37(28.0)
Number of courses offered	15(11.4)	31(23.5)	51(38.6)	35(26.5)

Source: Field Data

From Table 4 it can also be identified that the views of the respondents' experience of stress in relation to lack of adequate accommodation facilities varied 28% respectively of respondents experienced mild and extreme amount of stress. With regard to stress associated with the number courses offered (averagely 7 per semester) about 39% of respondents saw it as moderately stressful while 23.5% and 26.5% experience mild and extreme stress respectively. Only 11.4 % do not experience any form of stress associated with the number of courses offered.

The stressors discussed earlier could have effect on the academic performance of the respondents. Research question 2 therefore sought to find out whether the stressors actually affect the students' academic performance.

Table 5 Effects of stress on academic performance

	Yes N(%)	No N(%)
Does stress affect the hours you use to study?	108(81.8)	24(18.2)
Do you have difficulty understanding what is being taught at lecture when stressed?	92(69.7)	40(30.3)
Does stress affect your academic performance?	104(78.8)	28(21.2)

Source: Field Data

When respondents were asked if stress affected the hours, they use to study majority (81.8%) of them agreed while the remaining 18.2% disagreed. With regard to the second question of whether students found it difficult to understand what is being taught at lectures when stressed, about 69% agreed and 30% of respondents disagreed. The final question under this section asked the students whether the stress they experience under the three categories of causes affected their academic performance, the majority of students (104) representing 78.8% answered in the affirmative with the remaining 21.2% not in agreement with the statement. From the responses given by the respondents there is a general agreement that stress affects their academic performance.

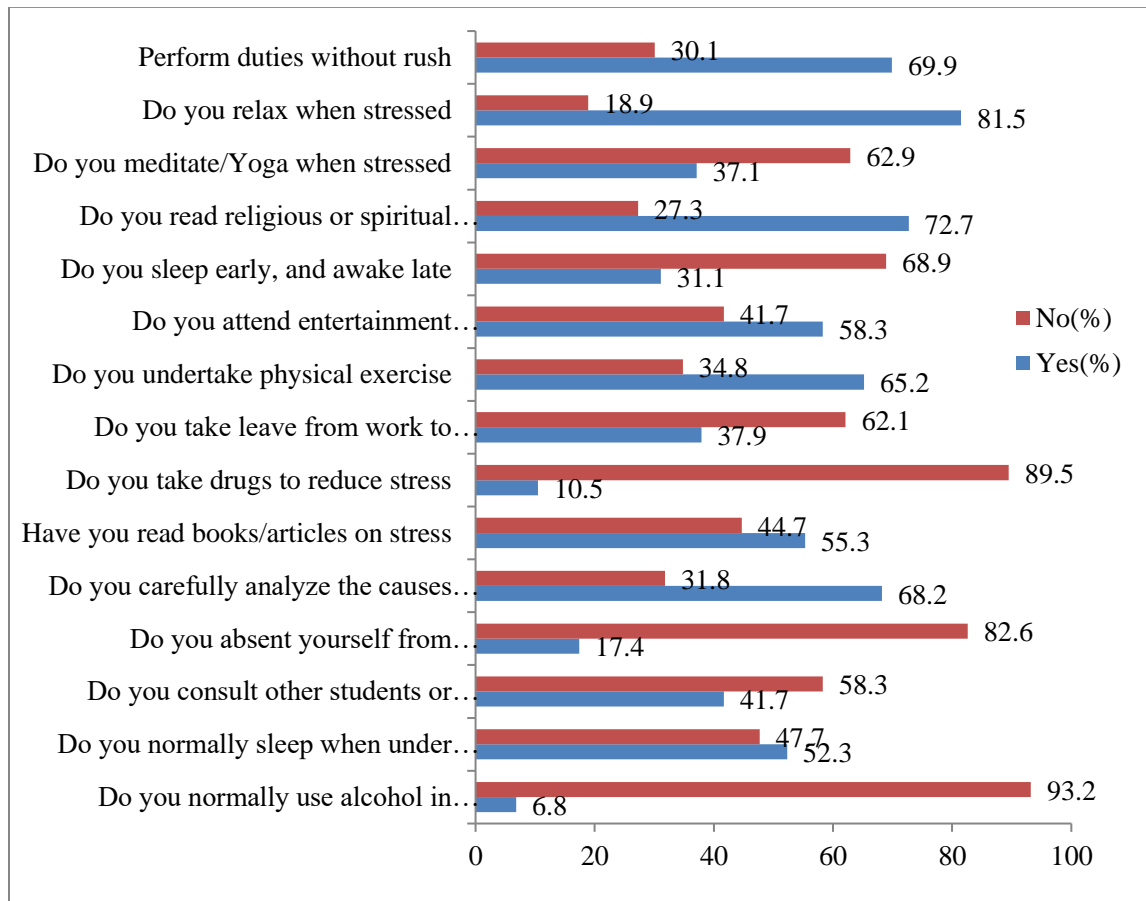
Figure 1management techniques (Coping strategies of stress)**Source: field data**

Figure 1 shows the coping strategies adopted by PHAS weekend students of Catholic University College, Fiapre. When respondents were asked if they consulted others when stressed 58.3% indicated they did not while 41.7% said they did. On the issue of whether the respondent absented themselves from school when stressed 17.4% answered in the affirmative while as many as 82.6% of respondents went to school when stressed. This trend indicated that respondents did not resort to counter-productive coping strategies.

It was indicated that 68.2% of respondents carefully analysed the causes of their stress while the rest 31.8% did not. This implied more than half of the respondents used the appraisal-focused strategy when stressed. On whether the respondents read articles or books on stress 55.3% indicated they did. Majority of respondents indicated they do not use either drugs or alcohol when stressed. This means most of the respondents did not use.

4. DISCUSSION

From Tables 1-3 it is evident that PHAS weekend students perceive stress in all the three categories of causes of stress identified. Though some of the respondents perceived stress in all the causes of expressed in the questionnaire, it is only with lack of recognition for good effort and having too many responsibilities as the source of work stressor that more than 20% of respondents perceived extreme stress. However, lack of communication and consultation between management and staff was the only source of stress where majority of respondents (46.2%) perceived moderate amount of stress. Lack of participation in decision

making, lack of adequate salary, lack of democracy in leadership, attending workshops, inadequate working materials and writing reports were perceived as mild or moderate sources of work-related stress by respondents. These responses are in line with Derogatis and Coon (1993) findings that any aspect in the environment that increases demands upon the individual also imposes stress upon that individual. This affirms Moos and Schaefer (1993) increases manifestations in psychological symptoms and perception of environmental pressures increase.

In the category of personal stressors (Table 3) as causes of stress combining school, work and family life was the cause of extreme amount of stress for most of the respondents. This is not surprising as combining all these activities put a strain on the energy available to an individual. In the area of school related stressors learning for quizzes and examination had most respondents perceiving either moderate or extreme amount of stress. This is consistent with Goodman (1993) findings that students report experiencing academic stress at predictable times each semester with the greatest sources of academic stress resulting from taking and studying for examinations. It can be concluded that majority of respondents experience moderate amount of stress at their workplace, in their personal life and with their academics. This supports Scotts et al., (2008) assertion that there are other miscellaneous stresses that come with college life.

The students agreed that stress affected the amount of time used to study. They also indicated that when stressed they found it difficult to understand what was taught at lectures. This can make the student feel frustrated which is an emotional manifestation of the stress experienced. This result confirms Sonderegger and Barrett (2004) assertion that emotional arousal tends to temporarily impair one's mental efficiency and the high arousal has been shown to produce narrowing attention, poorer judgment and reduction in effectiveness of one's memory. This ultimately results in a situation where students tend to perform poorly in examinations (Topper, 2007).

The last question sought to establish if the stressed experienced by the respondents had any effect on their general academic performance, majority of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This is consistent with Salas, Driskell and Hughes (1996) findings that stress is one factor that influences academic success and compromises academic performance. From the responses given by the respondents it implies that the respondents believed stress affects their academic performance. It also came to light that respondents avoided counter-productive coping strategies such as use of alcohol or drugs and absenting ones' self from school. Generally, the respondents used constructive coping strategies. The study revealed that majority of respondents used the relaxation strategy in dealing with stress. They go for entertainment programmes, sleep early and wake up late, and relax when stressed. This implies that respondents used the emotion-focused strategy of Moos and Billings cited in Yaokumah (1999) coping strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that all respondents experienced an amount of stress in all the three categories of stressors examined. It can also be concluded from the findings that stress affected the amount of time used to study, the concentration rate of students during lectures and ultimately affected the academic performance of the students. Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made: Establishment of distance learning centre, Counselling centre, social activities, Time management, Group learning. It is suggested that an exploratory study be conducted to determine if there are differences in stress management techniques between regular students and weekend students of Catholic University College, Fiapre.

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