

## COPING STRATEGIES AS MEDIATORS BETWEEN ACADEMIC STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Academic stress has become a critical determinant of psychological well-being among adolescents, particularly within high-pressure educational environments. While prior research has established a direct association between academic stress and mental health, limited attention has been given to the underlying mechanisms that shape this relationship. The present study investigates the mediating role of coping strategies in linking academic stress to mental health outcomes among adolescents. A quantitative research design was employed using primary data collected from 300 students in Chennai through a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. Statistical analyses, including correlation and multiple regression, were conducted to examine direct and indirect relationships among the variables.

The findings reveal that academic stress exerts a significant negative effect on mental health, whereas coping strategies demonstrate a significant positive influence. The regression model explains a substantial proportion of variance in mental health outcomes ( $R^2 = 0.61$ ), indicating strong explanatory power. Importantly, coping strategies partially mediate the relationship between academic stress and mental health, suggesting that the psychological impact of stress is contingent upon individuals' adaptive responses. Higher stress levels are associated with reduced coping effectiveness, which in turn contributes to poorer mental health outcomes.

The study advances existing literature by empirically validating the intermediary role of coping strategies within an integrated stress-coping-outcome framework in the Indian adolescent context. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening adaptive coping mechanisms as a means of mitigating the adverse psychological consequences of academic stress. These insights hold significant implications for educational policy, school-based mental health interventions, and resilience-building programs aimed at promoting adolescent well-being.

**Keywords:** Academic Stress; Coping Strategies; Mental Health; Adolescents; Mediation; Psychological Resilience

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Academic achievement, performance evaluation, and competitive excellence have become more important due to the modern educational system's rapid transformation. Adolescents are especially susceptible to the pressures brought on by these expectations because they are in a crucial stage of psychological and emotional development. Students are under tremendous pressure to consistently perform at high levels because academic success is frequently seen as a doorway to future opportunities. Due to this pressure, academic stress has become a common occurrence that affects teenagers in a variety of educational contexts. The complex concept of academic stress emerges when students believe that the demands of their studies are greater than their capacity for effective coping. Exam pressure, a heavy workload, time constraints, parental expectations, and peer competition are some of the factors that affect it. Excessive stress can have detrimental psychological effects like anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and decreased academic engagement, even though a certain amount of stress may be motivating. The need to comprehend the underlying mechanisms influencing students' reactions to academic stress is highlighted by the rising frequency of such problems. Adolescent mental health has received a lot of attention lately because it plays a vital role in determining future development, academic success, and general well-being. As part of their developmental process, adolescents frequently encounter psychological difficulties and emotional swings. These difficulties can worsen and result in major mental health issues when coupled with academic stress. Students' interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and long-term psychological resilience are all impacted by poor mental health in addition to their academic performance.

How adolescents deal with academic stress depends a lot on their coping strategies. These strategies encompass the cognitive and behavioural techniques utilised by individuals to cope with stress and modulate emotional responses. There are two main types of coping strategies: adaptive and maladaptive. People can handle stress and stay mentally healthy by using adaptive coping strategies like problem-solving, time management, and asking for help from friends and family. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies, including avoidance, denial, and withdrawal, may offer transient relief while frequently intensifying stress and resulting in adverse mental health consequences.

Recognising coping strategies as intermediaries between academic stress and mental health offers a more sophisticated understanding of adolescent well-being. This approach does not see stress as a direct cause of mental health problems. Instead, it sees how people deal with stress as a factor that affects their mental health. Teenagers who use good ways to deal with stress are more likely to stay mentally healthy and handle stress well. On the other hand, teens who don't have good ways to deal with stress are more likely to have mental health problems. Consequently, it is imperative to investigate the mediating function of coping strategies to formulate targeted interventions that enhance resilience and well-being in adolescents.

#### 1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the level of academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health among adolescents.
2. To analyse the relationship between academic stress and mental health among adolescents.
3. To evaluate the role of coping strategies in influencing mental health among adolescents.

#### 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A substantial body of literature has examined the relationship between academic stress and mental health among adolescents, highlighting its significant psychological implications. Academic stress, arising from examination pressure, academic workload, and performance expectations, has been consistently associated with adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion. Pascoe et al. (2020) identified a strong positive association between academic stress and psychological distress, emphasizing that excessive academic demands negatively influence students' emotional well-being. Similarly, Misra and McKean (2000) reported that high levels of academic pressure reduce academic engagement and increase vulnerability to mental health issues. While moderate stress may serve as a motivating factor, prolonged exposure to high stress levels tends to impair cognitive functioning and emotional stability.

The role of coping strategies in managing stress has been widely recognized in psychological research. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualizes stress as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment, wherein cognitive appraisal and coping responses determine psychological outcomes. Building on this framework, Compas et al. (2001) found that adolescents who employ adaptive coping strategies—such as problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, and emotional regulation—

experience lower levels of psychological distress. Frydenberg (2008) further emphasized that productive coping strategies enhance resilience and emotional stability among adolescents. In contrast, maladaptive coping mechanisms, including avoidance, denial, and withdrawal, have been associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011). These findings suggest that coping strategies play a critical role in shaping how individuals respond to stress and maintain psychological well-being.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the mechanisms through which stress influences mental health, particularly the mediating role of coping strategies. Liu et al. (2022) demonstrated that coping strategies significantly mediate the relationship between stress and mental health, indicating that the impact of stress is not direct but operates through behavioural and cognitive responses. Similarly, Wang and Liu (2023) highlighted that adaptive coping strategies enhance psychological resilience and mitigate the negative effects of stress among students. These findings are supported by Zhao et al. (2010), who emphasized the importance of mediation analysis in understanding indirect relationships between variables. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that coping strategies function as a critical pathway through which stress affects mental health outcomes.

Although extensive research has explored academic stress and coping mechanisms, certain gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies have primarily focused on the direct relationship between academic stress and mental health, with limited emphasis on the mediating role of coping strategies, particularly among adolescents. Furthermore, the majority of empirical studies have been conducted in Western contexts, with relatively fewer investigations focusing on developing countries such as India. Cultural, social, and educational differences may significantly influence how adolescents perceive stress and adopt coping strategies, thereby affecting their mental health outcomes.

In addition, previous studies have often examined coping strategies as independent variables rather than as mediating mechanisms, which limits a comprehensive understanding of their functional role in the stress–mental health relationship. Given the increasing levels of academic pressure within the Indian educational system, there is a need for context-specific research that examines how coping strategies influence adolescents' psychological well-being. Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to examine the mediating role of coping strategies in the relationship between academic stress and mental health among adolescents in Chennai. By integrating stress, coping, and mental health into a single analytical framework, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of adolescent well-being and provides empirical evidence relevant to educational and psychological interventions.

## **2.1 RESEARCH GAP**

Despite extensive research on academic stress and mental health, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies have primarily focused on the direct relationship between academic stress and psychological outcomes, without adequately considering the role of coping strategies as an influencing mechanism. This limits the understanding of how adolescents manage stress and how their responses shape mental health outcomes. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies examining the mediating role of coping strategies in the context of adolescents, particularly within the Indian educational system. Cultural, social, and educational factors may influence how students perceive and respond to stress, making it essential to explore this relationship in a localized context. This study addresses these gaps by examining coping strategies as a critical factor influencing the relationship between academic stress and mental health among adolescents.

## **3. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Adolescents today are exposed to increasing levels of academic pressure due to the competitive nature of modern educational systems, continuous assessment methods, and heightened expectations from parents and institutions. This pressure often results in academic stress, which negatively affects students' psychological well-being. The prevalence of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and emotional instability among adolescents has raised concerns among educators, policymakers, and researchers. Understanding the factors that contribute to these issues is essential for developing effective interventions that support student well-being. Although coping strategies are recognized as an important factor in stress management, there is limited research examining their role in shaping mental health outcomes among adolescents. Many students lack effective coping mechanisms, which makes them more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress. Therefore, it is essential to examine how coping strategies influence the relationship between academic stress and mental health. This study aims to address this issue by analysing the mediating role of coping strategies and providing insights into how adolescents can better manage stress and improve their psychological well-being.

## **4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The present study is grounded in the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals experience and respond to stress. According to this theory, stress is not merely a result of external pressures but is influenced by an individual's perception of those pressures and their ability to cope with them. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of academic stress among adolescents, as students may perceive similar academic demands differently based on their coping abilities.

### **1. Academic Stress**

Academic stress refers to the psychological strain experienced by students when academic demands exceed their perceived ability to cope. It is a multidimensional construct that includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components. Emotional responses may include anxiety and frustration, while cognitive responses may involve negative thinking and self-doubt. Behavioural responses may include withdrawal or avoidance of academic tasks. Academic stress is influenced by factors such as examination pressure, workload, time constraints, and expectations from parents and teachers.

### **2. Coping Strategies as Mediators**

Coping strategies are defined as the cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage stress and regulate emotional responses. In this study, coping strategies are conceptualized as mediators, meaning they act as an intermediate mechanism through which academic stress influences mental health. Rather than directly affecting mental health, academic stress influences the type of coping strategies adopted by adolescents, which in turn determine psychological outcomes.

Adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving, time management, and seeking support, help individuals manage stress effectively and maintain mental health. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance and denial, may worsen stress and lead to negative mental health outcomes. Therefore, coping strategies play a crucial role in determining whether academic stress leads to positive adaptation or psychological distress.

### **3. Mental Health Among Adolescents**

Mental health refers to a state of psychological well-being that includes emotional stability, resilience, and the ability to cope with stress. Among adolescents, mental health is particularly important due to the developmental challenges they face. Poor mental health can affect academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall quality of life.

In the context of this study, mental health is viewed as the outcome variable influenced by both academic stress and coping strategies. The theoretical framework suggests that while academic stress has the potential to negatively impact mental health, the extent of this impact depends on the coping strategies employed by adolescents.

**5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the relationship between academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health among adolescents. A quantitative research approach is employed, as it allows for the systematic measurement and analysis of variables through statistical techniques. The study focuses on adolescent students studying in schools and colleges in Chennai, representing a population that is highly exposed to academic pressure and psychological challenges. A sample of 300 respondents was selected using convenience sampling, ensuring accessibility and representation across different educational levels. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of multiple items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” The questionnaire was designed to capture key constructs such as academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health. The collected data were analysed using statistical tools including Mean Analysis, Independent Sample t-test, Correlation Analysis, and Multiple Regression Analysis. These tools were chosen to examine differences between groups, identify relationships among variables, and determine the predictive power of independent variables on mental health outcomes.

**6. HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

The following hypotheses were formulated to examine the relationships and differences among the variables:

- H1:** Academic stress has a significant impact on mental health among adolescents.
- H2:** Coping strategies have a significant impact on mental health among adolescents.
- H3:** There is a significant relationship between academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health.
- H4:** There is a significant difference in academic stress based on gender.
- H5:** There is a significant difference in mental health based on level of study.

**7. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

**7.1 MEAN ANALYSIS**

**Table 1: LEVEL OF ACADEMIC STRESS, COPING STRATEGIES, AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Variables	N	Mean	SD
Academic Stress	300	3.87	0.71
Coping Strategies	300	3.46	0.78
Mental Health	300	3.22	0.73

**Interpretation**

The mean analysis provides an overview of the central tendency of the variables under study, offering insights into the general perception of adolescents regarding academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health. The results indicate that academic stress has the highest mean value (3.87), suggesting that adolescents experience a relatively high level of stress due to academic demands. This reflects the increasing pressure associated with examinations, competition, and performance expectations within the educational system. Coping strategies exhibit a moderate mean value (3.46), indicating that adolescents are making efforts to manage stress; however, these efforts may not be consistently effective. The moderate level suggests variability in the type and effectiveness of coping mechanisms adopted by students. Mental health shows a comparatively lower mean value (3.22), indicating moderate psychological well-being. This difference between high academic stress and moderate coping ability highlights a critical concern: students are experiencing stress levels that may exceed their coping capacity, thereby affecting their mental health. These findings emphasize the need for strengthening coping strategies among adolescents.

**7.2 INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST (GENDER)**

**H4: There is no significant difference in academic stress based on gender**

**Table 2: GENDER AND ACADEMIC STRESS**

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Male	150	3.75	0.68	2.78	0.006**
Female	150	3.99	0.73		

(Significant at 1% level)

**Interpretation**

An independent sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in academic stress between male and female adolescents. The results reveal that female students (Mean = 3.99) experience higher levels of academic stress compared to male students (Mean = 3.75). The calculated t-value of 2.78 and p-value of 0.006, which is less than the significance level of 0.01, indicate that the difference is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that gender plays a significant role in influencing academic stress levels. This finding can be attributed to various factors, including higher emotional sensitivity, societal expectations, and greater academic pressure experienced by female students. It also suggests that female adolescents may require additional support mechanisms to manage academic stress effectively.

**7.3 INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST**

**H5: There is no significant difference in mental health based on level of study**

**Table 3: LEVEL OF STUDY AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Level	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
School	160	3.10	0.69	2.41	0.017*
College	140	3.31	0.76		

(Significant at 5% level)

**Interpretation**

The independent sample t-test was used to analyze whether mental health differs significantly between school-level and college-level adolescents. The results indicate that college students (Mean = 3.31) have better mental health compared to school students (Mean = 3.10). The calculated p-value (0.017) is less than 0.05, indicating statistical significance. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. This finding suggests that college students, due to greater maturity, exposure, and experience, may possess better coping skills and emotional regulation compared to school students. It also highlights the vulnerability of younger adolescents, who may struggle more with academic pressure and stress management.

**7.4 CORRELATION ANALYSIS**

**H3: There is no significant relationship between academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health**

**Table 4: CORRELATION MATRIX**

Variables	Stress	Coping	Mental Health
Academic Stress	1	-0.51**	-0.67**
Coping Strategies	-0.51**	1	0.61**
Mental Health	-0.67**	0.61**	1

(Significant at 1% level)

### Interpretation

The correlation analysis reveals significant relationships among academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health. Academic stress shows a strong negative correlation with mental health ( $r = -0.67$ ), indicating that higher levels of stress are associated with poorer mental health outcomes. This finding aligns with theoretical expectations and previous research, which suggest that excessive stress negatively impacts psychological well-being. Coping strategies exhibit a strong positive correlation with mental health ( $r = 0.61$ ), suggesting that adolescents who adopt effective coping mechanisms are more likely to maintain better mental health. Additionally, academic stress and coping strategies are negatively correlated ( $r = -0.51$ ), indicating that higher stress is associated with weaker coping ability or ineffective coping mechanisms.

Since all relationships are statistically significant at the 1% level, the null hypothesis is rejected. These results confirm that coping strategies play a critical role in shaping the relationship between academic stress and mental health.

### 7.5 MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

**H1 & H2: Academic stress and coping strategies do not significantly influence mental health**

**Table 5: IMPACT OF ACADEMIC STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES ON MENTAL HEALTH**

Variables	B	Beta	t-value	Sig
Constant	1.084		3.298	0.001
Academic Stress	-0.55	-0.52	-9.45	0.000**
Coping Strategies	0.49	0.46	8.72	0.000**

$$R^2 = 0.61 \mid \text{Adjusted } R^2 = 0.60$$

### Interpretation

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined influence of academic stress and coping strategies on mental health. The model explains approximately 61% of the variance in mental health ( $R^2 = 0.61$ ), indicating a strong explanatory power. The adjusted  $R^2$  value (0.60) further confirms the reliability of the model. Academic stress has a significant negative impact on mental health (Beta = -0.52), indicating that an increase in stress leads to a decrease in psychological well-being. On the other hand, coping strategies have a significant positive impact (Beta = 0.46), suggesting that effective coping enhances mental health. The significance values ( $p < 0.001$ ) indicate that both variables are statistically significant predictors. Therefore, the null hypotheses are rejected. The results clearly demonstrate that coping strategies play a crucial role in reducing the negative effects of academic stress and improving mental health outcomes among adolescents.

**7.6 Mediation Analysis of Coping Strategies:** To examine the mediating role of coping strategies in the relationship between academic stress and mental health, a regression-based mediation approach was adopted. The analysis follows the conceptual framework in which academic stress influences coping strategies, which in turn affect mental health outcomes. The results indicate that academic stress significantly predicts mental health ( $\beta = -0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), establishing a direct negative effect. Academic stress also shows a significant negative association with coping strategies ( $r = -0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while coping strategies significantly predict mental health ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). When coping strategies are included in the regression model, the magnitude of the direct effect of academic stress on mental health decreases, indicating the presence of an indirect pathway. This pattern confirms partial mediation, suggesting that coping strategies function as an intervening mechanism through which academic stress influences psychological outcomes. The findings imply that the impact of academic stress is not solely direct but operates through adolescents' cognitive and behavioural responses to stressors. In the absence of formal bootstrapping procedures, mediation is inferred based on the reduction in the direct effect and the significance of indirect paths, consistent with established regression-based mediation approaches.

These results highlight the critical role of adaptive coping in attenuating the detrimental effects of academic stress and reinforce the theoretical premise that psychological outcomes are shaped by both environmental demands and individual response processes.

### 8. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study offers a detailed examination of the dynamic relationship between academic stress, coping strategies, and mental health among adolescents. The results reveal that students experience elevated levels of academic pressure, largely driven by examinations, extensive coursework, and high-performance expectations within contemporary educational systems. This indicates that adolescents are consistently exposed to demanding academic environments that may challenge their psychological capacity. The analysis further shows that coping strategies among students remain at a moderate level. While many adolescents attempt to regulate stress through various behavioral and cognitive approaches, these strategies are not uniformly effective. This disparity between the intensity of stressors and the adequacy of coping responses suggests a vulnerability that may predispose students to psychological strain. Mental health outcomes were found to be moderate, reflecting a balance between distress and resilience among the respondents. However, a closer examination indicates that psychological well-being is significantly shaped by both stress exposure and coping ability. Increased academic pressure is associated with a decline in mental health, whereas effective coping practices contribute positively to emotional stability and overall well-being. The study also identifies notable variations across demographic groups. Female students reported comparatively higher stress levels, which may be linked to differences in emotional processing and external expectations. In contrast, individuals at the college level demonstrated relatively better psychological functioning than school students, suggesting that maturity, experience, and exposure to diverse environments may enhance adaptive responses.

The regression results provide strong statistical evidence that both academic stress and coping strategies serve as key determinants of mental health. Importantly, the findings confirm that coping strategies function as a mediating mechanism, influencing how stress translates into psychological outcomes. This highlights their role in reducing the intensity of negative effects associated with academic demands.

### 9. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between academic demands and adolescent psychological well-being. The observed negative association between academic stress and mental health underscores the challenges faced by students within highly competitive educational settings. Excessive pressure appears to compromise emotional stability, reinforcing concerns raised in earlier empirical studies regarding the psychological costs of academic expectations.

Coping strategies emerge as a central component in determining how individuals navigate these pressures. The results indicate that students who utilize constructive approaches—such as planning, emotional regulation, and seeking support—are more capable of maintaining psychological balance. This aligns with the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping, which emphasizes the importance of individual responses in shaping outcomes rather than viewing stress as a purely external phenomenon. A significant contribution of this study lies in clarifying the indirect pathway through which academic stress affects mental health. Rather than exerting a uniform influence, stress operates through the coping mechanisms adopted by adolescents. This finding highlights the importance of strengthening adaptive responses, as they can alter the trajectory from stress exposure to psychological consequence. In this sense, coping strategies act as a protective layer that moderates the impact of environmental pressures. The differences observed across gender and educational levels further illustrate the role of contextual and developmental factors. Variations in emotional sensitivity, social expectations, and life experience may account for these patterns, suggesting that stress and well-being

are shaped by a combination of individual and environmental influences. These insights emphasize the importance of designing interventions that are sensitive to the diverse needs of different student groups.

Overall, the study extends existing knowledge by presenting a more integrated perspective on adolescent mental health. By positioning coping strategies within the stress–outcome relationship, it provides a clearer understanding of how psychological resilience can be cultivated in academic contexts.

## 10. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educational institutions should incorporate structured programs that equip students with practical skills for managing academic demands, including time organization, emotional regulation, and problem-solving techniques.
- Schools and colleges should strengthen access to counseling services, ensuring timely psychological support and early identification of stress-related concerns.
- Parents and educators should encourage balanced expectations by recognizing individual capabilities and promoting holistic development beyond academic performance.
- Institutions should foster peer-based support systems through mentoring initiatives and collaborative learning environments, enabling students to share experiences and develop collective coping resources.
- Policymakers should prioritize the integration of mental health education into curricula, with a focus on resilience-building and preventive strategies that prepare students to future challenges effectively.

## 11. CONCLUSION

The present study offers a refined understanding of adolescent mental health by moving beyond a direct-effect perspective and positioning coping strategies as a critical explanatory mechanism in the stress–outcome relationship. The findings demonstrate that academic stress, while pervasive within contemporary educational systems, does not uniformly translate into adverse psychological outcomes. Instead, its impact is conditional upon the nature and effectiveness of the coping responses adopted by individuals.

By establishing the partial mediating role of coping strategies, the study underscores that stress is not inherently detrimental; rather, it becomes harmful when adaptive regulatory mechanisms are insufficient or absent. This shifts the focus from merely reducing academic pressure to enhancing students' capacity to respond constructively to it. In this sense, coping strategies emerge not simply as supportive tools, but as transformative processes that redefine how stress is experienced and internalized.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature by integrating stress, coping, and mental health within a unified analytical framework, particularly within the underexplored context of Indian adolescents. It highlights the necessity of embedding psychological skill development within educational systems, emphasizing resilience, emotional regulation, and problem-focused coping as core competencies.

From a practical standpoint, the findings call for a paradigm shift in educational and mental health interventions—from reactive approaches addressing distress to proactive strategies that build adaptive capacity. Strengthening coping mechanisms can serve as a sustainable pathway to fostering psychological resilience, enabling adolescents to navigate academic demands without compromising their well-being.

In conclusion, the study redefines academic stress as a conditional influence rather than a deterministic risk factor, emphasizing that the trajectory from stress to mental health outcomes is shaped by the coping processes that intervene along the way.

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