

Social Work Intervention for Examination Stress

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ABSTRACT

Examination stress among school students is on the rise in the present times. This stress experienced by the students is because of the overemphasis on performance and perfectionism in the term end results in school education by the parents, school and society. There is this pressure to be the best. This competition for the highest marks has its adverse effects. The emphasis is not on developing competency or the learning process, but on the marks obtained in the examination. The purpose of evaluation melts down on how much percentage has been secured. This has created an unhealthy competitive environment in the educational system. There is a cutthroat competition among the school students, mainly induced by the society. The college admission after school is difficult and highly competitive. These pressures contribute to high examination stress among students. The present research study was aimed at preparing a social work intervention for school students to prevent, manage and reduce examination stress. Sixteen professionals were interviewed who were working with school students. Their views and experiences were put together to develop the intervention plan.

1. Introduction

The idyllic world of children is under attack by the stresses of modern life and children are ill prepared to cope with them, children like adults, can feel the same psychological pains that adults feel. What they lack is the intellectual ability to understand the pain and how to control it. They are more vulnerable because they have not developed skills necessary to understand what is happening to them and why. That is the terrible disadvantage, when what is necessary to conquer stress is to gain control over one's own life. Schools play an important role in the life of a child, but school can be a place of stress, fear and even pain for children. The discipline, the timing of school, the curriculum, the homework and the teacher causes stress for children. There is increasing pressure on children to achieve. The curriculum seems to be steadily moving downward. Things that were ones taught in higher grades are being introduced in the lower grades. There are pressures to learn to read and write earlier in life. Unfortunately, a growing number of students are becoming victims of stress and taking to harmful habits like popping sleeping pills, smoking and even consuming alcohol. These habits though may provide momentary relief and a sense of high, are extremely harmful as indulging in substance abuse will create other serious problems. Therefore, it is very important to identify the stress symptoms and seek help to overcome them as early as possible.

Taking examinations can be very worrying and stressful. The worry of not doing well in itself can cause such stress that the performance on the day of the examination is not the best (Verma et al. 2002, Saharia and Goswani 2020). The fear associated with examination is largely due to anxiety about the outcome. There are worries that the student will be disgraced and embarrassed about how the family and friends will react and about letting themselves and other people down (Zeidner, 1998). In extreme cases the student reacts as if their whole lives depended on passing the examination. It is difficult for

them to keep a sense of perspective. While doing well in their examinations may be important, but life does not depend on them, they do not realize that examinations can often be retaken and there will be many examinations in life.

The students are under tremendous pressure now-a-days. Even if they are very hard working and intelligent it does not guarantee them a course or profession of their choice, there is such a rush for the college seats, of the lakhs of candidates only a few thousands are able to get through a course and college of their first preference. The society and family pressurize the student to perform the best all the time, the student has to be an achiever all the time. As examination comes closer, many students approach the school counselors with certain uneasy symptoms like lack of sleep, hunger, anxiety, depression or a strong unknown fear (Deb, 2014). Attribution of all such symptoms of examinations may not be justified (Gosar et al., 2019). A strong combination of factors such as family environment, parental attitudes/expectation, friends, social circle, individual and their aspirations play a contributing role in causing examination stress. Fear of failure adds up to their stress related to the examination (Reji, 2016).

Examination stress causes depression, forgetfulness, irritability and many other behavioral and emotional disturbances. The sufferer of stress is always tired and is less efficient. Thus, examination stress affects the personality and performance of the students. Stress among children as a phenomenon is on the rise and has dangerous manifestations both psychologically and physically (Bernard and Krupat, 1994). In the recent years we have seen the emergence of counseling services for students during school examinations and at the time of declaration of results. The increase in the number of help line services for students in itself is an indication that stress is on the increase, and it has a long-lasting effect on their mental health.

Social work intervention can be explained as a planned and purposeful action based on research and knowledge

acquired that is translated into values, skills and techniques to address the social problem. Social worker needs to understand all the dimensions of the problem. Accordingly develop the intervention program dealing with all the dimensions and with the different stakeholders. Thus, the social work intervention would work at macro and micro levels focusing on the individual, families, communities and the other key stakeholders.

2. Research Methodology

The present research study was conducted to develop a social work intervention designed to help students in managing and reducing examination stress. This study would also help in the understanding of mental health needs of students and the nature and direction of social work intervention needed to deal with examination stress. The outcome of this research would be beneficial for students, parents, teachers, and school authorities as well as professionals like social workers, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, school nurses and others interested in student's mental health.

To prepare a social work intervention for school students, the researcher interviewed four groups of professionals who are working with students and/or in student welfare. These included teachers/ principals of schools, school social workers/ counselors, NGO professionals, psychologists/psychiatrists, and social work educators. Four professionals were interviewed from each group. Thus, a total of 16 professionals were interviewed in all. The findings of the interview helped design the Social work intervention to address the issue of examination stress.

3. Social Work Intervention Model

The researcher proposes a social work intervention based on the responses from the experts working with school students. All the findings emerging from the views and experiences from the professionals working in the area of student welfare were put together in developing the social work intervention. The social work intervention was designed to prevent and manage examination stress and work with students, parents and teachers in the schools.

4. Preventive Measure to address examination stress

There are a number of preventive measures that could be taken up to address examination stress among school students. The preventive steps need to be with the students and with the significant others who are in interaction with the students.

5. Intervention with the students

The primary effort of this intervention would be with the students. The students need to develop a realistic understanding of the purpose of examination. So that students are able to adjust to the demanding situation of examination. The students have to be encouraged to promote healthy behavior, and reduces the risk of psychosocial disorders because of examination stress.

The students need to equip themselves with competence to face examination. This would require to build up the capacities of the students. Students sometimes lack confidence, doubt their capacities, and are deficit in skills needed for examination. Thus, it is important that they are

prepared for the examination not just with the subject content but also with a positive mental framework. For this competence build up students should be trained with effective study habits, time management skills, appropriate examination taking behavior and a positive attitude towards examination.

The students further need to be guided to strengthen their personality. The personality of the students can be developed by imbibing in them problem solving skills, goal setting habits, promoting recreational interests including physical activities, adequate expression of self through self-discovery creative activities like music, gardening, painting, adapting to difficult and challenging situation and developing coping skills to the stressors in the day-to-day situations.

Students stress gets manifested in many somatic symptoms that disturbs their daily functioning (Waghachavare et al., 2013). Thus, students need to be trained to deal with stress. Some of the them are simple relaxation techniques. These are effective in reducing stress. Simple physical relaxation technique of deep breathing and progressive muscular relaxation will help students reduce stress. Deep breathing is a simple, effective method of relaxation. Exercises like taking a number of deep breaths and relaxing the body, with each breath feel the body unwind and relax more and more. Continue this for two-five minutes and observe the body relax. Progressive muscular relaxation is useful for relaxing the body when the muscles are tense. In the progressive muscular relaxation, a group of muscles are tensed up tightly, contracted, held in this state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then, the muscles are relaxed to the normal position; again, consciously relax the same muscles even further. Follow this with the different limbs, neck, shoulder and abdomen. Slowly the individual's body is relaxed. The stress and strain can diminish with simple relaxation techniques.

Improving communication and encouraging ventilation. Students need to express their opinions, desires, needs and fears verbally and non-verbally. This could also include clarifying their doubts and asking for advice and help. It is important that students have communicable relationship with friend, parents and teachers. Free flow of information, opinions and views is necessary for the development of a healthy personality.

Session could be organized to help students improve their communication skills. Student should be encouraged to talk out their feelings, views and experiences. This ventilation in the presence of an empathic listener is therapeutic. The listener could be the school social worker/counselor/teacher or peer. There is a need for an attentive listener with concern and care. Ventilation can be very beneficial to reduce examination stress like an old saying "a problem shared is a problem halved". This ventilation session can be conducted by group simulation, group discussion and sharing. The students can improve communication and ventilate pent up feeling among their friends or classmates.

6. Intervention with parents

Students sometimes have attributed examination stress to their parents' behavior, expectation and the family environment. Teachers also contribute to examination stress by their behavior and expectation. To prevent student from examination stress it is important to modify the surrounding of the students. Parents play an important role in the life of students. Parenting is a

challenging task. To be an effective parent, parenting should be based on security and affection, which incorporates attitudes, emphasizing on playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy. There should be no room for coercion, threat, intimidation and the use of power to force submission.

Parents are the significant others in the life of students. Parents are totally responsible for the well-being of their children. In the present times parents have this over-indulging attitude that causes stress and strain to the children. Parents need to be more supportive and encouraging to their children. Present day parents can be helped to understand their parenting style so that they are able to nurture and discipline the children appropriately. Setting realistic expectation and allowing the children to select their own interests in academic and extra curriculum activities like sports, music and art is important. Sessions with parents can be held in schools to encourage stimulating parental behavior.

7. Teachers Cooperation and Support

Teachers are one of the significant others' that leave deep impressions on the child's mind. Teachers are in constant contact with the children and any signs of examination stress can be observed by the teachers. Teachers are key persons who can also predict before anyone else that a particular student is showing signs of pressure and is suffering from or is liable to suffer from examination stress through their behavior and academic performance.

In an experimental study conducted by Joseph (2002) the researcher observed the positive impact of child mental health orientation program on school teachers. It was found that the capacities of the school teachers could be improved by an orientation program that helps the teachers to understand child mental health needs and issues. NIMHANS, Bangalore have also been involved since 1975 in preparing and implementing program in the field of school mental health and their experience shows that school teachers can be effectively sensitized in identifying emotional problems of children. Teachers can be trained in counseling skills to improve the children's competence.

Sessions with teachers on children's needs and behavioral problems will help teachers identify students with problems, especially examination stress. Sessions on positive disciplining of students will help the teachers handle students in the classroom setting. Sessions will also be held with teachers on stress management, so that there is an environment of mental well-being in the school.

Session with teachers twice a year by experts followed by discussion on case studies can help teachers to be sensitized to students' problem. Sessions with parents can be planned out every term on the parents-teacher-meeting (PTM) day. Parents can be brought together in the school hall or in one of the classes to hold these sessions. Parents must be involved in these sessions from the planning stage itself. Regular interactions with the parents will help the school to create a supportive and friendly environment in the school and in the homes too.

8. Examination stress reduction and management

The social work intervention should also address students that are identified with stress and plan out stress reduction methods. This is specifically for students who need special

attention more than the other students. The students can be identified with stress symptoms, by themselves or by the significant others. The significant others could be parents, peers or teachers. Those who are physically close to the students and who observe behavioral and emotional problems in the students. The school social worker/counselor must plan out stress management and reduction sessions regularly. These sessions would reduce stress by management in an eclectic approach combining mainly behavioral, cognitive-behavioral and supportive components.

The behavioral approaches focus on change in observable behavior or behavior modification. These approaches are based on the concept that psychological problems occur due to learning or conditioning and can be undone by the same processes. The school social work/counselors can help the students. Anxiety can be managed by methods of deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation. Meditation is another technique to relax the mind. In this the individual sits in a quiet place, eyes closed and concentrates at a point or visualize a pleasant view. The mind drift away from the point to various thought and the attempt is to keep on seeing or thinking of that point or view. Meditation can also be the practice of observing the thought and feelings and not reacting to it. Initially a difficult task slowly the mind learns to meditate. Students can also be helped by systematic desensitization. Students that experience distress in examination times feel various emotional and physical problems. Classical conditioning can be used to relax the body in systematic desensitization, as the students are encouraged to face the exams with support. Repeated examination situation makes the students more confident in going through the process of examination.

The Cognitive approaches are important in reducing examination stress as it is the students' negative perceptions towards examination and examination results that needs to be treated. These therapeutic approaches are also called cognitive restructuring. Rational-Emotive therapy of Albert Ellis is one of the earliest cognitive-restructuring approaches. This assumes that individuals have rational and irrational tendencies. The irrational thoughts prevent from reaching the goals results in inner conflict and mental tension (Zhdanov et al., 2018). This causes emotional difficulties in students, this irrational thought cause examination stress and fear of failure. Person centered counseling helps students build up a more realistic thinking. Meichenbaum's self-instructional training is another method of the cognitive approach. Meichenbaum uses self-instructional training to help students replace their maladaptive cognitions with rational, positive thinking in an examination situation.

The Cognitive Behavioral Approach is most suited to treat examination stress as it's a combination of restructuring the cognition of the students and help in stress reduction trainings.

Small Therapeutic Group: The students facing examination stress problems could be assembled in small groups to help them out in adaptive coping strategies. The aim is to support these students to work out their own adaptive coping strategies. Group session would help them work out solutions for themselves. Here students form support groups helping out each other. Ventilating their problems to each other so that they know that there are other students too, who feel their way. There are common emotions of fear, low self-esteem in the group, which the students feel they were suffering alone so the

interactions with other students would be advantageous. The group sessions will help the students support each other.

Problem Solving Counseling: Problem solving counseling is a structured and systematic method of interaction with client to recognize the problems or the stressors in their lives and then adopt steps to tackle these problems. Problem-solving counseling is a double-headed approach that is it tackles the emotional and the practical aspects of the problem. The emotional problem is tackled first and then the client is in a better frame of mind to solve his problems for example when a student is upset and tensed (emotional problem), for the internal assessment (practical problem). The student is first helped with his lack of confidence, and low self-image (emotional problem). Then helped with the practical assessment concern by enabling him in seeking clarification from the subject teacher in understanding what is to be done in the assignment.

Crisis intervention requires specialized skills and experience dealing with crisis. The ability to assess and intervene during emergencies is a challenging skill. Incorrect assessment, missed opportunities, unskillful behavior and mistakes can prolong a crisis, create new problems or turn an urgent problem into a dangerous emergency. Some qualities that are required by the school social work/counselor are that they can be reached seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day if necessary. They are sensitive, good listeners and are prepared to give time to the students. In most circumstances, the difficulties that students face can be addressed through the usual one-to-one counseling process. However, there are circumstances when crisis situation occur in which immediate or same day intervention by counselor is called for. Counselors can help by providing an objective frame of reference within which the crisis can be considered, there can be a discussion of possible alternative, to promote healthy functioning and to obtain commitment from the students.

The stress reduction efforts are also to promote supportive parenting for students experiencing examination stress. Students that are observed pressurized due to the examination situation require parental help, care, affection and support. This attitude of the parents would be very beneficial to the students. Parents could also be involved in the treatment process, so that the stress condition can be controlled and reduced for the students at school and in the home environment.

Parent-child-interaction: The parents of students should be met in small group to discuss the parent-child relationship. Parent child interaction of students in senior classes is a fragile relationship. There is a binding between the parent-child and a lot of differences of opinion too. Most parent-child relationship has their ups and downs. This relationship is important to us as this sometimes affect the child's personality. Sessions should be held with parents on parent-child relationship.

Parents interact with their children in the way they think is right. They encounter avoidance, defensiveness, resistance and even hostility from their wards. Parents become confused they sometimes give up, they get frustrated in their interaction with their child, sometimes parent-child dialogue take the form of power struggles and conflict also. Parents may also begin to disagree to each other, when parents argue about what to do; children think that parents don't know what they are doing. Parents lose credibility in front of their own children.

Parents with severe relationship problems with children or sometimes dysfunctional families need to be referred to the

counsellor. The counsellor to understand the student's problems need to address the family problem. Thus, family counselling and family therapy may be required, so that the parent-child relationship is strengthened. Family therapy will facilitate the social worker/counselor to identify family patterns that contribute to behavioral issues or sometimes even mental health concerns with the students or with their family members. This therapy helps members to break those habits that cause the problem. Family therapy involves discussion and problem-solving sessions with the family as a whole or one to one with members having the problem. Family therapy sessions will help in strengthening communication patterns within the family. This will solve family problems or interactional issues and also address the examination stress. Sometimes issues of the family friends or neighborhood could be the cause of stress for the student, this further causes examination stress.

Peer mentors and teachers could help in examination stress surveillance. It is important to involve peer mentors and teachers in examination stress surveillance. Peers are another important group of the significant others who are directly in touch with the students. They can be an important helper to the student to first identify and then later to prevent and manage examination stress among the students.

Socialization with friends or peer relations plays a powerful role in the lives of adolescents. In adolescent years, some of the most enjoyable moments probably are spent with peers, on the telephone, in school activities, in the neighborhood, at dances parties, or just being together. Peer relationship is vital for adolescents. In childhood the focus of peer relation is on being accepted and liked by the friends. Being left out or not being noticed or rejected can have a damaging effect on the student's development and can be carried on to adolescence. Teenagers prefer to have smaller groups of peer relations, which are more intense and intimate (Santrock, 2004). Gottman and Parker (1987) listed six functions of friendship/peer group companionship, stimulation, physical support, ego support, social comparison and intimacy/affection. Acknowledging the importance of peer group, the intervention has a special role for the peer mentor.

Students who are sensitive towards children's issues and who show interest, those students would be trained as peer mentors from each class and will form a core group. The sessions that will be taken up with the volunteered peer mentors will introduce them to the phenomena of examination stress. It is important to identify signs to examination stress among students. Peer mentor could refer students to teachers/school social worker/counselor, when they identify students need help. The peer mentor core group could be sensitive and vigilant to identifying students with problem. Peer mentor could be on surveillance for their classmates, looking out for students who are having problem in studies and are tensed and worried about their performance or showing a change in their behavior. The responsive peer mentor, thus form a link between service providers and students who need help. The peer mentors will be in constant touch with the school social worker/counselor. If they identify students deteriorating in studies or with strange behavior, like high absenteeism, loneliness, these students will be brought to the notice of the school social worker/counselor.

Teachers are in constant interaction with the students, so they will also be involved in the surveillance team. Teachers too will be sensitized to identify and help students getting stressed

with examination or study pressures. Teachers will deal with the students in class and if need be, teachers will bring these students to the notice of the school social worker/counselor if they find students are unable to manage the examination stress. Thus, a safety net is spread around all students to identify, prevent or manage examination stress.

9. Conclusion

This kind of intervention would attempt to prevent examination stress among all the school students and to reduce the examination stress that has been diagnosed among students. It would be favorable to introduce this social work intervention in schools to facilitate students to cope with examination stress. So that all students are provided help to

enhance their performance during examinations and students get assistance if they succumb to the increased examination stress. The components of the sessions in this intervention would help school social worker/counselors to implement this effectively at all schools. In India there are many schools that do not have professional social worker/counselors; this intervention could form a basis to understand what needs to be done to help students. These schools can invite qualified persons who can take sessions to help students according to the different dimensions incorporated in this intervention design. It is important to address this situation of stress among students as the students need help. The school, teachers, peers and parents should be ready with the required help and support. This will aid in controlling the problem of examination stress.

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