



Understanding the Unseen: Key Factors Behind Mental Pressure in Secondary School Students and Strategies for Building Resilience in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Rising mental pressure of secondary school students is an apparent issue attributed by academic pressures, peers comparison, social media influence, family expectations, and lack of resources to cope. This article delves into the myriad elements that lead to mental distress among adolescents, emphasizing the impact of social pressures, academic settings, and personal resilience on mental health. This high-stakes environment, driven by parental and institutional pressure to perform, creates an atmosphere of constant focus on academic success. Furthermore, social media exacerbates peer competition and cultivates a culture of comparison that negatively impacts self-esteem and mental health. Family obligations combined with socioeconomic challenges make this mental burden heavier and the students more susceptible to anxiety and stress-related conditions. The article also offers remedies for resilience that should be implemented by schools, such as cultivating a positive environment, adopting mental health classes, making counseling service available, and promoting participation in extra-curricular activities. With strategies for building resilience and coping skills being a focus, schools also need to help these students deal with mental pressure and cope with academic and social hurdles that might arise. By taking a proactive stance, you can not only benefit the mental health of the students, but you can also improve their academic outcomes and personal growth.

Keywords: Factors, Mental Pressure, Secondary School Students, Resilience

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental pressure among secondary school students has emerged as a pressing concern for educators, parents, and mental health professionals. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage, marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes, making students more vulnerable to stressors. Academic demands, heightened competition, and the rapid pace of societal change are now intersecting with traditional challenges, creating a unique set of pressures for today's youth (Anderson & Hiebert, 2020). Academic expectations are often intense, with students striving to meet high standards set by schools, families, and peers. The constant push for excellence is further compounded by social pressures, including peer comparison and the influence of social media, which amplify feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. In addition, cultural and familial expectations can sometimes clash with students' individual aspirations, creating internal conflicts that exacerbate stress. These factors collectively take a toll on students' mental well-being affecting the performance of students in general as well as their personal growth. Considering the prevailing presence of these stressors, there needs to be a prominent approach by schools to rectify mental pressure in students. Schools are uniquely positioned to positively influence adolescents' environments through supportive communities and providing students with skills, when faced with adversity, to build resilience. Educational institutions can ease the mental stress of their students by recognizing the reasons behind it and by taking precautionary measures. Tackling this issue is pivotal—not just for success in school but for raising well-rounded, emotionally healthy people prepared to thrive in a complex world.

KEY FACTORS DRIVING MENTAL PRESSURE

1. Academic Performance and Pressure to Excel: In many cases, academic performance is one of the most important impressions of a child's perceived capacity and potential, seen as a forecast of future success. This emphasis on education and academic excellence induces substantial mental pressure on secondary school pupils when they regularly navigate stringent curricula, high-stakes exams, and continuous assessments (Dombrovskis, Guseva, & Tolstov, 2021). In such a competitive learning ecosystem, performance and worth become one, and students are at risk of feeling stressed, anxious and burned out. The frequent high-stakes examinations, the incessant victimization, and the multilayered expectations from parents, teachers and society all together cumulatively cause major mental pressure on secondary school students. Board exams and entrance tests, which often dictate career trajectories, create chronic stress due to the fear of failure, leading to insomnia, anxiety, and depression. The relentless cycle of internal assessments, assignments, and projects further amplifies this burden, making students feel perpetually judged and eroding their intrinsic motivation. Unrealistic parental expectations

add another layer of strain, as students struggle with anxiety, guilt, and fear of disappointment when they cannot meet projected aspirations. Similarly, well-meaning but rigid teacher expectations, coupled with a stigma around failure, discourage students from seeking help, isolating them in their struggles. Cultural and societal norms, particularly in regions where academic success is tied to family pride and social status, drive students to sacrifice personal interests and well-being to meet external demands. This growing pressure is connected to increasing mental health issues, such as test anxiety and depression, underscoring the need to reimagine academic achievement. In summary, schools and families can guide students towards managing academic pressures in ways that protect their mental health, not through avoidance, but through empowering holistic development, emotional intelligence, and seeing obstacles as opportunities not threats.

2. Peer Competition and Comparison: Peer competition and comparison are prevalent in secondary school environments, where adolescents are more influenced by their peers than other social influences. This greatly perpetuates mental strain where students often compare their self-worth with that of their classmates in terms of academic performance, skillsets, and social circles. In competitive academic environments, one's desire to surpass their peers can foster a frenetic pursuit of perfectionism, which in turn can have detrimental effects — inducing elevated anxiety and lower self-esteem (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Students may become discouraged when they believe they are not measuring up to the standards set by their peers, whether it be in academics, sports or other activities. The social dynamics at schools also add to the impact of peer comparison. Most adolescents are motivated to belong to certain social groups or meet expectations dictated by their networks of peers. The push to conform to standards that differ from personal talents and skills—or worse, skills that take far more time, energy and resources to acquire than any student possesses—equals frustration and low self-worth. Moreover, competitive friendships, where peers are both accomplices and competitors, create an oxymoronic pairing that breeds a whirlwind of mixed feelings of buddy-feeling and envy. These dynamics create an ecosystem in which the success of another is tantamount to a personal failure, mounting mental pressure.

Social media exacerbates this issue by providing a constant stream of curated success stories and achievements from peers, creating a distorted perception of reality. Students who consume such content may feel that their own efforts and accomplishments are inadequate in comparison, even if they are performing well by objective standards. This "highlight reel effect" often leads to feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and envy, which can compound stress and anxiety levels (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2020). Peer competition also extends to non-academic areas such as appearance, popularity, and material possessions. Adolescents often face pressure to emulate trends and maintain a certain social image, which can result in additional stress, especially for those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Such comparisons rattle students' sense of individuality and leave them more susceptible to inferiority feelings. In order for schools to reduce peer competition and comparison, they need to cultivate a culture that appreciates individual strengths and celebrates togetherness. Projects included in groups, peer mentors and valued in various talents could help shift the focus to collective support rather than contention. Teaching students to celebrate their unique attributes and focus on self-improvement instead of external comparisons is a significant way that educators and parents can help as well. Emphasizing the importance of empathy and inclusivity in school can help lower the psychological pressure created by competition not only between peers but also friends, which in turn helps create healthier relationships and better mental health amongst students.

3. Social Media Kinds of Influence: Social media is now an integral aspect of life for teenagers and this greatly affects their mental health. Although these platforms provide chances for connection and self-expression, they also add considerably to mental strain by exposing users to idealized and curated versions of members of their peer groups' existence. The constant influx of curated lives that present only the best of people, places, and experiences results in unrealistic imagery and students questioning their own lives: why don't they look/feel/sound like that? This comparison is frequently accompanied by feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth (Chou & Edge, 2012), and a sensation known as Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), where users feel anxiety from missed participation in events or trends from what is presented online. Social media platforms themselves, of course, are algorithmically driven and reward posts that keep users engaged, typically fueled by aspirational and unattainable representations. As adolescents are still developing their identities, they are especially vulnerable to this kind of influence." This can result in young people internalizing these unrealistic depictions as ideal standards for success, beauty, or happiness which, in turn, can lead to heightened feelings of self-criticism and dissatisfaction with their own lives. This constant need to measure up can be mentally exhausting, contributing to anxiety, stress, and even depression. Social media also places pressure on students to construct and maintain a "perfect" online persona. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat encourage users to share highlights of their lives, leading to a skewed representation of reality. For many adolescents, this translates into a need to present themselves in a way that garners validation through likes, comments, and shares. The pursuit of such external validation can erode intrinsic self-worth and create a cycle of dependency, where self-esteem becomes contingent on virtual approval. When posts fail to receive the expected level of engagement, students may experience feelings of rejection, inadequacy, or social isolation, further exacerbating their mental distress (Twenge & Campbell, 2018). The addictive nature of social media is another factor contributing to mental stress. Prolonged screen time and compulsive checking of notifications disrupt sleep patterns, reduce face-to-face interactions, and take time away from activities that promote well-being, such as physical exercise and hobbies. Sleep deprivation, in particular, has been linked to heightened stress levels, impaired cognitive functioning, and poor academic performance, creating a vicious cycle for students already under academic and social pressures. Moreover, social media can be a platform for cyberbullying, which has devastating effects on adolescent mental health. Negative comments, online harassment, and public shaming can lead to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation among vulnerable students. The anonymity afforded by social media platforms often emboldens perpetrators, making it difficult for victims to seek help or escape from the abuse. To address the influence of social media on students' mental health, it is crucial to promote digital literacy and responsible online behavior. Schools and parents should educate adolescents about the curated nature of social media content and encourage them to critically evaluate what they see online. Setting healthy boundaries, such as limiting screen time and promoting offline activities, can help mitigate the adverse effects of excessive social media use. By fostering a balanced relationship with technology, students can reduce their exposure to stress-inducing content and focus on building authentic connections and self-confidence.

4. Family Expectations and Cultural Pressures: Family expectations and cultural pressures are deeply intertwined and play a pivotal role in shaping the aspirations, academic choices, and performance outcomes of secondary school students. In many cultures, particularly in collectivist societies, academic success is not merely an individual achievement but a reflection of family pride and societal standing. Parents often hold high expectations for their children to excel academically, envisioning prestigious careers in fields such as medicine, engineering, or law. While these aspirations can serve as motivators, they can also become a source of significant mental pressure when students' personal interests or abilities do not align with their families' expectations (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). The pressure to conform to family expectations often leads students to suppress their own dreams and passions. For instance, a student interested in pursuing a creative field such as art or music may feel compelled to choose a more "respectable" career path to satisfy parental demands.

It leads to guilt, frustration, and a sense of lack of control over our lives. For instance, those who languish below academic benchmarks "might see their academic careers as disappointments, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem and strain on family relationships." This pressure is exacerbated by cultural attitudes toward education. In much of Asia and the Middle East, for example, academic achievement is ingrained as a cultural practice with the goal of achieving financial security and family honor. While the need to get good scores in competitive exams and make it to leading institutions is undeniably stressful, it is the case of public pressure that gets heavy on students' shoulders if they fail to live up to their family's expectations. These cultural expectations may also lead to a reluctance to speak about academic struggles, because to do so would carry the stigma of openly talking about failure or stress. With little to no communication, students may feel alienated, left without support, further aggravating their mental illness (Quach et al., 2015). And family dynamics, like comparisons between siblings or between siblings and their peers, can add to the mental strain. Say things like "Why can't you do what your cousin does?" or "Your friend got a better score; you need to push yourself more" creates a competitive home environment that only serves to undermine a student's confidence further. The pressure can be especially intense for students of low socioeconomic status, whom society tends to view as having few opportunities at socioeconomic mobility and thus relies heavily on academic achievement. This can create feelings of obligation where you are burdening the students with unreasonable expectations without regard to all the adversities they may be facing. Gender roles are also intertwined with familial and societal expectations.

In some cultures, male students may be expected to pursue ambitious careers as future breadwinners, while female students may face pressure to excel academically to prove their worth, yet still adhere to traditional familial roles. These conflicting expectations can create unique stressors for both genders, impacting their mental health and academic engagement. To alleviate these pressures, it is essential for families to adopt a balanced approach that values both achievement and well-being. Parents should encourage open communication, where students feel safe to express their aspirations and challenges without fear of judgment. Schools can support this by conducting workshops or counseling sessions that educate families about the importance of aligning expectations with students' interests and capacities. By fostering a supportive and empathetic environment at home, families can reduce the mental strain on students and empower them to pursue their goals with confidence and resilience.

5. Insufficient Coping Skills and Support Systems: Many secondary school students have not yet developed the tools that will help them navigate academic, social, and personal challenges. When my students lack these necessary skills, they are more susceptible to the negative impacts of stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue. Developmentally, effective coping mechanisms such as problem-solving strategies, emotional regulation strategies, and time management strategies are often underdeveloped in adolescents, and these skills can leave them poorly prepared to manage an increasingly demanding environment. Indeed, studies show that students with limited access to mental health resources – or those who have not learned adaptive coping strategies – are at increased risk for mental health problems, such as chronic stress and anxiety disorders (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014). This is compounded by the lack of support systems available to them within schools. Most of the educational institutions do not have dedicated counselling services or trained professionals to address the psychological needs of the students. The lack of mental health resources for students means that there's nowhere for students to go to express concerns or seek guidance, and that means students are left to navigate through stress alone. And students with mental health struggles often do not seek help, even when they can. To mitigate these gaps, we need to implement holistic mental health programs across schools, train teachers with basic counseling skills, and cultivate a safe space in schools where all students can express their vulnerability without being judged (Stewart & Sun, 2021).

6. Socioeconomic Pressures and Financial Insecurity: Socioeconomic pressures and financial insecurity are major factors affecting students' mental well-being and academic performance. Families facing financial constraints often struggle to provide adequate educational resources, such as textbooks, tutoring, or internet access, creating barriers to effective learning. Limited access to extracurricular activities, which are essential for holistic development, further compounds the issue by depriving students of opportunities to explore interests and build confidence. These limitations can lead to feelings of inadequacy and isolation as students compare themselves to peers with greater resources, heightening their mental stress (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). The psychological impact of financial insecurity extends beyond academic challenges. Students from low-income families may carry the emotional burden of their family's financial struggles, experiencing guilt or anxiety over their perceived inability to contribute or alleviate the situation. In extreme cases, financial pressures may force students to prioritize work over studies, disrupting their education and increasing the risk of burnout. Research suggests that chronic stress related to economic hardship has persistent mental health consequences, including increases in anxiety and depression (Kim, 2014), as well as lower academic attainment.

THE RESILIENT PHASES OF LIFE: CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS

Creating a Supportive School Environment: Creating a supportive school environment with a focus on emotional safety is key for building resiliency in students. This creates an environment of belonging, empathy and respect for one another. When a student feels valued and supported, he/she is more willing to engage with teachers, counselors or peers in times of stress. Inclusive initiatives, including anti-bullying programs, peer mentoring, and events

that embrace diversity school wide can help foster a culture of empathy. Schools can also train teachers to spot signs of emotional distress and respond appropriately. Emotional safety includes letting students know they can share their thoughts without the threat of getting in trouble or judged — to talk about the things that they're dealing with. A supportive environment also includes the physical spaces, like wellness rooms, where students are encouraged to take a break or a moment to regroup when it all gets to be too much. Universities that promote these environments experience lower stress levels among students and higher engagement in academics (Bernard, 2006). Focusing on emotional well-being helps schools not only tackle mental health issues but also to empower students to develop resilience and thrive academically and socially.

Integrating Mental Health Education: By incorporating mental health education into school curricula, students gain essential knowledge and skills needed to effectively manage stress. Teaching mental health education can equip students to build skills such as emotional regulation, stress management, and resilience-building. It also helps normalize discussions around mental health, breaking the stigma that often discourages young people from seeking support. For example, classroom activities focused on identifying emotions or coping strategies can make students more self-aware and proactive in managing their well-being. Mental health awareness campaigns, workshops, and seminars conducted by professionals can further reinforce the importance of emotional health. Educators trained in mental health literacy can act as frontline resources, guiding students toward help when needed. Schools can also incorporate age-appropriate content, such as teaching mindfulness practices for younger students and providing information about recognizing mental health disorders for older students. Research suggests that mental health education significantly improves students' attitudes toward seeking help and reduces anxiety levels by equipping them with tools to handle stress (Regehr et al., 2013). By embedding mental health education into their framework, schools can create a culture where mental well-being is prioritized alongside academic achievement.

3. Access to Counseling and Support Services: Providing accessible and effective counseling services is a cornerstone of supporting student mental health. School-based counseling offers a safe space where students can discuss their challenges without fear of judgment. Trained counselors can address a range of issues, from academic stress to social or emotional difficulties, helping students develop healthy coping mechanisms. Studies demonstrate that students with access to professional mental health services are better equipped to manage stress, perform academically, and maintain positive peer relationships (Hoare et al., 2020). Schools can enhance their counseling capabilities by partnering with mental health organizations or offering telehealth services to reach students in underserved areas. Additionally, implementing a tiered support system—where universal interventions address the general student population and targeted interventions support at-risk individuals—can maximize the impact of counseling services. Regular workshops or drop-in sessions can encourage students to utilize these resources proactively. Moreover, counselors can collaborate with teachers and parents to ensure a holistic support system, creating an environment where students feel cared for and understood. By prioritizing access to counseling, schools can address mental health challenges early, improving students' emotional resilience and overall well-being.

4. Encouraging Extracurricular Engagement: Extracurricular activities, such as sports, music, art, or drama, provide students with valuable outlets for stress relief and personal growth. These activities allow students to explore their interests, build new skills, and form meaningful social connections. Engaging in extracurriculars fosters a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence, which can mitigate feelings of inadequacy often linked to academic or social pressures. Participation in team-based activities, such as sports, also promotes teamwork and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for emotional well-being. Research shows that students involved in extracurricular programs demonstrate stronger self-concepts, improved emotional regulation, and better resilience when facing stressors (Mahoney et al., 2003). Schools can encourage participation by offering a diverse range of activities that cater to varying interests and by providing financial support to students who may otherwise be unable to participate. Additionally, recognizing and celebrating achievements in these areas can reinforce the value of non-academic pursuits. Encouraging balance helps students build better coping strategies and lessens the mental toll of exams.

5. Fostering Open Communication with Teachers and Parents: Open, respectful communication between students, teachers, and parents is crucial in creating a mutually supportive network to help mitigate stress and mental pressure. By keeping the lines of communication open with students, teachers build trust that allows students to actively report their struggles and ask for help. Consistent check-ins — whether it's one-on-one meetings or informal conversations — can help educators detect when students are experiencing stress or anxiety. Teachers can offer support and be empathetic listeners in a way that creates a supportive environment, reducing feelings of loneliness (Roeser et al., 2000). Parents also serve as critical pressure release valves, creating a home culture that prioritizes emotional health over academic performance. There is a healthy involvement of the parent offering guidance and support without pressuring unrealistic expectations. Schools can promote communication through open contact and joint action of parents and children that strengthen parent-child collaboration. Supporting research shows that the resilience and ability to cope that students demonstrate is greatly affected by when they feel supported by both their teachers and their parents (Spera, 2005). By fostering open communication, families and schools can collaborate to meet students' needs, resulting in a holistic support network that promotes well-being and success in school and beyond.

6. Teaching Techniques of Mindfulness and Stress-Reduction: Techniques of mindfulness and stress-reduction are extremely effective in managing mental pressure and building resilience. Meditate, Deep Breathing Exercises and Guided Visualization These practices encourage students to concentrate on the present moment, which minimizes anxiety and enhances emotional regulation.

Incorporating mindfulness into the school day, through activities like mindful mornings or short relaxation breaks, can help students develop a habit of self-care. Research indicates that mindfulness practices significantly improve students' emotional resilience, enhance attention spans, and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression (Bishop et al., 2004). Teaching these techniques equips students with practical skills to manage stress, not just in school but throughout life. Schools can also provide workshops or integrate mindfulness education into health and wellness programs, ensuring that all students have access to these benefits. Additionally, encouraging staff to model mindfulness practices can create a supportive environment that reinforces the importance of mental well-being. By prioritizing mindfulness and stress reduction, schools can empower students to take an active role in managing their mental health, fostering both immediate and long-term resilience.

CONCLUSION

Mental pressure among secondary school students is a complex issue influenced by academic expectations, peer competition, social media, family pressures, and socioeconomic challenges. These factors create a web of stress that impacts students' mental well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance. However, schools hold a pivotal position in mitigating these pressures and fostering resilience. By cultivating a supportive environment grounded in empathy and understanding, schools can provide students with the emotional safety they need to thrive. Integrating mental health education into the curriculum not only raises awareness but also equips students with essential skills to manage stress effectively. Access to counseling services and partnerships with mental health professionals ensures that students receive timely and professional support. Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities offers creative outlets for stress relief and opportunities to develop self-confidence and emotional regulation. Furthermore, promoting open communication between students, teachers, and parents strengthens the network of support, creating a collaborative environment for stress management. Teaching mindfulness and stress-reduction techniques empowers students to navigate daily challenges with resilience and composure. Together, these strategies underscore the transformative role schools can play in addressing mental health challenges. By adopting these proactive measures, schools not only enhance students' academic success but also contribute to their holistic development, ensuring they are well-prepared to face the demands of an ever-evolving world. In doing so, schools become not just centers of learning, but pillars of emotional and psychological support for the next generation.

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