



## Perceived Stress of High School Students

Yeshi Nidup<sup>1</sup>, Deepak Raj Cheri<sup>2\*</sup>, Singye Wangchuk<sup>3</sup>, Thinley Jamtsho<sup>2</sup>, Bagawath Bhandari<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ministry of education, Thimphu, Bhutan <sup>2</sup>Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School, Phuentsholing, Bhutan. <sup>3</sup>Sonamgang Middle Secondary school, Phuentsholing, Bhutan. <sup>2</sup>Phuentsholing Middle Secondary School, Phuentsholing, Bhutan. <sup>4</sup>Phuentsholing Higher Secondary School, Phuentsholing, Bhutan

\*Corresponding Author: [rajchetri81@gmail.com](mailto:rajchetri81@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This study evaluates the prevalence and severity of perceived stress amongst 638 students ranging from grade nine to twelve in Phuntshothang School under Punakha district, Bhutan. The quantitative method was used with the perceived stress scale (PSS) as a research tool to understand the level of stress in students. A questionnaire with a 5-Point Likert scale was instituted to understand the symptoms of stress and the factors causing stress. The Cronbach's alpha was calculated to be 0.90 and 0.83 for symptoms and factors, respectively, which were greater than 0.7 and in conformity with the reliability test. Findings showed low to severe levels of stress amongst students, with minimum students experiencing low and severe stress, and a majority of them experiencing moderate stress. Symptoms like fatigue, difficulty falling asleep, boredom, depression, diarrhea, cramps, gastritis, constipation, restlessness, and itching were experienced less frequently, while the majority of the students experienced headache, tense muscles, sore neck and back, anxiety, worries, phobias, irritability, anger and eating disorder more frequently. Among the five factors, physical factors, family factors, academic factors, relationship factors, and social factors, the study found social factors to be the greatest cause of stress, followed by academic factors. Family factors and relationship factors contributed least to stress after physical factors. The Significant gender difference was observed, with more male students suffering from stress than female students. The school management, counselors, and teachers are recommended to organize stress management programs and design recreational activities to engage students and keep them stress-free.

**Keywords:** Academic stress, factors causing stress, perceived stress scale, stress, symptoms.

## Introduction



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Stress is the response of an individual to a variety of situations that one encounters at different stages of life (Akacan, 2017). It is a common problem prevailing in organizations, homes, offices, or an institution worldwide, depending on the nature of the job, the working atmosphere, personal health, living environment, and one's ability to manage stress. Students at boarding schools are prone to stress, ranging from low to severe, demanding medical attention. There can be several factors causing stress among students in a boarding school; Physical factors, family factors, academic factors, relationship factors, social factors, and many more showing several symptoms.

Staying away from their parents and loved ones for a year is challenging for students who otherwise had been raised under parental love and compassion. Students staying in the hostel with friends varying in individual differences can be stressful at times. Some children who are unique in physical appearance, complexion, or behavior could constantly be bullied or teased, making their life stressful unless one possesses a high resilience and strategies to manage stress.

All the students studying at Phuntshothang School are being relocated to a new place away from their parents, and the likelihood of experiencing stress due to family factors are high. They will miss the love of their parents and siblings having to stay under the strict norms of hostel custodians. Students may feel that their parents are not supportive when their parents do not turn up to meet them for almost a year due to movement restrictions imposed during the COVID19 pandemic. Some students with family issues and divorced parents will experience more stress; at the same time, many of their parents cannot meet the financial demands of their children due to unstable incomes.

Students in day school spend 5 to 7 hours of their day with friends and teachers at school and the remaining hours with their family, due to which they are less likely to experience stress. On the other hand, boarding school students live on the campus for 24 hours, making them vulnerable to experiencing severe stress. However, students experience less stress with mutually good, positive fellow feelings, respect, and interaction and vice versa. There are a series of activities carried out in boarding schools, which keeps them engaged from as early as 5 A.M till 10 P.M, leading to stress among the students. Although students spend some time for their leisure, heavy workloads throughout the day could be stressful. They work hard to get good scores or grades to fulfill their parental and teacher expectations. Although some students fulfill their parental and teacher expectations, many of them have little capacity to fulfill these demands. This gap between educational expectation and performance may lead to their stress.

Students in a day school have the freedom to move around and meet friends and relatives whenever they wish to, which they cannot do in a boarding school. They have a fixed time to hang out, after which meeting with the opposite sex is restricted to curb several disciplinary issues. Some students who may like to develop relationships or are already into relationships with the opposite sex may find it stressful when they are restricted from such practices in the school.

Any student under stress is likely to experience symptoms like headaches, tense muscles, fatigue, anxiety, insomnia, anger, depression, eating disorder, and stomach disorder, which in the severe case may lead to suicidal ideation.

Stress is an invisible emotional change, and it is difficult to identify and manage before it worsens. Students who are good at coping with stress may be least affected than those who are less resilient when put under the same stressor level.

Research shows that physical and mental sickness is significantly associated with stress. Although socio-psychological situations induce stress and associated health problems, there is no proper study in the school to determine if the students are suffering from stress and sickness. Therefore, the school management must assess the prevalence of stress among students and provide the right intervention before it is too late. The fundamental purpose of this study is to evaluate the prevalence of stress and its severity among all the students studying in the school to ensure the emotional wellbeing and safety of the students.

### **Literature Review**

Stress is defined as a reaction affecting one's emotion, intellect, and behavior (Dangi & George, 2020) stimulated by the physical environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as one tries to adjust to it (Rogala et al., 2008). Akacan (2017) defines stress as factors causing distress, tension, and anxiety in one's life. Stress is physical or mental pressure experienced by an individual due to environmental factors or the inability to meet life's demands and expectations.

Everyone with varying severity experiences stress. Most people can manage a certain level of stress, while others cannot. Khan et al. (2013) found significant stress levels in students. Bhargava and Trivedi (2018); Yasmin et al. (2020) in their study found students experiencing severe levels of stress. Similarly, Jia and Loo (2018) mentioned high stress levels in undergraduate students.

Moreover, Beltran et al. (2020) noted intense to severe stress in students due to prolonged confinement due to the COVID19 pandemic. Interestingly, Bataineh (2013) mentioned moderate to high stress due to fear of failure. However, Edjah et al. (2020) found moderate stress levels in students. While Prabu (2015) posited moderate levels of academic stress, with male students having higher stress than female students; urban students had higher stress than students in rural settings, and science students showed higher stress than arts students. Leblanc (2009) claimed severe psychological stress deteriorates the academic performance of students, which is a cause of concern.

Several factors lead to varying levels of stress in students. Covid 19 pandemic, frequent lockdown, environmental and social factors (Yasmin et al., 2020); and relationship stress, financial and psychological stress (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). Students' stress can also be related to adaptation to the university environment, family separation, failure to find expectations from the university environment and, abandonment of past habits (Akacan, 2017); having to complete more modules in less time (Khan et al., 2013); and academic overload, awkward courses, low motivation, high family expectations and fear of failure

(Bataineh, 2013). A huge amount of academic work or daily academic-related activities more than what they can handle gets frustrating, leading to stress (Essel & Owusu, 2017). When students fail to meet the expectations of parents academically, they usually experience two types of stress, financial constraints to support living at par with the other people (Essel & Owusu, 2017) and a lack of support from family in providing instrumental and emotional assistance which further hinder their learning (Chao, 2012).

Other stress factors are related to gender, year of study, parental divorce (Teo, 2018); coronavirus - prolonged confinement, socio-economics crisis for education (Beltran, Martinez, Rodriguez & Valderrama, 2020); academic and social life (Edjah et al., 2020). The test, papers, projects, competitive nature within one's chosen field, financial worries, and future employment prospects are commonly known stressors (Rana et al., 2019).

The stress symptoms can vary from one student to another. However, some general symptoms are exhibited by all the students undergoing stress. Students experiencing stress feel tired and experience anxiety and mental disturbances (Yasmin et al., 2020). They also exhibit some forms of eating disorders, depression, and headaches (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018). Other symptoms like falling academic performance, lack of desire to enter university campus, lack of interest in studying, avoiding classes, failure to develop social relationships, and failure to make new friends in the university are reported (Akacan, 2017). The decline in academic performance, hindrance in effectiveness while studying, and effective time management (Khan et al., 2013); anxiety, mental disturbances, behavioral changes (Teo, 2018); depression, anger, and insomnia (Beltran et al., 2020) are also observed. In some cases, students were found to be lost in their minds, have insomnia, and worry (Edjah et al., 2020). Due to prolonged stress, students suffer from irritation, loss of concentration, unexplained fear, isolation, experimenting with drugs and alcohol, headaches, poor appetite, and low immunity (Rana et al., 2019).

### **Purpose**

This study aims to examine the prevalence and severity of perceived stress among high school students at Phuntshothang School in Punakha district, Bhutan.

In this context, the following questions were sought to be answered.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How stressed are the students?
2. Is there a difference in stress levels between males and females?
3. What are the most common symptoms of stress experienced by students?
4. What are the contributing factors to the cause of stress?

### **Methodology**

The quantitative method was applied for this study since it was suitable as the data collected were numeric representations of their symptoms and opinions.

The perceived stress scale (PSS) used in the study was originally developed by Cohen et al. (1983) and used by many researchers. The reliability test showed coefficient alpha of 0.84

and 0.85 for two college samples (Cohen et al., 1983). The reliability test for this study using Cronbach's alpha was calculated to be 0.90 for the items related to symptoms of stress, and 0.83 for the items containing factors causing stress among students. The questionnaires were established valid as the alpha obtained was greater than 0.70. The research participants rate each item of PSS on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Chao, 2012) that ranges from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The points were summed up for each student and scores were grouped into three categories; low perceived stress (0 - 13), moderate perceived stress (14 - 26), and high perceived stress (27 - 40). The questionnaire contains three parts: the first part is demographic information about students. The second part consists of Likert scale items to measure the stress level ranging from low to severe. The third part is to find out the factors causing stress. The data were analyzed using percentages and descriptive analysis in SPSS/Excel and interpreted in the form of graphs, charts, and tables. The purposive sampling was done to collect the data from all grade nine to twelve students who are currently studying in the present school.

### **Sampling**

The school had a total strength of 866 students, and all of them were included in the survey, among which responses from 638 students from grades nine to twelve were considered after the data cleaning. (N = 270) 42.3% were male, and (N=368) 57.7% were female. Among them, (N=197) 30.9% of the respondents were from class nine, (N=215) 33.7% from class ten, (N=123) 19.3% from class eleven, and (N=103) 16.1% students from class twelve. The detailed demographic information of the sample is given below in table 3.2.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of the participants

	<b>Male (m)</b>	<b>Female (f)</b>	<b>Total (m/f)</b>	<b>Male (%)</b>	<b>Female (%)</b>	<b>Total %</b>
Class 9	72	125	197	11.3	19.6	30.9
Class 10	80	135	215	12.5	21.2	33.7
Class 11	62	61	123	9.7	9.6	19.3
Class 12	56	47	103	8.8	7.4	16.1
	270	368	638	42.3	57.7	100

Student participants involved in responding to the questionnaires were of various age groups; (N = 169) 26.5% of the participants were between 10 to 15 years of age, (N = 452) 70.8% of them were between 16 to 20 years of age, (N = 15) 2.4% of them were between the age of 21 to 25 years. Finally, (N = 2) 0.3% were above 26 years of age. The details of the age group of the population sample are given in figure 1 below.

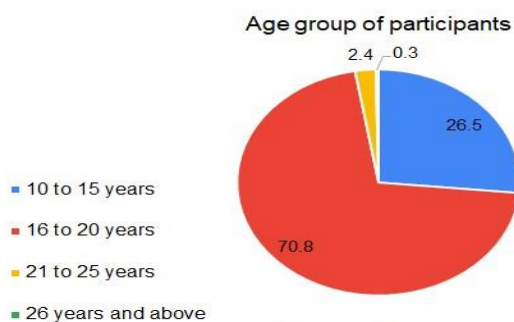


Figure 1

Figure 1. The age group of the population

### Findings

The study consisted of three sections; the first section contained the questions where participants were asked to rate from 1 to 4 if they experienced the ten symptoms given in the perceived stress scale (PSS) within the last month. The second section had 12 questions asking how often they experienced various types of stress, and the final section comprised 21 factors causing the stress to the participants. The final section had a set of questions to collect respondents' views on the factors causing stress. Table 2 represents the level of perceived stress among students of Phuentshothang School.

Table 2. Level of Perceived Stress among students of PSS

Stress level	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Low Perceived stress (0 – 13)	17	6.3	12	3.3	29	4.5
Moderate Perceived stress (14 – 26)	244	90.4	301	81.8	545	85.4
High Perceived stress (27 – 40)	9	3.3	55	14.9	64	10
	270	100	368	100	638	100

Ten questions were used to measure participants' stress levels, and participants were asked to self-rate against each statement. The study found that (N = 29) 4.5% of the total participants were experiencing low perceived stress. There were (N = 545) 85.4% of them experiencing a moderate level of perceived stress, and (N = 64) 10% among 638 participants were experiencing high levels of perceived stress. In terms of gender, (N = 12) 3.3% of female participants were found to experience low levels of stress as opposed to (N = 17) 6.3% of males; while (N = 244) 90.4% of males and (N = 301) 81.8% of female participants were found to experience moderate levels of stress. There were also small sections of students experiencing high-stress levels, (N = 9) 3.3% of them were males and (N = 55) 14.9% of them female, respectively.

Table 3 below shows scores in the mean and standard deviation of symptoms experienced by the student participants.

Table 3. Symptoms of stress experienced by students

	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. Headaches	2.44	1.75
2. Tense muscles, sore neck, and back	2.46	1.84

3. Fatigue	1.63	1.88
4. Anxiety, Worry, Phobias	2.43	2.08
5. Difficulty falling asleep	1.84	2.04
6. Irritability	2.71	2.08
7. Insomnia ( Not able to sleep)	1.37	1.86
8. How often do you get angry/hostile?	2.93	1.93
9. Boredom and depression	1.95	2.07
10. Eating too much or too little	2.66	2.21
11. Diarrhea, Cramps, Gas, Constipation	1.97	1.79
12. Restlessness, itching, tics	1.86	1.95

Among the 12 symptoms that student participants have responded to, based on how often they experienced each of the symptoms, the participants have expressed that they often get angry (with  $M = 2.93 \pm 1.93$ ), accompanied by irritability and scoring (with  $M = 2.71 \pm 2.08$ ) followed by eating disorder, where the loss of appetite or eat too much (with the  $M = 2.66 \pm 2.21$ ). The participants also reported experiencing the following symptoms: headache (with  $M = 2.44 \pm 1.75$ ), tense muscles, sore neck and back (with  $M = 2.46 \pm 1.84$ ). Anxiety, worry, and phobias (with  $M = 2.43 \pm 2.08$ ), while they also expressed to have mild symptoms like fatigue (with  $M = 1.63 \pm 1.88$ ), difficulty falling asleep ( $M = 1.84 \pm 2.04$ ), insomnia ( $M = 1.37 \pm 1.86$ ), boredom and depression (with  $M = 1.95 \pm 2.07$ ), Diarrhea, cramps, gastritis, constipation (with  $M = 1.97 \pm 1.79$ ) and finally restlessness, itching, tics (with  $M = 1.86 \pm 1.95$ ).

Table 4 below represents the score based on the perception of the students on physical factors contributing to the cause of stress. The questions were designed with a five-point Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree). The participants moderately agreed to the first two items under the physical factors. The participants felt inferior to other mates in the school (with  $M = 2.81 \pm 1.02$ ). They felt inferior due to their physical appearance (with  $M = 2.7 \pm 1.1$ ); on the other hand, they disagreed (with  $M = 2.3 \pm 1.15$ ) that their height was the cause of stress for them.

**Table 4.** Physical factors

	$\bar{x}$	SD
1. I feel inferior to other mates in the school	2.81	1.02
2. I feel inferior due to my physical appearance	2.7	1.1
3. I feel stressed due to my height	2.3	1.15
<b>Average</b>	2.6	1.1

Table 5 shows the mean and standard deviation for items 4 to 9 under family factors. Respondents strongly disagreed (with  $M = 1.6 \pm 0.9$ ) with the statement, "I feel there is less/no support from my parents". They disagreed that their parents do not get along well ( $M = 1.98 \pm 1.13$ ) and they face difficulties getting along with siblings (with  $M = 1.87 \pm 1.01$ ).

**Table 5.** Family Factors



	$\bar{x}$	SD
4. I feel there is less/no support from my parents	1.6	0.9
5. I get stressed as my parents do not get along well	1.98	1.13
6. I face difficulty in getting along with siblings	1.87	1.01
7. My parent(s) have expectations beyond my capability	3	1.25
8. I worry if my family can support me financially.	3.18	1.21
9. I find it difficult to stay away from the parent(s).	3.5	1.2
<b>Average</b>	2.5	1.1

The respondents moderately agreed (with  $M = 3 \pm 1.25$ ) that their parents have expectations beyond their capability, which they consider a cause of stress to them. They also moderately agreed (with  $M = 3.18 \pm 1.21$ ) that they worry because their parents may not be able to provide them with financial support. The respondents agreed with the highest mean among the family factor (with  $M = 3.5 \pm 1.2$ ), stating that staying away from their family is stressful.

**Table 6.** School/Academic Factors

	$\bar{x}$	SD
10. I am not interested in some of the subjects	3.11	1.17
11. School activities are stressful	3.2	1.14
12. School timing is too hectic	3.43	1.14
13. I worry about my exam (s)	4.6	0.7
14. I worry as I don't get enough time to study.	3.95	1.05
15. I worry about my safety in school.	3.19	1.26
16. I get stressed because of too much homework/assignments.	4.07	1.04
<b>Average</b>	3.7	1.1

Table 6 above represents participants' responses on school or academic factors in which respondents strongly agreed (with  $M = 4.6 \pm 0.7$ ), stating that worrying about their exams is the highest cause of stress for them. They agreed ( $M = 4.07 \pm 1.04$ ) that they get stressed due to too much homework/assignments, scoring second highest in the academic factors. Similarly, respondents agreed (with  $M = 3.43 \pm 1.14$  and  $M = 3.95 \pm 1.05$ ) that school timing is too hectic, and they worry that they may not get enough time to study, respectively. They moderately agree with ( $M = 3.11 \pm 1.17$ ) that they are not interested in some of the subjects, ( $M = 3.2 \pm 1.14$ ) to school activities are stressful, ( $M = 3.19 \pm 1.26$ ) stating that they worry about their safety in the school.

**Table 7.** Relationship Factors

	$\bar{x}$	SD
17. No freedom to date/ have a relationship with the opposite sex	2.44	1.37
18. I have a problem getting along with my friends	2.61	1.11
<b>Average</b>	2.5	1.24



Table 7 contains participants' responses on relationship factors where they moderately agreed (with  $M = 2.61 \pm 1.11$ ) to the statement "I have a problem getting along with my friends. The respondents agreed (with  $M = 2.44 \pm 1.37$ ) that they do not get the freedom to date or have relationships with the opposite sex.

**Table 8.** Social Factors

	$\bar{X}$	SD
19. I worry about my life	4.3	0.9
20. I worry about my future (whether I will get a good job)	4.45	0.9
21. I worry that I may not be able to get along well in the society	3.65	1.1
<b>Average</b>	4.1	0.98

Table 8 represents the participants' responses to social factors as a cause of stress. Respondents strongly agreed (with  $M = 4.45 \pm 0.9$ ) that they worry about their future and their life (with  $M = 4.3 \pm 0.9$ ). Participants rated high, agreeing (with  $M = 3.65 \pm 1.1$ ) that they worry that they may not be able to get along well in society.

## Discussion

The study investigated the level of perceived stress, the types of stress-related symptoms faced, and the factors causing the stress among the students of Phuentshothang School, Punakha District, Bhutan.

The majority of the students were found to experience moderate levels of stress, similar to the study findings of Edjah et al. (2020); Neeta & Singh (2020); Prabu (2015); and Bataineh (2013). While there were a good number of the students experienced a high level of stress (Yasmin et al., 2020; Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018; Khan et al., 2013; Teo, 2018; Beltran et al., 2020) which is alarming. The high stress level could be mainly because most students were separated from their families for the first time for a longer period. Moreover, they were stressed due to frequent lockdowns and disruptions in their study due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, more boys were found to experience moderate stress levels (Prabu, 2015) compared to girls.

On the other hand, more female students were found to experience high or extreme levels of stress, which is a matter of serious concern for the school management, counselors, and teachers. This could be because the female is found to be emotionally weak as compared to the male. A considerable amount of stress can be useful, but excessive stress may hinder students from doing well academically (Khan et al., 2013), while prolonged stress may lead to depression, anxiety leading one to indulge in substance abuse and other destructive behaviors (Richlin-Klonsky & Hoe, 2003 as cited in Khan et al., 2013) and may develop suicide ideation (Arria et al., 2009). The result indicates that the students are experiencing stress.

A majority of the students experienced anger (Beltran et al., 2020) or hostile feelings as a result of stress, followed by irritability (Rana et al., 2019) which is quite risky for self and

others as there is a high chance of self-harm and harm to others under the influence of anger. There was also an eating disorder and headaches (Bhargava & Trivedi, 2018), tense muscles, sore neck and back, anxiety or worries (Yasmin et al., 2020), and phobias (Omar et al., 2019) experienced by a considerable number of students. A small group of students also experienced other symptoms like fatigue (Yasmin et al., 2020), insomnia, boredom and depression, diarrhea, cramps, gastritis, constipation, restlessness, and itching (Simpson, 2018; Neeta & Singh, 2020). The symptoms expressed by the students confirm the prevalence of moderate to severe levels of stress. The symptoms of stress are not usually noticed due to our ignorance and lack of knowledge of the signs and symptoms caused by stress as a result victims will face negative implications in the long run. Lack of knowledge in identifying stress can develop severe emotional and physical health problems if timely intervention and necessary treatment are not provided.

The findings on the factors causing stress show that social factors were a major cause of stress (Edjah et al., 2020) followed by school and academic factors. Students are stressed about their future careers with the nature of courses they learn in school (Essel & Owusu, 2017). Relationship and family factors contributed the least stress, which was contradictory to the findings of Simpson (2018). The result indicated that students worry about their lives and whether they will be able to succeed in acquiring a stable job so that their society regards them. Stress due to academic factors is common in most of the studies like Yasmin et al. (2020); Khan et al. (2013); Bataineh (2013); and Edjah et al. (2020) which is similar to the finding of this study. Having to prepare and pass the examinations, following hectic school activities, and having too much homework and assignments to be done was some of the academic factors' students expressed contributing to stress. Family factors also contribute to a considerable number of factors similar to the findings of Akacan (2017), Teo (2018), and Neeta and Singh (2020).

Among the family factors, staying away from their parents was found to cause the most stress. This is evident that these students had been relocated to a new place away from their parents and they are likely to miss their parents. A high academic expectation of their parents and financial stability of their parents due to the onset of the pandemic also added considerable stress to their life.

### ***Limitation***

The study's finding is purely based on the self-rating given by the students of their own. There was no clinical examination carried out. Moreover, the conclusion is drawn based on the data collected from 638 students out of 866 students present at school.

### ***Conclusion***

The findings from this study indicated that the students suffered from all levels of stress, from low perceived stress to high perceived stress, with the majority of students with moderate perceived stress.

The most notable symptoms were getting angry or hostile, eating too much or too little, irritability, anxiety, worry, phobias, tense muscles, sore neck and back, and headaches.

Other symptoms like fatigue, difficulty falling asleep, boredom and depression, diarrhea, cramps, constipation, gastritis, restlessness, itching, and insomnia were also reported, but these were not so common.

All the factors such as physical factors, family factors, school or academic factors, social factors, and relationship factors contributed to the cause of stress in students. Amongst all the factors, social factors followed by academic factors appeared to be the major cause of stress in students. On the contrary, family factors and relationship factors seemed to be causing minimal stress in students.

In a nutshell, given this situation, every student is suffering from some level of stress, be it low, moderate, or high; proper stress treatment and management are deemed of paramount importance. If not handled well, there is a high risk of the students getting into serious trouble due to increased stress levels. Immediate remedial action and control mechanisms must be enforced to keep students stress-free and academically perform well. The findings from this have been well-timed to bring immense benefits to the school management, teachers, and students.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study's findings and considering the stress level, the researchers recommend the following be done immediately.

Since a major cause of stress is social factors, immediate mass orientation for students is necessary. The advocacy should cover and help the students understand coping with emotions and stress management, without which it would be difficult for them to overcome stress-related challenges. The school must arrange to stage motivational clips, counseling programs, and motivational talks every week while severe cases must be identified and referred to counseling.

The researchers recommend school management to re-look into the school timing and increase recreational time for the students. It is evident that students are engaged in academic activities from early morning till they go to bed, while they just have an hour after school for leisure time and recreational activities. The school management must also develop more games and sports facilities so that students can stress out after hectic academic schedules. Strategies to reduce homework and other academic-related tasks are also found necessary.

### **Conflict of interests**

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