

# Levels of Stress, Anxiety, Depression and Social Relationships among Undergraduate Students at the Teacher Education Institute of Malaysia

Raihan Sakinah Mohamad, Ku Suhaila Ku Johari

Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: kusahaila@ukm.edu.my

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## Abstract

The new generation will inherit and lead our country in the future. They are the nation's human capital in maintaining the well-being of economic, social, and political prosperity of the country. However, in recent times, various issues of depression have arisen among students, especially teenagers. Difficulty in establishing social relationships can lead students to feel that they are not socially accepted and may feel guilty about their actions. This study explores undergraduate students' psychological well-being and social relationships. This study was conducted on six undergraduate students at the Teacher Education Institute of Malaysia. Respondents also underwent screening using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) inventory. The findings from the test indicated that their stress levels were in the moderate, mild, and normal range (1 to 12). All six respondents were referred for group counseling sessions. Therefore, four group counseling sessions were conducted for all respondents, each lasting 1 hour and 30 minutes. Through these four group counseling sessions, the first session served as an introduction among group members. The second session aimed to assess the well-being of group members, including stress, anxiety, and depression. The third session involved sharing about the factors related to stress, anxiety, depression, and social relationships. The fourth session focused on sharing about the social relationships of group members. The research methodology used was psychoeducational group counseling. The study's findings highlight the factors related to stress and social relationships. This study is expected to enhance the health and well-being of student groups.

## Introduction

Recently, we have often heard of various mental health problems among teenagers. The difficulty in forming social relationships can cause teenagers to feel that they are not socially accepted and may experience guilt for their actions. According to Luo (2012), there is a connection between loneliness and depression. A feeling of loneliness can cause an individual to experience various signs of depression. Some of these depressive symptoms include loss

of appetite, sleep disturbances, and a sense of hopelessness (Siti Marziah et al., 2013). A person with depression easily becomes frustrated by their actions and easily loses hope due to the factor of not having the confidence to move on (Mahpis & Akhir, 2020). Moreover, those who suffer from depression also cannot feel joy. This is because they are at a high level of grief and can no longer experience happiness in any activity either with family or peers. According to the findings of Hasmaliza's study (2008), parenting styles were found to influence the level of depression among high school students. The study's results showed that parents are significant figures in a child's life. Therefore, the quality of the parent-child relationship and parenting style can affect teenagers and potentially lead to depression. Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were found to be positively related to the variable of depression among students.

In addition, a person with depression will also lose physical functions such as having a headache, feeling tired, or abdominal pain. This causes a person to feel weary of thinking about their problems and not be able to solve them effectively. Additionally, one of the signs of depression is disrupted sleep and eating issues (Suhaimi, 2018). This is due to disturbed sleep and eventually having difficulty sleeping which causes prolonged fatigue. Those with depression also cause eating problems, such as loss of appetite, which can result in drastic weight loss as it avoids eating and subsequently isolating themselves in the room throughout the day.

The relationship between anxiety and self-performance has been studied in various populations and environments. Individuals with anxiety show a negative association with performance in life as well as in the aspect of academic achievement. Academic experience can also contribute to factors that can affect a student's performance. According to Vogel and Collins (2000), the past experience of an individual who has not achieved or has had a negative experience, the level of anxiety will also be higher and lead to lower current performance. As a result, if someone has positive experiences, their anxiety levels will be lower, thus leading to better performance. Research on anxiety has been conducted by Seligmen and Wuyek (2007), and they found that highly anxious students are significantly more likely to receive lower grades. There are also studies related to anxiety exploring the effects of anxiety on students' academic achievement. It is reported that anxiety can have a negative impact on students' academic performance, which means that students with high levels of anxiety tend to perform lower than those with low levels of anxiety.

Stress, in turn, is considered an individual condition that results from their interaction with an environment that is considered too demanding and threatens their well-being. Stress also involves not only the physical but also the emotional aspects. There are studies that show that patterns of students' social conditions can cause stress (Dusselier et al., 2005). It has been found that introverted individuals tend to experience more stress than their extroverted peers. This can be caused by sedentary academic humiliation. The same study also showed that stress can cause sleep difficulties, and substance abuse can lead to depression.

Social support refers to the experience of being valued, respected, cared for, and loved by others present in an individual's life (Gurung, 2006). It can come from various sources such as family, friends, teachers, the community, or any social group to which one belongs. Tam et al (2011) examined the relationship between social support and self-esteem among adolescents in Malaysia. The study's findings indicated a positive correlation between social support and self-esteem among adolescents. Additionally, Teoh and Afiqah (2010), who studied self-esteem among youth, social support, and personality, showed that all aspects of personality and social support are related to the level of students' self-esteem.

**Methodology**

The research methodology used is qualitative using case study design. Four face-to-face group counseling sessions were conducted. The data analysis for this study involved data from interviews, observations, and instruments, and it was analyzed using thematic processes and coding to generate themes from five respondents. Data collection was carried out through the administration of the DASS Screening Test questionnaire, as outlined in Table 1 below, and Table 2 contains the DASS screening scores

Table 1  
*Respondents DASS Screening Test*

	SCORE					
RESPONDENT	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6
Stress	5	3	8	2	10	2
Anxiety	3	3	4	5	6	5
Depression	2	1	5	6	6	3

Table 2  
*DASS guidelines screening scores*

SCORE SCREENING				
SCALE	Depression	Anxiety	Pressure	STATUS
Normal	0-5	0-4	0-7	Normal
Lightweight	6-7	5-6	8-9	
Simple	8-10	7-8	10-13	
Bad	11-14	9-10	14-17	Abnormal
Very bad	15+	11+	18+	

The first session focused on introducing group members and creating a comfortable environment before discussing their issues. In the second session, discussions revolved around the DASS Screening Test scores and their relationship to social relationships. The third session involved sharing factors related to stress, anxiety, and depression among group members. The fourth session centered on sharing social support, highlighting significant individuals in the members' lives.

The study had a total of six respondents, consisting of second-year undergraduate students from the Teacher Education Institute of Malaysia. Respondents 1, 2, 4, 5 were 20 years old, respondent 3 was 21 years old, and respondent 6 was 22 years old. The psycho-educational group counseling sessions were carefully planned, with objectives set based on idea-sharing and discussions. The first session focused on group member introductions. The second session focused on the DASS Screening Test to determine the DASS scores of the group members. The third session concentrated on factors causing stress, anxiety, and depression. The final session focused on social support in the members' lives and strategies for managing stress, anxiety, and depression.

**Research Findings and Discussion**

This section discusses the results obtained from the research findings. The majority of the group members were found to have high levels of social support. However, there were still some group members who had lower levels of social support because they did not receive

emotional assistance and support from family, friends, or significant individuals when they faced problems. Furthermore, students with lower levels of social support were also those who did not receive advice and guidance when they made mistakes, and they couldn't share their joy or sadness with their family, friends, or significant others. According to Drageset (2004), when an individual receives good social support from family and friends, they are less likely to experience loneliness because they have support to express their feelings and someone to rely on. The research findings also indicated that the levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among the respondents were low because they all were in the normal range.

### **Factors of Stress, Anxiety and Depression**

#### **i. Academic Environment Factors**

The role of the environment plays a significant part in contributing to the phenomena of stress, anxiety, and depression. Lecturers or teachers can also be a source of student stress, whether directly or indirectly. Teachers are responsible for imparting knowledge and life skills to students, but there are instances where some teachers overlook the diversity and uniqueness of their students. Those who prioritize academic achievement tend to give more attention to high-achieving students. Unfortunately, less academically gifted students can be neglected or marginalized in the classroom. This marginalization can make students feel undervalued and lead to a loss of interest in learning, which, in turn, leads to stress. Additionally, pressure from superiors and strict regulations at IPG Kampus Bahasa Melayu can make it difficult for group members to adapt to the campus environment.

During the group counseling session in the third session, all group members acknowledged that the environment at IPG Kampus Bahasa Melayu contributed to student stress. Two out of the six group members stated that favoritism by lecturers, who focus more on high-achieving students, negatively affected the learning atmosphere in class. Four group members mentioned that the rules at IPG Kampus Bahasa Melayu are too strict and make them feel like they are in a school-like environment. Here are statements from group members regarding the environmental factors:

*"I feel like I'm in school again while staying at IPGKBM. It's just like when I was in my school dorm. It's hard to get out. Sometimes, we get stressed and want to release tension, but the limited time to go out makes it hard for us to leave." - R1*

*"I know I'm not good in class. But I used to enjoy going to this class. Before I entered this class, I would always feel happy. But in the class, it's like I don't exist. The teacher only gets close to the smart ones." - R2*

*"I'm not happy to attend this teacher's class. Sometimes, I feel lazy to do her assignments. I'm not one of her target students. But it's stressful because we come to class to learn. But the lecturer is biased. Only the smart ones get praised. Sometimes, even when we answer questions, we never get praised." - R3*

*"I'm trying to adapt to IPGKBM now. The college warden writes our names if we come back late before 10 pm. Here, I don't feel like I'm in a university. I envy friends at other universities who seem to enjoy studying." - R4*

*"I live in KL, but I rarely go home and often can't join family activities, even during holidays. The strict rules require attendance at programs. Holidays are scheduled during the first week of the semester break or weekends. Classes are held from morning till evening every day. On weekends, if possible, we want to release stress." - R5*

*"At the beginning, it was very difficult for me to adapt here. Now I'm still trying to adapt, but in the past, I often cried alone. I thought when I entered university, there wouldn't be rules like in school anymore. But when I entered IPGKBM, it was no different from being in school." - R6*

**i. Family Factors**

The results of this study indicate that family is one of the factors contributing to stress among students. When linking family factors to the stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by group members, it is evident that the pressure arises from a mix of emotional aspects that can suffocate their lives. Even though students are adults, they still need someone to lend an ear and a shoulder to lean on to share their problems and life issues. Despite their awareness of their own actions and behaviors, their thoughts can be disrupted when they encounter life's challenges. This situation clearly shows how the feelings experienced by these students lead to stress, often due to a lack of attention and affection from parents who are too busy with work.

In the counseling session, three out of five group members mentioned that their parents were too busy with work, leaving no time for them to discuss their problems. Here are statements from group members regarding how busy parents contribute to stress:

*"I also want to talk to my mom and dad. I understand their work, but every time I call, they'll say, 'call mom/dad back later. Mom/dad are a bit busy.' That's why I rarely call my parents. We're already stressed at IPG, and sometimes, when we go back home, it's just sitting in our rooms." - R2*

*"Although I'm grown up and can do things on my own, I still want to express my feelings to my family. My siblings are younger. I'm only close to my mom. But I understand that my mom is busy with work, and when she comes home, she has to take care of the house and cook for my younger siblings. My dad is often out of town." - R3*

*"I envy those who are close to their parents. My parents are already busy, and they're strict too. When I'm at home, my parents come home late. Not only that, even in IPGKBM with strict rules, I can't go out when I'm at home. I've never shared my feelings with my parents. Maybe they think I'm okay because I'm always cheerful and look happy. But to be honest, I'm not okay." - R4*

**ii. Friends factors**

Peers are often the closest group to a student, both during their school and university years, as a significant part of a student's life is spent with peers, whether in the classroom or outside of school hours. Group members, who are young adults or in the transitional phase from adolescence, always require friends and often consider them a reference point. For them, when many friends accept their presence, they feel valued and a sense of belonging. Conversely, when four out of six group members don't have many friends, whether because they may have difficulty socializing or because they are not accepted or have been excluded by other peers, they can feel isolated. As a result, they prefer to be alone and distance themselves from their friends. Here are statements from group members regarding peer-related factors:

*"I'm an introvert. When I first entered IPGKBM, I was surprised because everyone talked a lot. I don't know how to be friends with extroverted people. I felt like an*

*outcast because I couldn't fit in with them. I was often alone everywhere, and someone even said I didn't want to be friends with them. I don't like it when people say that. It's not that I don't want to be friends, but they push me away." - R3*

*"When I first entered IPGKBM, I had a close group of five friends. I'm the type who talks a lot, and I always WhatsApp one of the five friends. I'm not sure if she didn't like me because after the new semester started, they all distanced themselves from me. They didn't invite me when they went out. I was very sad, and now I'm not close to them or anyone. Even if I greet them, it's just a casual greeting." - R5*

*"I've been rejected by friends since school. I'm not from a well-off family. I'm not pretty. They want to be friends with people who look good. If we want to be friends, they treat us like they don't care. I feel it too. It's stressful, but I've gotten used to it." - R6*

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that the fourth-year students are experiencing normal levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. This situation needs to be addressed among students to prevent it from becoming severe because, as students, their primary focus should be on their studies, and they shouldn't have to worry about other issues that can disrupt their thoughts. Stress, anxiety, and depression are emotional disturbances for an individual. If a student, especially one transitioning into adulthood, experiences this situation, it can undoubtedly affect their overall well-being. Friends, teachers, and family can provide assistance by ensuring that individuals experiencing depression receive the appropriate help and treatment. Students dealing with stress require emotional support, love, patience, encouragement, and understanding from parents, teachers, and peers.



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