

PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS OF FAMILY STRESS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Family stress is now a common problem of most secondary school students in Nigeria. It has become a stressor that can cause a change in the family equilibrium thereby affecting students' mental well-being and academic performance. Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and personality disorders are common challenges among secondary school students. For optimum success to be achieved in the teaching-learning process there must be proper management of the human and material resources in the environment. Teachers and parents need to improve on their management techniques and interpersonal relationships by recognition of children's underlying feelings. This paper examined the psychosocial factors and consequences of family stress among students in secondary schools. The paper found that severe financial problems, bereavement, parental illness, parental conflict, parental divorce, bullying, peer victimization and lack of social support are psychosocial factors that cause family stress among secondary school students. However, the findings showed that many families do not know how to be helpful to their loved ones, therefore there is need for counsellors to help families to understand the factors that contribute to stress and how to manage them. There is also need for counsellors to help students understand some effective study methods so as to reduce their level of academic stress. Recommendations were made among which was that counselling unit should be established in all secondary schools in Nigeria, where students with mental health challenges as a result of family and individual stressed factors can go to present their problems for appropriate guidance.

Keywords: Secondary school, Students, Psychosocial factors, Family stress, Nigeria.

Introduction

Students deal with several biological, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial problems in the family. Some of these problems may be identified as a result of family stress among students. In other words, individuals experience stressful events and the resources they have with which they can use to address these events determines their stress status in the family (Lazarus and Folkman, 2018). Students need education because it is an essential tool in the society needed for human development and improvement. Ezike (2014) referred secondary school education as a full-time or part-time education offered in secondary schools normally for students within the age bracket of eleven to eighteen. Unfortunately, the lack of structure and routine, combined with increased environmental chaos that is more prevalent in low-income households, has been shown to have negative associations with child social and emotional development (Evans, Brown, Timmins and Nicholl, 2007). Family stress could be seen as a disturbance in the family system. It can emerge from stressors such as unemployment, war, death or divorce. Family stress can increase experiences of low self-worth, disempowerment, and inability to tolerate differences, tension, self-doubt and isolation. Family environments may make it challenging for parents to teach their children about how to express and manage stress as well as regulate their emotions.

Personal observations from many secondary school students in Edo State has shown high rate of family stress. Stress in the family among students is accentuated by the presence of stressful life events that threaten capabilities and their academic performance. These stressful events in the family may vary depending on the specific life domain and can compromise students' academic performance and mental well-being. Special attention has been paid to the psychosocial factors and consequences of stress in the family and also the nature of the environment, such as social and economic challenges. According to APA (2020), psychosocial factors are those social, cultural and environmental influences that affect mental health and behaviour. Stanfeld and Rasul (2007) cited in Upton (2013) referred psychosocial factors as those social structures and social processes that can impinge on the individual and influence his mental state. These psychosocial factors may include the effect of family stress, such as low household income, parental conflict and divorce, bereavement, parental illness, lack of social support, loneliness, work environment and social disruption. Research has shown that most secondary school students in Edo State have lost connections. They lack family support and parental warmth. The presence of these environmental and family stresses negatively affects behavioural adjustment and mental health among students, and precipitates the onset of maladaptive behaviour among students. Specifically, financial instability and belonging to pressure groups are associated with increased psychosocial stress and maladjustment among students in secondary school.

Family stress events or problems, such as financial problems, bereavement, parental illness, marriage conflict and parental divorce, also represent negative situations which lead to increase of family stress among students. The impact of daily stress experiences on young adult's output are moderated by family stress severity and parental warmth (Hanson and Chen, 2010). Family stress, such as parental illness, also seems to correlate with the presence of undesirable behaviour among students in the secondary school. These social and family stressors can be accompanied by individual stressful events experienced by the individuals themselves which place these youths in a particularly, vulnerable situation. Specifically,

exposure to serious situations such as peer victimization, prostitution, cultism, stealing and bullying, can impact negatively on affected students. Peer group victimization is reported as one of the most prevalent problems among students. Students perception about feeling rejected, alienated and harassed by peer group when they are bullied can cause major psychological consequences such as; regression, anxiety, depression, aggression and disruptive behaviours. Additionally, these symptoms in extreme cases among students can lead to a bipolar disorder which is a disorder associated with mood swings ranging from low to manic depression such as the family stress context. These situations could be leading sources of psychosocial stress among students. Specifically, aggressive behaviours from parents towards their sons and daughters are related to students' maladjustment and problematic behaviours.

Stressful life events prevent so many things, such as academic achievement and ability to venture into a vocational/occupational choice. Moreover, emotional understanding and emotional management mitigate the negative effects of perceived psychosocial stress and enhances life satisfaction among students. Peter (2018) pointed out that during times of stress, our personal coping resources, and consequently our parenting skills, may need a boost or a break. A separation or divorce, illness or death, or even a financial issue of a home or can result in a form of feelings for kids and parents. Family stress could be seen as a psychosocial problem which deals with various bodes in the family which serve as sources of worry and major concern in the family. Family stress could be defined as a disturbance in the steady state of the family system. The disturbance can emerge from the outside context (e.g. war, unemployment), from inside the family (e.g. death, divorce) or both simultaneously. In any case, the family system equilibrium is threatened or disturbed. Family stress is also defined as change in the family equilibrium. Such change can be expected (as with the birth of baby) or unexpected (as with winning a lottery).

While transition and change are inherently stressful, the impact can be positive or negative. The sources of stress whether they are volitional or unwanted, clear or ambiguous, predictable or unforeseen, all influence the outcome. Some families may experience unexpected disaster which can also affect their children, though their coping strategies and resilience can help them deal with their issues and make them stronger. Family stress is a neutral construct and can be defined as any stressor that concerns one or more member(s) of the family (or the whole system) at a given time which impacts the emotional connection between family members, their mood, well-being, as well as the maintenance of the family relationship. Our unique perception and reaction to an extent, and our personal coping resources, can cause stress response. Parenting during time of high stress, may affect children very differently from how it affects their parents as parents coping resources may be diminished under times of great stress. Children may behave very differently from their norm under great stress.

Symptoms of Family Stress

Recognizing the symptoms of stress and identifying the stressors is extremely important. A change in behaviour is often a key indicator of stress. Some of the symptoms of family stress include:

Cognitive symptoms:

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate

- Constant worrying

Emotional symptoms:

- Depression and general unhappiness
- Anxiety and agitation
- Moodiness, irritability, or anger
- Other mental or emotional health problems

Physical symptoms:

- Aches and pains
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heart rate
- Loss of sex drive

Behavioural symptoms:

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from others
- Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Causes of Stress in the Family

Health issues:

Ill health within the family, especially if it is long term is very stressful. Hospitalization of any family member is disruptive and unsettling. Whatever the condition, this is worsened if the illness is critical or fatal.

Lack of understanding:

Lack of understanding affects different family members in different ways and sometimes it is hard to comprehend or understand the grief of others when trying to cope with your own bereavement or deprivation, especially the loss of a father, or relative by death. How do you tell a child that their beloved grandparent has died when you are devastated yourself? Will you allow your child to go to the funeral or not? These situations are always very stressful and if not successfully handled can cause a long lasting impact on the family. We all do what we believe is right but in retrospection, when under enormous stress, we make mistakes.

Financial stress:

Financial stress can stem from being in debt, loss of work, unexpected expenses or even being married to someone who isn't good with money. This can lead to persistent conflict in the family due to financial imbalance in the family.

Divorce

Going through a divorce can be extremely stressful in the family. Strong emotions such as sadness, anger, and confusion are quite common following the ends of a marriage especially if you are grappling with financial strains or additional responsibilities around the house.

Psychological bereavement: This is a psychological depreciation or a state of grief. It is a natural response to loss? It is the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone

you love is taken away. Often, the pain of loss can be overwhelming. One may experience all kinds of difficulty and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. The pain of grief can also disrupt one's physical health, making it difficult for the individual to sleep, eat or even think. These are normal reactions to loss and the more significant the loss, the more intense the individual's grief becomes. Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of life's biggest challenges. You may associate grieving with the death of a loved one which is often the cause of the most intense types of grief, but any loss can cause grief and deprivation such as:

- Death of a spouse
- Divorce or relationship break-up
- Loss of job
- Loss of financial stability
- Miscarriage
- Loss of a cherished dream
- A loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after dreams
- Selling the family house
- Inadequate academic performance

Types of Stress

According to American Psychological Association, they view three types of stress in the family. These include; acute stress, episodic stress and chronic stress. These 3 types of stress have their own characteristics, duration and treatment approach.

Acute stress: Acute stress is usually brief, it is the most common and frequent presentation. Peter (2018) asserted that acute stress is most often caused by reactive thinking, which is when the body has immediate reaction to a new and challenging situation. For example, one may have recently been involved in an argument, you may have acute stress related to negative thoughts that are undesirable about the argument or may have acute stress that is about an upcoming work deadline.

Episodic health stress: People who frequently experience acute stress often live a life of chaos and crises. They are always in a rush or feel pressured. They are faced with so many responsibilities, and usually cannot stay organized with so many demands. These individuals are perpetually in the grips of acute stress overload. They have frequent episodes of acute stress.

Chronic stress: Chronic stress is the most harmful type of stress. If chronic stress is left untreated over a long period of time, it can have irreversible damages on physical health and deteriorate the individual's mental health. For example long term poverty, repeated abuse in any form, unemployment, dysfunctional family, poor work environment, substance abuse, or an unhappy marriage can cause significant chronic stress. Chronic stress can also set in when an individual feels hopeless, does not see acute from the cause of stress, and gives up on sulky solutions.

Consequences of Family Stress

Stress can have long-term physical and emotional health consequences on families and is contributing to some of the leading causes of death in the country. Research suggests that family stress is associated with income, parenting and family relationships. Students from lower functioning families displayed higher levels of depression and anxiety. This finding suggests that family-based prevention programs designed to promote adaptive parenting practices and family cohesion may reduce risk of internalizing problems among vulnerable family members (Compas et al, 2010). A little stress every now and then is not something to be worried about, rather it is the body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. But beyond a certain point, the ongoing, chronic stress, however can cause or exacerbate many serious health problems such as:

- Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders.
- Cardiovascular disease, including heart disease, high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, heart attacks and stroke.
- Obesity and other eating disorders.
- Menstrual problems.
- Sexual dysfunction, such as impotence and premature ejaculation in men and loss of sexual desire in both men and women.
- Skin and hair problems, such as acne, psoriasis, eczema and permanent hair loss.
- Gastrointestinal problems, such as gastritis, ulcerative colitis.

Family stress as a result of low income, inability to tolerate differences, disconnections often lead to parental shame, fear on the children, high expressed emotion and a lack of relational repair. These disconnections lead to the development of (often unconscious) negative and distorted relational images and meanings which may affect students' mental well-being. However, patients and families with the help of a therapist can repair their disconnections so as to foster motivation, growth and healing (Tantillo, 2006).

Counselling Implications

Looking into family stress and its psychosocial factors among students has so far reaching counselling implications

1. The counsellor aids the family to establish the strategies/ method in reduction of stress in the family.
2. The parents can therefore employ knowledgeable counsellors who will give effective counselling service to their family so as to address the issues of stress in the family.
3. There is a need for seminar sensitization on stress management by the counsellor in the family, so as to sensitize the family on the causes and psychological effects of stress.
4. There is a need for the counsellor to help the family to understand the factors contributing to stress and how to tackle those prevalent factors that contribute to stress in the family.
5. There is also a need for the counsellor to help the students to draft a reading time table for effective study method so as to reduce the level of academic stress among students.

Conclusion

It is important that students and families recognize, accept and manage their stress to avoid negative physical and emotional consequences. Stress that is not properly managed can metamorphose into a chronic stress. Chronic stress has been shown to suppress body immune

system, increase blood pressure and blood sugar levels and also exacerbate underlying conditions like anxiety and depression.

Recommendations

It is important that parents communicate with their children about how to identify stress triggers and manage stress in healthy ways while they are young and still developing behavioural patterns. However, to avoid the adverse effects of family stress, the following recommendations were made:

- Counselling unit should be established in all secondary schools in Nigeria, where students with mental health challenges as a result of family and individual stressed factors can go to present their problems for appropriate guidance.
- Parents should model healthy behaviours for their children to manage their stress. This will enable them to be psychologically and physically fit.
- Low levels of parental communication have been associated with poor decision making among children and teenagers. Parents should promote open communication and problem solving.
- Strong family functioning protects adolescents against the negative psychological impact of stress.
- Prevention and intervention programs that promote family structure, routine and organization should be encouraged.
- Programs that offer anticipatory guidance about the physical, emotional and relational changes associated with adolescence may help parents and adolescents navigate this period successfully, hence reducing risk of internalizing problems in youth.
- Providing parents with effective parenting strategies has lasting positive outcomes for children and parents (Patterson, Gewirtz and Forgatch, 2013).

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