

# Examining the Influence of Academic Stress and Suicidal Ideation on Mental Health in Coaching Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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**Abstract:** *This cross-sectional study explores the impact of academic stress and suicidal ideation on the mental health of adolescents enrolled in coaching institutes. Employing quantitative methods, it surveys 140 students aged 13-18 years from Aligarh, utilizing the Scale for Suicidal Ideation, General Health Questionnaire, and Revised Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents students. Furthermore, independent t-tests were conducted to discern significant differences in academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental health variables. A Stepwise Multiple Regression analysis, employing a stepwise selection method, was employed to investigate the intricate interplay of these factors. This study reveals significant gender-based disparities in academic stress and suicidal ideation among adolescents in coaching centres. Additionally, medical preparation exam aspirants experience notably higher academic stress compared to engineering exam candidates. These findings underscore the need for tailored interventions to address academic stress and promote the mental well-being of high-achieving students. The study highlights significant gender-based differences and reveals academic stress as a key predictor of mental health outcomes, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges in high-achieving*

**Keywords:** Academic Stress, Suicidal Ideation, Adolescent Mental Health, Coaching Institutes

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive educational landscape, the mental health of students, particularly those enrolled in coaching centres, has emerged as a critical concern. The pressures of academic performance, heightened expectations, and the pursuit of excellence have given rise to escalating levels of academic stress among these individuals below (Akhtar & Alam, 2020). This surge in stress levels has been associated with a rise in suicidal ideation, posing a significant threat to the well-being of these students (Suldo et al., 2008). This study aims to delve into the intricate interplay between academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental health among coaching students. Academic stress among adolescents is a significant issue that can have negative impacts on their well-being and academic performance. Several studies have explored the relationship between academic stress and various factors such as academic anxiety, academic self-efficacy, burnout, depression, and coping strategies. Academic stress has been found to be positively correlated with academic anxiety and burnout, and negatively correlated with academic self-efficacy (Gao, 2023). Female students, those with less educated parents, and those with poor academic performance are more likely to experience higher levels of academic stress (Pillai et al., 2023). Academic stress can also lead to decreased physical activity and sleep, which in turn can contribute to anxiety, and depression and suicidal ideation (Jeyasingh, 2022).

Suicidal ideation among adolescents in India is a significant public health concern (World Health Organization, 2020). Several studies have been conducted to understand the factors associated with suicidal ideation in this population. One study conducted in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar found that cyberbullying victimization was associated with an increased risk of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation

among adolescents and young adults (Maurya et al., 2022). Another study conducted in Punjab, Pakistan, found that bullying victimization and emotional intelligence were significant predictors of suicidal ideation among adolescents (Kausar et al., 2022). In Tamil Nadu, India, emotional intelligence and the quality of interpersonal relationships with parents were found to be strongly related to suicidal ideation among adolescents (Mohan & Swaminathan, n.d.).

The rationale for undertaking this study lies in the imperative need to address the burgeoning mental health crisis faced by students enrolled in coaching institutes. These centres, designed to augment academic performance, inadvertently subject students to an environment characterized by intense competition and unrelenting pressure. This high-stress environment has been identified as a significant contributing factor to the prevalence of suicidal ideation among this demographic (Hindustan Times, 2020). By examining the relationship between academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental health, this study seeks to unearth critical insights that can inform targeted interventions and support mechanisms. Understanding the intricate dynamics between these variables is paramount in developing effective strategies to safeguard the mental well-being of coaching students. This research endeavour is not only timely but also holds the potential to pave the way for evidence-based policies and interventions that prioritize the mental health of students, thereby fostering a conducive and nurturing learning environment.

The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) are highly competitive entrance exams in India, known for their rigorous selection process and the limited number of seats available in prestigious institutions. These exams hold immense significance as they serve as gateways to esteemed medical and engineering colleges, shaping the future careers of

thousands of aspiring students. However, the pursuit of success in NEET and JEE exams comes at a considerable cost, particularly for adolescents (Hindustan Times, 2020a). The intense competition, coupled with the enormous academic expectations, places a significant burden on students. The pressure to excel in these exams can lead to heightened levels of academic stress, as students grapple with extensive syllabi, intense study schedules, and the fear of failure. Moreover, the competition-driven nature of these exams fosters an environment of comparison and peer pressure, further exacerbating the stress levels among adolescents. The desire to secure a coveted seat in a reputable institution often becomes an all-consuming goal, leaving little room for relaxation or self-care (Frontline Bureau, 2023).

In this high-stakes scenario, students may experience a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, particularly if they feel inadequately prepared or unable to meet the expectations set by themselves, their families, and society (Cohen et al., 1983). This emotional turmoil can escalate to the point of suicidal ideation, as some students may perceive it as the only way out of the relentless cycle of academic pressure. The fear of disappointing parents, the societal emphasis on academic achievement, and the competitive nature of these exams can significantly contribute to the mental health struggles faced by these adolescents. It's essential to recognize that while striving for excellence is admirable, the toll it takes on the mental well-being of students cannot be underestimated (Gorilla, 2020).

Academic stress involves mental distress related to upcoming academic challenges, failures, or even anticipated academic failures. During the school years, academic stressors and suicidal ideation may manifest in various aspects of the child's environment: home, school, neighbourhood, or friendships. In Indian culture, the family unit has both positive and negative impacts on suicide (Ang & Huan, 2006). The family can serve as a protective factor providing strong support, but some Indian families may not consider it a real problem, further complicating the situation. Due to stigma, mental illness is often perceived as shameful, undermining a child's mental health. Suicide is underreported and misdiagnosed in India, with the highest rates among those under 30 years old. It's reported that about 25,000 students aged 18 to 20 commit suicide annually during the examination (Hindustan Times, 2020a). There is a clear link between academic pressure and suicidal behaviours among adolescents. Worldwide, nearly one million deaths each year are due to suicide, with young people being more vulnerable (Samuel & Sher, 2013a).

Studies on academic stress and suicidal ideation hold great importance in the present era and have become an essential topic in academic circles. In 2022, Kota witnessed 15 cases of suicide, with similar incidents numbering 18 in 2019, 20 in 2018, seven in 2017, 17 in 2016, and 18 in 2015. In the initial eight months of 2023, Rajasthan's Kota district reported an average of three suicide cases every month, as per statistics provided by the district administration (HT Correspondent, 2023). Suicidal ideation is defined as one's wish, thoughts, and a desire to end one's own life. Factors like academic pressure and stress have been found to

contribute to suicidal thoughts among adolescents. Studies have shown a positive correlation between academic stress, parental pressure, and psychiatric problems, particularly in the Indian context. Adolescents facing academic pressure may experience various detrimental effects on their mental health, including depression, fatigue, and aggression. The fear of not meeting parental expectations, coupled with peer pressure and low self-esteem, can drive students to contemplate suicide (Kausar et al., 2022)

The unyielding pressure these adolescents face leaves a profound mark on their mental well-being. This research has brought to light a distressing pattern: as academic stressors intensify, so do the levels of depression, fatigue, and even aggression among students. The burden of parental expectations, coupled with the social complexities of peer pressure and delicate self-esteem, can push students to the brink of despair (Samuel & Sher, 2013).

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in a coaching institute in Aligarh, employing a cross-sectional design to investigate the impact of academic stress and suicidal ideation on the mental health of adolescents. A quantitative research method was employed, utilizing primary data for analysis. The research design incorporated a complex regression approach, allowing for the examination of associations and relationships among the variables of interest.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 140 adolescent students, comprising 70 males and 70 females, with ages ranging from 13 to 18 years. Inclusion criteria encompassed the participants being enrolled in the coaching institute and falling within the age bracket of 13 to 18 years. Additionally, willingness to cooperate as subjects was a prerequisite for inclusion. The selection process was stratified based on the two prevalent courses offered by the institute, namely NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) and JEE (Joint Entrance Examination).

To maintain data integrity, exclusion criteria were established. Students below 16 years and those above 19 years of age were excluded from the study. Furthermore, responses with incomplete or missing statements in the scales were not considered for data analysis, ensuring the reliability of the findings.

### 2.2 Measures

#### *The Scale for Suicidal Ideation (SSI)*

Suicidal ideation among the students was assessed with the help of a 19 item self-report Scale for Suicidal Ideation, developed by Beck et al. (1979). The SSI was designed to quantify the intensity of conscious suicidal intention by scaling various dimensions of self-harm thoughts or wishes. The items state the magnitude of suicidal thoughts, and their characteristics and desire of them want to die. Cronbach alpha was .89, which indicates the high reliability of SSI. The validity of SSI was also indicated by the moderate

correlations with clinical ratings of suicidal risk and self-harm (Beck et al., 1979).

**Academic Stress**

To gauge academic stress, the Revised Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) was utilized. This instrument, developed by Sun, Dunne, Hou, and Xu in 2011, offers a comprehensive assessment of academic stress experienced by adolescents. The ESSA encompasses five latent variables: pressure from studies, workload, concerns about grades, self-expectations, and feelings of despondency. Comprising 16 statements, respondents rated their agreement on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Scores ranged from a minimum of 16 to a maximum of 80, with higher scores indicating greater levels of academic stress (Sun et al., 2011).

**Mental Health**

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) serves as a screening tool to detect minor psychiatric disorders in diverse settings, including general community populations and non-psychiatric clinical environments like primary care or general medical outpatient facilities. The abbreviated 28-item GHQ, developed by Goldberg and Hillier, is composed of four distinct subscales: somatic symptoms, anxiety and sleep disturbances, social dysfunction, and severe depression (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979).

**Statistical analyses**

Statistical analyses were carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. The dataset underwent thorough examination, including the computation of means and standard deviations (SD) to establish central tendencies and dispersion. Additionally, t-tests were conducted to assess significant differences between means of academic stress, suicidal ideation, and mental health variables. To delve deeper into the interplay of these factors, a Stepwise Multiple Regression analysis, employing a stepwise selection method, was applied. This facilitated the identification of significant predictors and their respective contributions to the overall mental health outcomes among the adolescent participants.

**3. Result**

**Table 1:** Differences in Academic Stress and Suicidal Ideation among Males and females (N=140)

Variables	Boys(n=70)		Girls(n=70)		t-value	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Academic Stress	51.5	10.1	53.41	7.94	1.20	0.05*
Suicidal Ideation	9.5	8.84	5.29	4.14	0.87	0.12

**Table 3:** Showing a summary of stepwise Multiple Linear Regression Analysis for variables predicting mental health among adolescents studying in coaching.

Predictor Variable	Stand. $\beta$	Multiple R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	Cohen's $f^2$	F	p
Emotional Abuse (Model $Y_s = a + \beta_1 X_1$ )							
X1	.017	.17	.031	.031	4.41	2.102	.03
Constant	13.24						

Note: X1= Academic Stress

Note: p<0.05 \*\*

The independent sample t-test results indicate that the mean score of academic stress for males is 51.55 (SD=10.1), whereas for females it is 53.41 (SD=7.94). Similarly, the mean score for suicidal ideation is 9.5 (SD=8.84) for males and 5.29 (SD=4.14) for females. The calculated t-value for academic stress and suicidal ideation are 1.20 and 0.87, respectively. The significance level (p) for academic stress is 0.05\*, indicating a statistically significant difference. However, for suicidal ideation, the difference is not statistically significant (p=0.12).

These results demonstrate a notable gender-based variation in academic stress and suicidal ideation. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, academic pressure appears to be higher among females, while suicidal ideation is more prevalent among males. Both of these factors exert a significant impact on mental health.

**Table 2:** Differences in Academic Stress, Suicidal Ideation Mental Health among NEET and JEE exam preparing students (N=140)

Variables	NEET Exam(n=70)		JEE exam(n=70)		t-value	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Academic Stress	54.80	8.004	50.17	9.63	3.02	0.05*
Suicidal Ideation	10.15	3.73	8.22	5.44	0.96	0.05**

Note: p<0.05 \*\*

Results from the independent sample t-tests reveal noteworthy differences. NEET students exhibit a mean academic stress score of 54.80 (SD=8.004), while JEE exam preparatory students have a mean score of 50.17 (SD=9.63). In terms of suicidal ideation, NEET students have a mean score of 10.15 (SD=3.73), whereas JEE exam students have a mean score of 8.22 (SD=5.44). The calculated t-value for academic stress is 3.02, indicating a statistically significant difference at the 0.05\* level. Likewise, for suicidal ideation, the t-value is 0.96, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

These findings underscore a substantial divergence in academic stress and suicidal ideation between NEET and JEE exam preparing students, shedding light on the distinct challenges these cohorts face. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, NEET students experience higher levels of academic stress, while both groups demonstrate different levels of suicidal ideation. It is evident that these variables play a critical role in influencing the mental health of these students, emphasizing the need for tailored support mechanisms.

In Table 3, A linear regression model was developed by considering academic stress and suicidal ideation as predictors of mental health (criterion). Out of the two variables, only academic stress emerged as a significant predictor of mental health.  $R^2 = 0.031$ ,  $F(1,479) = 15.65$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . The results obtained indicated that academic stress explained 3% of the variance in the mental health of adolescent students and was supported at  $p < 0.05$  level of significance. Therefore, this result supports the hypothesis that the regression coefficient for predicting mental health through academic stress and suicidal ideation will be other than zero. It confirms that the slope of the regression line was not zero and that the changes in the predictor variable will decrease the criterion variable by  $\beta = 0.176$  units. Hence, academic effort predicts the mental well-being of adolescent students. Further, Cohen's effect size value ( $f^2 = 0.0319$ ) suggested a high strength of association of academic stress affects the mental health of adolescent students.

#### 4. Discussion

The presented study sheds light on the critical issue of academic stress, suicidal ideation, and their impact on the mental health of adolescents in coaching centres. The findings reveal significant disparities and correlations, offering valuable insights for intervention and support strategies.

##### *Gender Disparities*

Table 1 underscores notable gender-based differences in academic stress and suicidal ideation. It is intriguing to observe that while academic pressure tends to be higher among females, a greater prevalence of suicidal ideation is found among males. This is a crucial revelation as it highlights the intricate relationship between academic stress and mental health outcomes, which can manifest differently across genders. Boys have a higher prevalence of suicidal ideation compared to girls. The level of suicidal ideation was found to be significantly higher in female professional students compared to male professional students. Male adolescents performing well in school were observed to have an elevated risk of suicidal ideation. Self-reported suicidal ideation was found to be more common in boys than what retrospective studies suggest (Kerr et al., 2008).

##### *Exam Preparation Stress*

Table 2 further dissects the nuances of academic stress and suicidal ideation, this time focusing on students preparing for NEET and JEE exams. The results depict significantly higher academic stress levels among NEET students compared to their JEE counterparts. This finding resonates with the highly competitive nature of medical entrance exams in India, possibly contributing to the elevated stress levels among NEET aspirants. Additionally, the comparable levels of suicidal ideation across both groups point to the universality of this concern within the context of exam preparation, necessitating targeted interventions for all students in these high-pressure environments. Suicide among adolescents in India is a significant public health issue. In contrast with the above findings Samuel and Sher (2013) examined that in India; family provides crucial support but can complicate mental health care seeking. There's a strong stigma around mental illness, seen as shameful. Religion plays a significant

role, often leading individuals to seek remedies from religious sources before considering mental health evaluation. Despite underreporting, suicide rates are highest among those under 30 in India, highlighting the urgent need for mental health support, especially for the youth (Samuel & Sher, 2013b).

##### *Regression Analysis*

Table 3 introduces a regression model, employing academic stress and suicidal ideation as predictors of mental health. Intriguingly, only academic stress emerges as a significant predictor, explaining 3% of the variance in the mental health of adolescent students. This underscores the profound impact of academic stress on mental well-being. The regression coefficient's non-zero value corroborates that changes in academic stress levels directly influence mental health outcomes. The substantial effect size ( $f^2 = 0.0319$ ) emphasizes the high strength of association between academic stress and mental health, further underscoring the significance of this relationship. Students preparing for highly competitive entrance exams like NEET and JEE face a unique set of challenges that can significantly contribute to the emergence of suicidal ideation. Several key factors contribute to this concerning trend.

The rigorous nature of preparation for NEET and JEE exams places an immense academic burden on students. The high stakes and intense competition create an environment where success is paramount. The fear of failure and the pressure to perform at exceptionally high levels can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Many students invest a considerable amount of their parents' resources, time, and emotional support into their exam preparations. The fear of not meeting their parents' expectations and the potential disappointment they might face in case of failure can be overwhelming. This fear of letting down loved ones can exacerbate stress levels and contribute to suicidal ideation. Entrance exams like NEET and JEE are highly competitive and students often find themselves surrounded by peers who are also striving for success. Constant comparisons with peers who may be performing exceptionally well can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being left behind. This can be emotionally distressing and may contribute to thoughts of suicide.

The demanding nature of exam preparation often leads to a lack of social interaction and limited time for leisure activities. This isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, further impacting students' mental well-being. The absence of a strong social support system can make it difficult for students to cope with the stressors they face.

The outcome of these entrance exams can determine a student's future career path. The uncertainty surrounding success or failure can lead to overwhelming anxiety about what lies ahead. This uncertainty about their future prospects can contribute to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Students may not have developed effective coping mechanisms to deal with the pressures they face. This may

lead them to feel overwhelmed and unable to navigate the challenges effectively.

The prevalence of suicidal ideation among students preparing for NEET and JEE exams is a deeply concerning issue. The unique combination of intense academic pressure, fear of disappointing loved ones, peer competition, social isolation, uncertainty about the future, and a lack of coping mechanisms creates a perfect storm for the emergence of such thoughts. Recognizing these factors is crucial in developing targeted interventions to support the mental health and well-being of these students.

Academic stress has been found to have a significant impact on mental health, specifically in relation to suicidal ideation. Several studies have shown a positive association between academic stress and suicidal ideation among university students (Brailovskaia et al., 2020), (Okechukwu et al., 2022) (Akhtar & Alam, 2015). The transition from high school to college, the demands of college life and the pressure to excel academically contribute to increased stress levels among students (Kim et al., 2015). This stress negatively affects mental health, leading to an increased risk of suicidal ideation.

## 5. Implications

The implications drawn from this study carry significant weight in addressing the pressing issue of mental health among students preparing for competitive exams. Firstly, there is an urgent need for educational institutions and coaching centres to bolster their mental health support services. By establishing accessible counselling and crisis intervention resources, students can seek timely help when facing emotional distress. Early identification and intervention efforts should also be prioritized through regular assessments and confidential reporting systems. Furthermore, organizing workshops focused on stress management and coping skills can equip students with essential tools to navigate academic challenges in a healthier manner. Engaging parents and families in this process is crucial; educating them about the unique pressures their children face and encouraging open communication can provide invaluable emotional support. Additionally, a critical evaluation of the curriculum and examination structures is warranted to strike a balance between academic rigor and students' mental well-being. Lastly, fostering a positive peer environment through teamwork and mutual encouragement can counteract the negative effects of intense competition. By implementing these measures, we can work towards creating an environment that prioritizes the mental health and overall well-being of students preparing for competitive exams.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates the profound impact of academic stress and suicidal ideation on the mental health of adolescents in coaching institutes. It underscores the urgency of developing targeted mental health interventions and support systems, particularly focusing on gender-specific needs and the pressures associated with competitive exams like NEET and JEE held in India for medical and

engineering preparation for entrance exam in colleges. This research contributes significantly to our understanding of the mental health challenges faced by high-achieving students in high-pressure educational environments. It is evident that the intense pressure, fear of disappointing loved ones, and the competitive nature of these exams contribute significantly to the emotional distress experienced by these students. The gender-based disparities further emphasize the need for tailored support mechanisms, recognizing that female students may face unique stressors. Moreover, the comparison between NEET and JEE aspirants highlights the heightened academic stress levels experienced by those in professional courses, particularly in the medical field.

The implications drawn from this study emphasize the urgency for educational institutions, coaching centres, and public health authorities to prioritize mental health support services. Early identification and intervention efforts, stress management workshops, and parental involvement are crucial steps towards alleviating the mental health burden on these students. Additionally, policy changes and advocacy for a more balanced approach to education are imperative for long-term systemic improvements. Ultimately, by implementing these measures, we can strive towards creating an environment that not only fosters academic excellence but also prioritizes the mental well-being and overall flourishing of students preparing for competitive exams. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the pursuit of education is accompanied by the necessary support and resources for mental health, safeguarding the future success and well-being of our students.

### Ethics Statement

We ensured the confidentiality of participants' responses and maintained their anonymity throughout the study. Participants engaged voluntarily and received no financial incentives for their involvement. Prior to administering the questionnaires, participants were provided with a concise overview of the topic and given general instructions. They had full autonomy to withdraw from the study at any point.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interests.

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