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How Academic Burnout Affects Collegiate Students Internally

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As college students, we all might have experienced, are experiencing, or will experience academic burnout as our workload gets (what feels like) exponentially more challenging and higher in volume. Burnout from any perspective is when one is at the climax of their stressing point, and as we will see, it can arrive under various circumstances. Hopefully, this paper gives some insight into what might be causing this burnout, thus exposing options to relieve stress and improve our mental and physical state. To delineate, the problem of academic burnout refers to students’ feelings of debilitation, pessimism, and overall low self-esteem. This harbors exhaustion, low attention spans, and overall dissociation within students, which usually results in poor mental and/or physical health, along with low academic performance. Here, academic burnout will be showcased through biology, sociology, and psychology in a manner where the origins, treatments, consequences of the lack thereof, and finally lasting effects will be made clear.

Regarding stress, C.J Holahan et. al asserts that “…the biological stress response involves interconnections among the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems…”(C.J. Holahan et. al, 2017) that may exacerbate –or worsen- a wide onset of physical illnesses. The natural mechanisms of sympathetic arousal and activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis are some factors that are studied when dealing with the body’s reaction to stress.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 1. Two stress-related biological mechanisms between central nervous system input and production.

As we can see in Figure 1 above, these two biological mechanisms naturally release epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol (descent after fight or flight). However, in intense and sustained stressful situations, the extended release of epinephrine is what causes headaches; while the extended release of cortisol puts one at an increased risk of various problems including anxiety and depression. You might hear often from many students that their head hurts, they are nervous about grades, etc. As they are right in their self-diagnosis, these mechanisms explain what happens inside the body when students are experiencing burnout. Continuing with the origins of academic burnout, studies show that social support is directly associated with academic burnout and overall life satisfaction. From a sociological perspective, college students may see how they might make up more of their own support system than they may be used to. Whether they are near home or out of state, many students can attest that this is a huge factor that affects their mental health as they attempt to adapt to the changes. According to Choi Portis’ journal in the American Bar Association, research has shown that those with a strong support system are seen to have “…higher levels of well-being, better coping skills, and…[reduced] depression and anxiety.” (Portis, ABA, 2022). A stronger support system supports better life satisfaction overall, thus providing a better chance to escape the clutches of academic burnout. However, each student will have to find what that support system looks like to them individually as there is no framework as to what that is for everyone. A primary source of stress not just in students, but in people all over comes from our psyche. Psychologically, we as people tend to get into our own heads, doubting ourselves, and stressing about new opportunities, grades, etc. When we feel burned out, the Henry Ford Health Staff has shown we might think thoughts such as:

* How can I get through the rest of today?
* I can’t think straight.
* I just can’t catch up on my work.
* What is wrong with me?
* I can’t do this anymore.

(Henry Ford Health Staff, 2021)

These thoughts originate from the seemingly overbearing new stressors that we come across, especially as students. Workplace stress that is not managed will have students feeling like they have put in too much effort, are hypersensitive to their emotions, are more anxious, have less energy, and are generally tired at times when they would normally be fine.

We have discussed how these stressors and factors may come from a plethora of places, but now we will continue with the detriments of not assessing and treating academic burnout (again, this may be applied to burnout in general as well). Psychologically, one major outlet may be meditation. Now although that may not be for everyone, this is not something that should be pushed off until it is tried, as it can give a sense of calm, peace, and balance. The great thing about meditation is that it can be done from anywhere, and it does not cost you anything. Looking back at figure one, discussing the biological mechanisms that occur when one is stressed, meditation is a very good outlet as it helps to “…lower cortisol levels and improves the body’s ability to cope with stress.” (Stanlake, Upwell Blog, Wellness, 2017). In the same article, a study of meditation on student’s behavior had shown that there were more benefits, including:

* Increased confidence and self-esteem
* Improved sense of self-worth
* A more positive body image
* Improved inter-student relationships
* Enhanced Cognitive Function and learning skills

(Stanlake, Upwell Blog, Wellness, 2017).

From a personal collegiate standpoint, a student should simply find something that they like to do. Oftentimes, they are not the only ones who appreciate this, and even more often than that, there is a club or group participating in said activity. Whether it is club sports, crocheting, reading, or even eating out to taste new foods. There is always a group for you out there, and the scariest and hardest part is just putting yourself out there to meet those people. A promise that can be made, however, is that social life in college is all the easier once you meet those people. This benefits students from both a psychological and sociological aspect because now the student has a like-minded group to (in a sense) ‘escape’ to when the academic workload seems too overbearing. In this scenario, one may find a routine for themselves, where they will even be motivated to do their work and study because now, they have something they love to do with friends who love to do the same.

These are all amazing outlets, and only a small piece of the puzzle – as there are many ways to express, find, and value oneself. Although this is great, there are also some very detrimental aspects of a student leaving themselves to their own devices when encountering academic burnout. If left untreated, burnout can isolate a student from their social activities and eventually become habitual. This habitual burnout (as discussed in the second paragraph) will eventually become part of their everyday life and lead to anxiety, depression, loneliness, and overall dissatisfaction with themselves. Besides social isolation, this is where the heightened cortisol and epinephrine levels come into play again. As we discussed earlier, these create a lengthened feeling of anxiety (among other things) which causes headaches, migraines, an extended feeling of tiredness, a change in appetite, and more. Leaving academic burnout to its own devices may affect much more than one may think.

We have already delineated where stressors may arise, how to deal with them, and what happens when we don’t deal with them immediately. Now we will gloss over what happens in the long term if academic burnout is not dealt with. Psychologically, we can all conclude that academic burnout is not the only stressor in a student’s life – albeit it is a major one. But this one specifically, as it can immediately cause sensations of anxiety and depression can snowball into suicidal and/or homicidal thoughts in a person if left unchecked. For example, at my previous institution, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), there was someone who had jumped from my dorm room on the 6th floor a few years before I got there, around Halloween time. In orientation, we were told about this incident (among a few others) in an attempt to let us students know we could reach out to anyone when these extreme feelings of academic burnout – or stress in general – were wearing us down. According to the International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, those who experience high levels of academic-related stress in college increase the risk of “…developing preventable physical health problems later in life” (Pascoe, 2019), as those who are under such stress – especially during exam time, are less likely to be physically active. These stressors may lead to the development of metabolic syndrome, obesity, and other non-communicable diseases. This is why finding and providing opportunities to relieve stressors while we are young and developing as people is so crucial for our future.

Although it is part of the growing pains for students at university, academic burnout can be extremely dangerous if not recognized and treated. And if not treated, whether, through creative outlets, physical activity, or therapy, there may be long-lasting effects that stick as the student develops into adulthood. Many different viewpoints can look at academic burnout by themselves, but as everyone’s background, mindset, and chemical balance are different, it is hard to distinguish which discipline has the ‘right answer’ regarding the causes and effects of academic burnout. This is why we took this interdisciplinary approach in hopes of tying various disciplinary reasoning together to come to a better understanding of how academic burnout and its treatment (or the lack thereof) are crucial in our formative years.

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