# Strategies for Managing Stress Among Teenagers Living in Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Stress strains the mind, emotions and motivates the person to face difficult circumstances head-on. On the other hand, excessive stress has negative short and long-term repercussions on one's mental and physical well-being. The purpose of the current study was to ascertain how everyday stress is among teenagers in Pakistan and what effect it has on their mental and physical health. As a theoretical framework, the Thomas Theorem was used. The study's sample size consisted of sixteen pupils from the 13–16 age group in Rawalpindi Province, Punjab. To investigate the issue, in-depth interviews were conducted with students in the ninth and tenth grades using an interview guide. The field data was interpreted using thematic analysis. The literature study and field data revealed that the primary sources of stress were parental expectations, relationships between siblings, and beauty stress. The results showed that these stressors have specific psychological and physical side effects, including headaches, irritability, low motivation, and a propensity for making poor decisions. Stress appears to have an impact on a teen's health in addition to their academic achievement.*
**Keywords**: Stressor, Teens, Physical Health, Emotions, Performance.

## Introduction

Stress is a standard part of life that arises from significant changes in our circumstances, both positive and negative. Each individual has their own unique set of life events that they perceive as stressors, as well as coping mechanisms available to them. While certain stressful situations can be challenging, they can motivate individuals to achieve their goals and make positive adjustments. However, excessive stress can have detrimental effects on both physical and mental health (Bickford, 2005; Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety, 2000). Consistently avoiding mild levels of stress can lead to long-term mental impairment (Cohen et al., 2007; McEven, 2007).

Rapid changes characterize the early adolescent years. During this transitional phase, individuals experience quick changes in their physical, mental, social, cognitive, and sexual areas. They are exposed to various social, emotional, and environmental pressures (Romeo, 2015; Parpio et al., 2012,2013), which can lead to stressful life circumstances such as academic pressure, parental divorce or separation, an uncertain future, poverty, family conflicts, and parenting styles. Some individuals perceive these demands as opportunities for growth and development. In contrast, others struggle to handle them due to a mismatch between their ability to manage their needs and desires and the sources of stress they encounter. Excessive stress can disrupt one's physical, mental, and behavioural health (Shaikh et al., 2004; Bickford, 2005), and it can also impact a student's overall health and academic achievement (The Centre for Adolescent Health, 2006). Mental health symptoms are everyday stressors for adolescents, yet a high percentage of them do not seek mental health assistance, according to the World Health Organization (2005).

Both male and female adolescents are susceptible to behavioural and psychological issues. Poor physical, mental, and behavioural health can negatively affect their academic performance, including school dropout, social isolation, lack of interest in their surroundings, mood swings,

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difficulty focusing, and lack of concentration (Parpio et al., 2013). Their social development, along with hormonal and physical changes, makes them vulnerable to depression (Gelhaar et al., 2004). Therefore, their emotional, mental, and physical well-being serves as a reliable indicator of their overall health, as noted by Parpio et al. (2012).

The teenage population in Pakistan also experiences various forms of stress. However, research on how stress affects the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of teenagers has been largely overlooked. There have been few studies conducted to understand the reasons behind stress and coping strategies in young people. Therefore, this cross-sectional study aims to identify the sources of stress and examine how it impacts the health of teenagers in Rawalpindi.

## Theoretical Explanation

The Thomas Theorem, proposed by William Isaac Thomas in 1928, is a sociological theory within the Symbolic Interaction Paradigm. It suggests that circumstances have actual consequences if they are perceived as accurate. In other words, an individual's subjective assessment of a situation influences their actions, which are, in turn, influenced by their subjective interpretation of the scenario. Therefore, a person's behaviour is influenced by how they perceive their circumstances. An individual's personality is shaped by a series of perceptions in which they are involved.

Their perception of those events determines the impact of life events on people. Stressful situations or ongoing conflicts do not automatically result in stress. They are only considered stressful when there is a higher likelihood of a stressful reaction. An individual's belief that an event is stressful is influenced by how they perceive and interpret it. Regardless of how accurately they perceive it, an individual's reaction to any situation is based on their perception of the world.

Teenagers are part of a culture heavily influenced by social factors such as family relationships, teacher-student relationships, parental expectations, and parenting style. They also face personal pressures related to academics, beauty standards, and stress about the future. Additionally, environmental factors such as the organizational structure and behaviour of their surroundings play a role. All these elements are social circumstances that teenagers encounter and can significantly impact their future physical and mental well-being. While all teenagers experience stressors, how they interpret and respond to those stressors can have either positive or negative health consequences.

**Figure 1 Theoretical framework and conceptual framework**
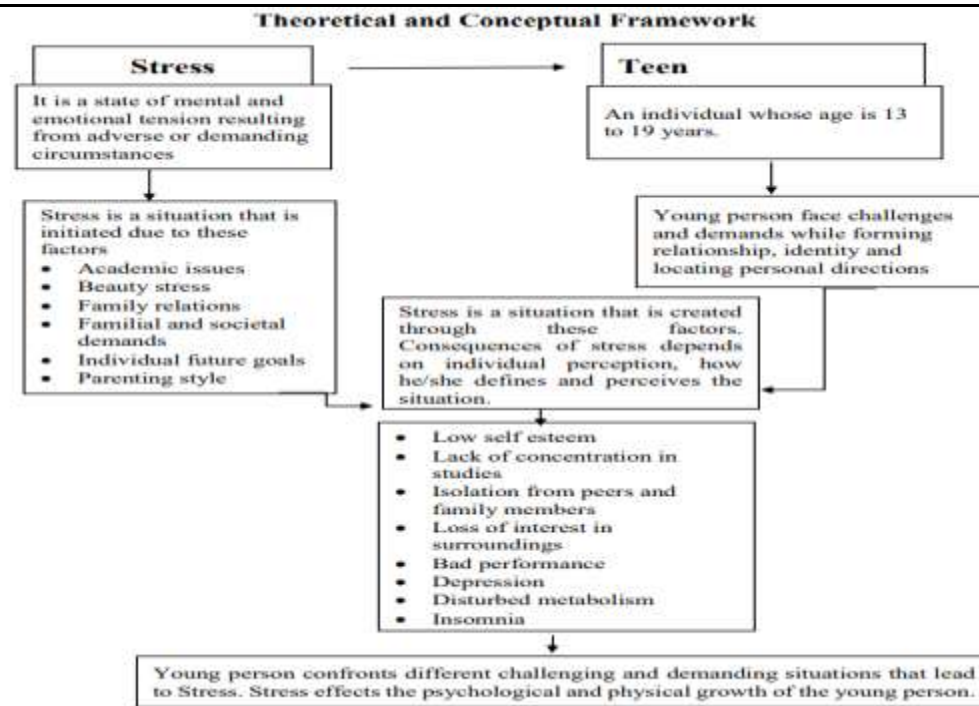


## Methods & Materials

The qualitative research approach was used to evaluate the participant's perspective and experience of stress. According to Crossman (2014), this approach is necessary to understand how participants interpret their experiences. The study aimed to explore how students in Rawalpindi experienced certain events and how they interpreted them as stressful or not. The study focused specifically on Rawalpindi, and the population consisted of male and female students aged 14-16. A purposive sample of 16 youngsters (15-17 years old) from matric courses (9th and 10th) was selected for interviews. An interview guide was used to collect data on this topic. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret and analyse the data. The researchers were limited to conducting the study only in Rawalpindi due to time and budget constraints, which prevented them from gathering data from other cities. These limitations are just a few of the shortcomings of the study.

## Results and Discussion

The socio-economic context of the participants plays a vital role in identifying the root causes of issues like stress. The participants' ages varied from 14 to 16, and most resided in nuclear families. The respondents were pursuing their education from a well-reputed private institution in Rawalpindi. All participants encountered different stressors for several reasons, such as parenting style, beauty consciousness, sibling relationships, pursuing high-profile professions, and fulfilling their parents' expectations.

### Parents' expectations

Parenting styles are based on the specific division of roles and responsibilities regarding child-rearing practices, such as fathers having expertise in specific areas and mothers having expertise in others. Gordon (1999) described that when mothers could not control their children, fathers assisted with their compliance. Parenting is gendered, with mothers being

more involved with their daughters and fathers with their sons. Huma talked about her parents' expectations regarding her studies:

> *"When I could not perform well in my studies, it led to*
> *stress because I could not fulfil my parents' expectations"*
> *(Huma, April 5, 2018).*

According to the participants' views, most children were stressed due to their parents' strictness and their expectations for them to acquire high-profile professions, which they considered necessary for their children's survival in a competitive context. These expectations created tremendous pressure to achieve high grades and a confusing situation that led to a fear of failing to meet targets among children.

## Forms of Stress Among Teens
### Sibling relationships
Relations within the family play a pivotal role in the socialization of children and their healthy relationships with society. Disturbed familial relations contribute to emotional distress. This complex notion involves hostility among siblings due to jealousy and competition. Ashar talked about familial conflict with his brother:

> *"My younger brother annoys me a lot. When I scold him,*
> *he complains to my father, and then my father scolds me*
> *because my brother is considered the favourite child of me*
> *parents" (Ashar, April 6, 2018).*

Umar talked about his bitter relationship with his elder sister:

> *"My sister always wants to take on the role of my father and*
> *teases me about everything" (Umar, April 6, 2018).*

Sadan shared his views regarding his sufferings because of his relationship with his younger sister:

> *"I feel disturbed whenever my academic performance is*
> *compared with my younger sister's" (Sadan, April 5, 2018).*

According to the participants' views, sibling relationships caused stress when parents compared their children, and elder siblings suppressed their younger siblings to maintain their authoritarian status. In some cases, elder siblings were considered responsible and mature role models for their younger siblings. Parents taught elder children tolerance in case of conflicts with younger ones, which led to stress among them.

Similar views were reported by Langeveld (2010), who stated that the quality of relationships predicts a child's well-being while conflicting relationships among siblings induce unhealthy emotions. Students' mental stress originates from study conditions and personal factors such as interpersonal communication, self-care ability, and family conditions.

### Beauty Stress
Beauty is timeless, changing, and universal. It is considered a language of identity and a promoter of self-esteem. It is not only an aesthetic conception applied to the face and body, but it also describes social status, gender, and class. The idea of beauty is shaped through social relations and cultural practices. Anna shared her experience of stress related to her beauty:

> *"I wanted to stand out at every occasion. I was conscious*
> *about my dress and makeup when I went to attend family*
> *and friends' functions. I could not tolerate anyone looking*

*as beautiful as me at functions" (Ainna, April 5, 2018).*

Umar expressed his beauty consciousness:

> *"Looking good fascinated me, so I felt stressed in choosing*
> *good dresses for parties. I could not afford negative comments*
> *about my dress" (Umar, April 5, 2018).*

Amina expressed her feelings about her facial beauty:

> *"I was tense when pimples appeared on my face. It is a matter*
> *of tension for me. I ran to consult a skin specialist to get rid of*
> *pimples" (Amina, April 5, 2018).*

*Stress* is a unique and individualized phenomenon that varies based on personal perception within a social setting. The trends of beauty varied among male and female students. Girls were more conscious about their facial beauty, figure, and dress than boys, who were more interested in impressive dressing. Media, socialization patterns, and cultural practices induced beauty consciousness among female students. The beauty phenomenon among girls is instilled through mothers and social media based on social and cultural norms. Jeffreys (2005) stated that women and men create and maintain beauty through makeup, hairstyles, and dressing.

## Effects of Stress on Teens' Well-being

*Stress* is a natural phenomenon that can have various effects on an individual's health. These effects can be both mental and physical, impacting the individual's overall well-being. The physical consequences of stress include headaches, fever, muscle strain, abnormal sleep, and appetite. Mental stress results in isolation, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, aggression, and lack of concentration. Wajiha talked about her experience related to the effects of stress on her health:

> *"When I was stressed because of studies and competition,*
> *I felt severe headaches and had a fever most of the time. I did*
> *not feel hungry and skipped meals" (Wajiha, April 5, 2018).*

Stress was a problem that affected all students' health. It was associated with frequent headaches and fevers. Everyone experienced stress in one way or another because they needed to achieve their objectives, and the fear of failure led to stress. Students reported abnormal appetite whenever they felt stressed. The majority of them skipped meals, resulting in low energy levels. Only one student reported overeating syndrome during their stress phase. Similar findings were elaborated by Walter et al. (2013), who explained that the fear of falling back subtracts the students' energies, shatters their academic performance, and causes them to lose concentration in their studies. Students become demotivated and overstate their health conditions due to the comprehension of high levels of stress.

## Isolation

Isolation is the state of being in solitude due to multiple reasons that seclude the individual from social contacts and relationships. It raises stressful situations, leading to a lack of concentration confidence, feelings of helplessness, and loss of control. The significant component of isolation is the state of loneliness that a person experience emotionally. It is the end stage of chronic stress that deprives the individual of social relations. Sadan shared his feelings when he was stressed:

> *"During any tension, I didn't want to talk to anyone and locked*
> *myself up in my room" (Sadan, April 5, 2018).*

One student who was suffering from chronic stress tended to be socially isolated. He didn't even want to face his family members in his routine. His stress accumulated because he didn't discuss his issues with his parents. He could not feel his parents' love, care, and affection. It led him to lose social interaction, making him feel lonely and socially isolated.

Similar findings were shared by Munir et al. (2015), who indicated that individuals experiencing loneliness have poor social contacts and relationships. They feel emotionally alone and need relations. Isolation from loved ones affects the psychological well-being of the individual and leads to emotional distress and dissatisfaction with their life conditions. Stress stimulates negative emotions that deteriorate the individual's mental health and social identity.

## Aggression

*Human aggression* is a behaviour in which an individual intends to harm another person proximately on explicit and implicit grounds, such as academic assignments, unhealthy familial and peer relations, authoritarian parenting style, etc. Bushman (2009) stated that aggression is a natural phenomenon that stimulates harmful feelings in an individual to hurt their target. Moiz talked about his expression during stressful situations:

> *"I could not control myself whenever I was annoyed due to irritating matters such as fights with my brother, discussions on grades, and prohibition of playing games. Then I used to break different household items in aggression" (Moiz, April 5, 2018).*

Nearly half of the students reported a loss of their temperaments in stressful situations, resulting in irritation, impatience, frustration, and aggressive behaviour. They used to damage household items whenever they were stressed, which further upset their social relations. Al-Dubai et al. (2011) explained that physical and psychological well-being was influenced by the level of stress, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, loss of control, aggression, hypertension, and disturbed metabolism.

## Stress Management (Coping) Strategies

Stress is a desirable and regular phenomenon in every human being's life. It may be productive or pernicious, based on the individual's perception of the situation. Stress management strategies are used to check the individual's stress and depend on the prevalent stressors that affect the individual according to their definition of the situation. An individual can choose different modes for their stress management, such as weeping, breaking items, self-talk, isolation, playing games, and watching funny dramas, movies, and cartoons.

## Self-Talk

*Self-talk* is a stress management technique that involves regulating one's behaviour by reflecting on one's emotions and thoughts. When individuals feel that no one is interested in listening to their problems, they may turn to self-talk to cope with stressful situations. Sadan, for example, shared his experience with stress management, stating,

> *"Whenever I faced tension, I would go to my room and talk to myself because I didn't feel like I could trust anyone else to understand" (Sadan, April 5, 2018).*

While strong family bonds are typically associated with healthy behaviour, some students may experience humiliation and negative responses from their family members when they try to share their problems. It can lead to a lack of trust and isolation, causing individuals to rely on self-talk as a coping mechanism. Students who have poor relationships with their families may

choose to talk to themselves in order to avoid negative comments and maintain their self-esteem.

Research by Carter et al. (2015) suggests that stress can be a risk factor for mental health disorders, affecting an individual's rational thinking, emotional responses, and behaviour. Stressors related to developmental challenges and daily hassles, such as conflicts with parents and school-related stress, can also impact mental health. Suldo, Shaunessy, and Herdesty (2009) found that as stress levels increase, students who use anger as a coping mechanism are more likely to experience internalizing disorders like depression, anxiety, and isolation. In such situations, effective family communication can be a more adaptive coping strategy. Students' mental stress can stem from study conditions, interpersonal communication, self-care abilities, and family dynamics.

## Weeping

Weeping is a natural stress relief technique that can help individuals reduce feelings of distress. It may help flush out excess stress hormones and regulate emotions (Siler, 2011). Huma, for instance, described how she used crying as a way to release her stress, saying,

> *"Whenever I could not achieve the scores I expected, I would*
> *cry a lot because I was afraid of losing my image in front of*
> *others" (Huma, April 5, 2018).*

Many female students turn to crying as a way to cope with overwhelming situations and feelings of helplessness. Cultural gender stereotypes often dictate that girls should be more permissive and boys should be more assertive, making the demonstration of aggressive behaviour by girls seem abnormal. Young people internalize gendered acceptable behaviours through familial socialization from an early age, which then shapes their interaction patterns in later years.

## Sports

Sports are a popular stress management technique, particularly among male individuals who have easier access to playgrounds compared to females. Boys often choose outdoor sports like football, volleyball, and cricket to release their stress, while girls tend to prefer indoor games like dice, badminton, and hide and seek.

Awab, for example, shared his stress management strategy, stating,

> *"Whenever I felt tense, I would play cricket and football*
> *to release my stress. Kicking the football was the best way*
> *to get rid of my tension" (Awab, April 5, 2018).*

Many male students use sports as a way to relax and relieve stress. They often visit playgrounds or sports clubs to alleviate their stressors, with cricket and football being popular choices. On the other hand, female students are less likely to adopt sports as a stress management technique due to cultural values that restrict their participation in outdoor activities.

Similar findings by Fletcher, Hanton, and Mellalieu (2009) suggest that young people adopt various techniques to handle their stressors, with sports being a common coping mechanism for resolving anxiety, aggression, and frustration. Regarding cultural norms for girls, In Asian cultures, especially in Islamic countries, the concept of honour is closely associated with females. Girls are often closely supervised from their teenage years until marriage, and harsh parenting practices are used to discipline them.

**Comedy Videos**

Watching funny video clips can be an effective stress reducer, as humour is a great way to alleviate tension. Viewing sitcoms or movies allows individuals to temporarily forget about the issues causing stress and immerse themselves in a different world of visualization (Maristela, 2012). It shifts the focus away from oneself and onto the words, gestures, and situations of others. Wajiha, for instance, shared her way of dealing with stress, stating,

> *"I used to watch cartoons and funny movies to relieve my stress*
> *from family and academics" (Wajiha, April 5, 2018).*

Many students find relief from stress by watching cartoons, sitcoms, animated films, action movies, and comedy movies. Both male and female students use funny videos as a way to escape from their stressful situations. Humour and watching comedy movies and cartoons can be an effective way to alleviate stress. The affective element of resilience that comes from watching funny media clips can help alleviate negative emotions such as depression, sadness, anger, and anxiety.

Overall, students employ various strategies to manage their stress, including self-talk, weeping, playing sports, and watching comedy movies.

**Organizational Behaviour**

Organizational behaviour refers to the interaction between individuals and organizations, including the codes of conduct influencing behaviour within these organizations. Organizations often employ various strategies to regulate the behaviour of their staff (teachers) and consumers (students) through strict rules and regulations. These organizations follow rigorous conventions to avoid conflicts of interest with consumers and economic loss. However, unclear inclusion procedures can create ambiguous situations that cause stress for individuals.

Wafaa, for example, shared her experience with the admission procedure, stating,

> *"I could not provide the fee payment slip required for new*
> *student registration, so my teacher did not allow me to attend class.*
> *I could not inform my parents about this issue, and I had to sit*
> *outside the class all day. I had no way to resolve the issue, which*
> *caused me a lot of stress and confusion" (Wafaa, April 5, 2018).*

Many students face similar situations where organizational rules lead to stress. Instead of discussing such matters with the students, schools should involve the students' parents in resolving these issues. Students often lack the necessary information to resolve such problems, which increases their stress levels.

Bickford (2005) suggests that the management style of an organization can contribute to stress. Stress arises from the mismatch between individuals and the organization, and the more significant the discrepancy, the more likely it is to cause an ambiguous situation and strain.

## Conclusion

Stress, acute or chronic, is a constant in daily life. Pupils experience physical and psychological issues as a result of a variety of stressors, including academic pressure, parental expectations, parenting styles, relationships with siblings and family, beauty pressure, stress related to the future, teacher behaviour, and organizational structure. During the stressful phase, most students report experiencing headaches, fever, irregular hunger, feelings of isolation, mood swings, low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating, and exhaustion. Teens with dual-earner parents experience long-term stress that isolates them from their families and the wider community. Teenagers confide in themselves about their life experiences when they can't find someone reliable to discuss their problems. Students use various stress-reduction techniques to

deal with their problems, such as media clips, sports, self-talk, crying, and material damage. Teenagers' life stresses require careful consideration and appropriate solutions since, if acute stressors are not handled promptly and skilfully, they may develop into chronic stressors. Their capacity for social interaction, mental stability, and academic achievement may all be impacted by neglect. The outcome could be the social isolation of stressed-out youngsters, which damages the personalities of the next generation. Teenagers could benefit from planning funfairs at their schools. Familial solid ties can effectively reduce teenage stress.

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