

Examinations Should Test Knowledge, Not Nerve!

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In the month of May, a 18-year-old student, who was a resident of Bihar and had come to study in Kota, Rajasthan a month earlier, committed suicide on May 2, 2022 [1]. The reason for his taking the extreme step was suspected to be exam-related stress. This was the second incident of suicide of a coaching student in Kota in ten days, and the fourth in a month. Kota is known as the coaching capital of India, and the private tutorials that thrive there are industries in themselves. Every year, more than 150,000 students throng to this city to prepare themselves for JEE and NEET at its 150-odd coaching centers. Hence, it has become symbolic of the craze for competitive education and its negative impact on young minds, due to its high incidence of teen suicides. As many as 19 students are reported to have committed suicide in Kota in 2017.

Teen suicide, while being extreme and on the rise, is only the tip of the iceberg. Exam-related stress is an all-pervading problem that is little observed and even less understood. Various research studies have revealed that as many as two-thirds of students aged between 14 and 25 experience worrying levels of exam anxiety. As the day of the exam approaches, there will be signs of stress and mental breakdown. The release of various stress hormones in the body to combat situations of stress might lead to edgy and nervous feelings[2]. *“Muscles become tense, breathing faster, mouth dry, while the heart pounds and sweating increases. Early signs of excessive stress are headaches, loss or change in sleep pattern, loss of appetite and temper, tired and sick feeling, loss of concentration and a sense of restlessness. Sometimes the unusually excessive stress may trigger panic attacks, depression,or even self-harming behavior like suicide attempts. An adolescent with sleepless nights, troubled thoughts, loss of appetite, rapid pulse, and trembling hands is a typical case of exam fear,”* state the authors [2].

Who Is to Blame?

Modern civilization is highly competitive. It places a high premium on worldly achievement and material success. The entire system has evolved to perpetuate this ideal.

Wealthy and glamorous people have replaced men and women of knowledge or talent as our role models. Lifestyle has become urbanized with a high dependency on industry for jobs, and the education system, in turn, has become a feeder of human resources to industry. Parents find their sense of security and emancipation in their children, who can thrive in this system. The systems of governance lack both the vision and motivation to change the status quo. The end victims of this vicious cycle are the innocent children who are pushed into the rat race of ‘success’ and ill equipped to cope with the stress-inducing situations brought about by the high expectations of both parents and schools.

The education system is particularly flawed in that it does not rely on a child’s natural curiosity to learn, but rather it functions in a strictly regimented mode, little respecting the child’s need for freedom and inclination to learn through experimentation and experience. Discipline is imposed rather than inspired. A systemic bias in favor of academics rather than all-round development makes it particularly taxing for young and evolving minds. Memorization of information stands in for genuine understanding. Rather than being an empirical measurement of the student’s learning and comprehension, exams have become “make or break” situation, and the entire life of the student seems to hinge on them.

Parents, on the other hand, tend to relegate their entire responsibility for education to the school system and invest little or no personal involvement in the educational process. They seem to equate their discharge of duty towards the child’s education with the payment of school fees, the purchase of books, and harboring expectations of good performance in exams. Parents rarely engage in meaningful conversations and exchanges with their children regarding their school life. Children too do not trust their parents enough to disclose all that is happening in their lives, partly because they do not know how to express it and more so because they fear how any disclosure they voluntarily make will be received. This disconnect between the parent and the child is a contributory factor for stress in children.

The Larger Issues

The education system itself is subject to state policy. Governments, being bureaucratic by nature, take time to introduce any change. Much of our educational policy appears outdated and, in fact, counterproductive. While there have been commendable reforms to introduce modern educational practices and also to protect the rights of children up to the higher middle school level, there has been no corresponding scaling of reforms to reach the higher strata of schooling. In fact, factors that exert undue pressure on students have intensified greatly from high school onwards, and there is no relief to the individual until he or she gets settled into a well-paying job. The precondition for this is good scores in the exams. The other options are (if parents allow) to opt out of this artificially induced rat race by choosing to pursue his or her dreams on their own, or decide to settle for a substandard life, or, as a few sadly do, to end the torture of existence once and for all.

Thus, there are multiple factors at play which contribute to exam stress. From the points discussed above, it is clear that we live in an ecosystem that is predisposed to it. In fact, it would be reasonable to postulate from our observations that the stresses imminent in the adult world are merely getting transferred to children under the guise of 'preparation' for the rat race that lies ahead in an apparently 'ideal' world. Being relatively recent in occurrence and symptomatic of modern, urbanized culture, there are very few scientific studies to go by to address the issue. However, according to an in-depth study [3], suicides among children and young adults peak at the beginning of exam season, adding to fears that pressure to get good results is harming their mental health. Other causes include bullying and bereavement.

Prevention Better Than Cure

As doctors, what should concern us is how we can respond effectively to mitigate this issue. Safeguarding young lives is our professional responsibility, and we should do all we can to further it. Yet, frankly, can we? The manifestation of stress is psychological in nature and

presently not clinically relevant. As things stand, such cases may very rarely come to the attention of a paediatrician, and that too circumstantially. Most of the causative factors concerning this are largely beyond our control. On a pragmatic note, 'prevention is better than cure' has been proposed as the better model for dealing with the issue [2], and the authors state "..... *the best way to prevent exam stress is confidence, ensured by timely preparation for the exam*" [2].

This is basically preemptive in nature, and might not be timely for cases that might get referred to us, which will typically be in the midst of the problem. In such cases, the clinician may advise therapeutic measures like deep breathing, relaxation routine, proper food, physical activity, adequate sleep and alignment with support groups. More than this, an understanding attitude on the part of the clinician will go a long way in providing relief to both the child and the parents. Good understanding is required in order to break the vicious cycle of stress and enable a child to gain a healthy upbringing. Belonging to a specialty concerned with child health, we also have a moral obligation to advocate against the factors that adversely affect children. We can use social platforms and the mass media to convey our concerns and hope that eventually policies will change and society will improve for the sake of better care of children.

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