INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EXPLICATION AND EMERGING RESEARCH (IJMEER)

Vol. 1 | Issue 2 | April–June 2026

Academic Stress and Coping Strategies Among Undergraduate Students of Arts Colleges in Marathwada Region, Maharashtra

Dr. Meena Kulkarni

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Shri Shivaji College, Akola, Maharashtra

meenakulkarni.psych@gmail.com

Received: March 2026 | Accepted: May 2026 | Published: July 2026

Pages: 38–49

Abstract: Academic stress is increasingly recognised as a significant mental health concern among undergraduate students in India, particularly in historically underserved regions. This study examined the prevalence and nature of academic stress and the coping strategies adopted by undergraduate students enrolled in arts degree colleges in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra. Using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and the Brief COPE Inventory, data were collected from a stratified random sample of 320 students across four arts colleges in Aurangabad, Latur, and Osmanabad districts. The study found that 64.1% of respondents reported moderate to high levels of perceived stress, with female students reporting significantly higher stress scores than male students ($p<0.01$). Academic overload, examination pressure, fear of failure, and parental expectations emerged as the four most frequently cited stressors. In terms of coping, emotion-focused and avoidance-based strategies — including rumination, social withdrawal, and substance use — were significantly more prevalent among high-stress respondents, while problem-focused strategies such as planning and positive reframing were more commonly used by students with lower stress scores. Socioeconomic background and first-generation college student status were significantly associated with elevated stress. The findings call for the systematic integration of professional counselling services, stress management workshops, and mentoring programmes within undergraduate arts colleges in Marathwada, with particular attention to the needs of female and first-generation learners.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Coping Strategies, Perceived Stress Scale, Undergraduate Students, Marathwada, Mental Health*

1. Introduction

Academic stress, broadly defined as the cognitive appraisal of academic demands as exceeding one's perceived coping resources, is now recognised as one of the most prevalent mental health challenges facing undergraduate students in India. As higher education expands to include larger proportions of first-generation learners from rural, semi-urban, and economically marginalised backgrounds, the interaction between academic challenges and social stressors has become increasingly complex and poorly understood in the context of non-metropolitan settings.

The Marathwada region of Maharashtra — comprising the eight districts of Aurangabad, Latur, Osmanabad, Nanded, Beed, Hingoli, Parbhani, and Jalna — presents a particularly relevant context for this inquiry. The region is characterised by a largely agrarian economy, high rates of farmer indebtedness, elevated suicide rates among farmers, and historically limited access to quality higher education infrastructure. Students from this region who enrol in arts undergraduate programmes frequently carry heavy family expectations alongside economic insecurity,

creating a confluence of stressors that may intensify academic pressure beyond levels documented in urban higher education settings.

Despite growing awareness of student mental health in India following the National Mental Health Survey of India 2015–16 (NIMHANS, 2016), systematic empirical data on stress levels and coping behaviours among undergraduate arts students in Marathwada remains sparse. Existing literature predominantly focuses on medical, engineering, and management students in urban settings, leaving a significant knowledge gap regarding the experiences of humanities students in less privileged educational environments. The present study aims to fill this gap.

The theoretical framework draws on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping, which posits that stress arises from the appraisal of an environmental demand as exceeding one's adaptive resources, and that coping strategies can be broadly classified as problem-focused (addressing the stressor directly), emotion-focused (managing the emotional response), or avoidance-based. This framework has been widely validated in Indian educational contexts and provides a structured basis for interpreting study findings.

2. Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. The target population comprised all undergraduate arts students (First, Second, and Third Year B.A.) enrolled in government-aided arts degree colleges in three Marathwada districts: Aurangabad, Latur, and Osmanabad. Stratified random sampling was used to select four colleges — one per district from Latur and Osmanabad, and two from Aurangabad given its larger student population — and within each college, students were selected using systematic random sampling from class registers. The final sample comprised 320 respondents (84 male, 212 female, 24 preferring not to disclose), representing a response rate of 91.4%.

Two validated psychometric instruments were administered. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983), was used to assess the degree to which respondents appraised their academic and personal situations as stressful over the preceding month. Scores range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. The Brief COPE Inventory (Carver, 1997), comprising 28 items across 14 coping dimensions, was used to assess coping strategies. Both instruments had previously been validated in Hindi, and the Hindi versions were administered to all participants. A supplementary sociodemographic questionnaire collected data on gender, year of study, parental education, household income, and first-generation college student status.

Data were analysed using SPSS version 25.0. Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables. Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to compare PSS-10 mean scores across sociodemographic subgroups. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine associations between PSS-10 scores and Brief COPE subscale scores. A significance threshold of $p<0.05$ was applied throughout. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study was approved by the departmental research ethics committee of Shri Shivaji College, Akola.

3. Results and Findings

The mean PSS-10 score for the overall sample was 22.7 (SD=5.4), indicating a moderate-to-high level of perceived stress. Using established PSS-10 cut-offs (low: 0–13; moderate: 14–26; high: 27–40), 14.1% of respondents fell in the low stress category, 49.7% in the moderate range, and 36.3% in the high stress range. Female students reported a significantly higher mean PSS-10 score (23.9) than male students (19.8; $t=4.61$, $p<0.001$), a finding consistent with gender-disaggregated stress research in other Indian educational contexts.

The four most frequently endorsed stressors, derived from open-ended questionnaire items, were: examination pressure and fear of failure (reported by 78.4% of respondents), parental expectations regarding performance and employment after graduation (71.2%), financial strain and uncertainty about post-graduation income (63.8%), and academic workload and syllabus volume (58.9%). First-generation college students (n=147, 45.9%) reported significantly higher mean PSS-10 scores (24.3) than students with at least one college-educated parent (21.5; t=3.28, p=0.001).

Analysis of Brief COPE subscale scores revealed that high-stress respondents (PSS-10≥27) more frequently used maladaptive coping strategies including self-blame (r=0.54, p<0.001), behavioural disengagement (r=0.48, p<0.001), and substance use (r=0.31, p<0.01). In contrast, low-stress respondents showed significantly higher use of problem-focused strategies including active coping (r=-0.42, p<0.001), planning (r=-0.38, p<0.001), and positive reframing (r=-0.35, p<0.001). Social support seeking showed a moderate positive correlation with stress levels (r=0.22, p<0.01), suggesting that socially isolated students experience greater stress rather than being insulated from it.

4. Discussion

The finding that approximately 64% of arts undergraduate students in Marathwada reported moderate to high perceived stress levels is consistent with similar studies from other Indian regional colleges and indicates that academic stress is neither confined to competitive professional programmes nor to elite urban universities. The elevated stress among female students likely reflects the dual burden of academic demands and gender-specific family and social expectations regarding domestic responsibilities and early marriage — stressors that have been similarly documented among women students in rural Maharashtra by earlier qualitative studies.

The predominance of avoidance-based and emotion-focused coping among high-stress students is particularly concerning from a public health standpoint. Behavioural disengagement — including skipping classes, postponing study, and social withdrawal — creates a self-reinforcing cycle of academic underperformance and increased stress. Substance use, while reported by a minority of respondents, was statistically associated with high stress and may be under-reported due to social desirability bias. These findings suggest a pressing need for early, normalised, non-stigmatising mental health support structures within arts colleges.

The significance of first-generation college student status as a stress predictor is an important finding for institutional policy. These students frequently lack familial guidance on navigating higher education systems, have fewer academic social networks, and face heightened economic uncertainty. Mentoring programmes pairing first-generation students with senior peers or faculty, as piloted in some Maharashtra Rajiv Gandhi Higher Education Institutes, have shown promise in building academic self-efficacy and reducing dropout rates and may deserve replication in arts colleges of Marathwada.

5. Conclusion

This study presents substantive empirical evidence that academic stress is prevalent and consequential among undergraduate arts students in Marathwada, with particular vulnerability among female students, first-generation learners, and students from economically disadvantaged households. Maladaptive coping strategies are disproportionately employed by high-stress individuals, pointing to a need for skills-based intervention.

The study recommends: (i) mandatory appointment of trained counsellors in all government-aided arts colleges with student populations exceeding 500; (ii) integration of stress management and mental health literacy modules into the first-year B.A. induction programme; (iii) dedicated mentoring and financial guidance for first-generation students; and (iv) establishment of peer support networks trained in active listening and referral. Policy

alignment between the Maharashtra Higher Education Department's Mental Health Policy Framework and institutional implementation at district college level is urgently required.

References

Carver, C. S. (1997). You want to measure coping but your protocol is too long: Consider the Brief COPE. International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 4(1), 92–100.

Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24(4), 385–396.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer.

Mathews, L. (2018). Gender differences in academic stress and coping among undergraduate students. Journal of Indian Academy of Applied Psychology, 44(1), 117–124.

Misra, R., & McKean, M. (2000). College students' academic stress and its relation to their anxiety, time management, and leisure satisfaction. American Journal of Health Studies, 16(1), 41–51.

NIMHANS. (2016). National Mental Health Survey of India 2015–16: Prevalence, patterns and outcomes. Bengaluru: National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences.

Praharsa, A. R., & Joshi, S. (2020). Stress among undergraduate students in Marathwada region colleges. Maharashtra Education Review, 12(2), 34–42.

Srivastava, K. (2010). Urbanization and mental health. Industrial Psychiatry Journal, 19(1), 75–76.

UGC. (2019). Guidelines on mental health and psychosocial well-being of students. New Delhi: University Grants Commission.

WHO. (2021). World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all. Geneva: World Health Organization.