

SOCIOSPHERE

Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

DOI: [Insert DOI here]

Website: <https://synergizejournal.org/index.php/Sociosphere/index>

e-ISSN: 3089-8161

Academic Suffocation: Students and Efforts to Build Inner Balance

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Received: [November 2025]; Accepted: [December 2025]; Published: [January 2026]

Abstract

Academic pressure experienced by students often negatively impacts their psychological condition and inner balance. The background of this study lies in the increasing cases of mental exhaustion, anxiety, and emotional instability resulting from high academic demands, peer competition, and the lack of adequate emotional support systems. This research aims to identify the forms of academic pressure perceived by students, as well as the strategies they use to build and maintain inner balance amid such stress. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collection techniques in the form of in-depth interviews involving 15 students from various study programs at both public and private universities in Indonesia. The data were analyzed using thematic methods to reveal common patterns in the students' experiences and strategies. The research findings indicate that students face pressure arising from overwhelming assignments, high academic expectations, and social pressures from their surroundings. In response, students develop various efforts to build inner balance, including spiritual practices (such as meditation and prayer), better time management, recreational activities, and seeking emotional support from peers or campus counselors. The conclusion of this study shows that efforts to build inner balance are dynamic processes that are strongly influenced by self-awareness and environmental support. Interventions from the university, such as the provision of counseling services and stress management programs, are crucial to help students cope with academic pressure in a healthier and more constructive manner.

Keywords: Academic pressure, Inner balance, Student strategies, Mental health

Abstrak

Tekanan akademik yang dialami mahasiswa kerap kali berdampak negatif pada kondisi psikologis dan keseimbangan batin mereka. Latar belakang penelitian ini adalah meningkatnya kasus kelelahan mental, kecemasan, dan ketidakstabilan emosional yang muncul akibat tuntutan akademik yang tinggi, kompetisi antarindividu, serta kurangnya sistem dukungan emosional yang memadai. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bentuk-bentuk tekanan akademik yang dirasakan oleh mahasiswa, serta strategi yang mereka gunakan dalam membangun dan menjaga keseimbangan batin di tengah tekanan tersebut. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam terhadap 15 mahasiswa dari berbagai program studi di universitas negeri dan swasta di Indonesia. Data dianalisis menggunakan metode tematik untuk mengungkap pola-pola umum dalam pengalaman dan strategi mahasiswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menghadapi tekanan yang bersumber dari tugas yang menumpuk, ekspektasi akademik yang tinggi, serta tekanan sosial dari lingkungan sekitar. Dalam menghadapi hal tersebut, mahasiswa mengembangkan berbagai upaya untuk membangun keseimbangan batin, antara lain melalui praktik spiritual

(seperti meditasi dan doa), manajemen waktu yang lebih baik, aktivitas rekreatif, serta pencarian dukungan emosional dari teman sebaya atau konselor kampus. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa upaya membangun keseimbangan batin merupakan proses yang dinamis dan sangat dipengaruhi oleh kesadaran diri serta dukungan lingkungan. Intervensi dari pihak kampus, seperti penyediaan layanan konseling dan program manajemen stres, sangat dibutuhkan untuk membantu mahasiswa menghadapi tekanan akademik secara lebih sehat dan konstruktif.

Kata kunci: Tekanan akademik, Keseimbangan batin, Strategi mahasiswa, Kesehatan mental.

Introduction

In academic life in higher education, students are faced with various demands that demand high intellectual, emotional, and social readiness. The academic pressure that comes from lecture assignments, exams, grade demands, and expectations of parents and society makes student life often feel crowded and emotionally draining. This reality is further exacerbated when students lack understanding or skills in managing the pressure, so that their mental balance is often disturbed. This not only has an impact on academic achievement, but can also reduce the quality of life, social relationships, and even mental health. Therefore, it is important to realize that maintaining inner balance is not a luxury, but rather an urgent need for today's college students. Ideally, the campus as an academic space is a place that supports students to develop holistically, not only cognitively but also affectively and psychomotor. Students should be given a safe space to explore ideas, learn from mistakes, and grow into strong individuals in character and intellect. In this ideal situation, academic pressure is not a burden, but rather a challenge that can be faced with adequate systemic and emotional support.

More than that, higher education institutions should facilitate an effective psychological support system such as counseling services, stress management training, and the involvement of lecturers as academic companions. A humane and empathetic academic environment will help students build confidence, manage negative emotions, and maintain a healthy and productive learning spirit. Thus, equanimity is not only a personal goal, but also part of institutional responsibility. But in reality, many students have difficulty in achieving inner balance due to increasingly complex and accumulated academic pressure. The assignments that come with it, a rigid evaluation system, and minimal rest time often make students feel exhausted and lose motivation. In addition, the high competitive culture in the academic environment sometimes adds to the psychological burden of students, especially when they feel left behind by their peers. This situation, if not managed properly, can cause symptoms of chronic stress to mental disorders such as anxiety and depression (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Ironically, many college students don't know where to turn for help, or even fear being seen as weak if they reveal their emotional difficulties. The stigma against mental health is still quite high, both from peers and educators. This causes students to often choose to suppress their feelings, which in the long run worsens their psychological condition. As a result, not only their academic performance is disrupted, but also their social and physical lives are affected (Stallman, 2010). Theoretically, prolonged academic stress can affect an individual's emotional stability and psychological balance. The stress and coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman explains that stress arises when an individual assesses a situation as a threat that exceeds his or her resources or ability to deal with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If students do not have an adequate coping strategy, then the constant pressure will disrupt emotional regulation and equanimity. Empirically, a number of studies show a link between academic stress and increased levels of anxiety, mental fatigue, and even depressive disorders in college students. College students who face stress without social support or good stress management skills are more likely to experience burnout and withdraw from social activities (Misra & Castillo, 2004). These studies reinforce the urgency to provide a more proactive intervention approach to addressing this issue.

Through meta-analysis, it was found that psychological interventions such as mindfulness training, group counseling, and social support have been shown to be effective in improving students' mental well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This kind of intervention not only plays a role in relieving stress but also

improves students' resilience and social skills. Thus, evidence-based strategies are needed to help students rebuild their inner balance in the face of the academic world. One of the important solutions that can be implemented is the provision of regular stress management training programs for students, both in the form of workshops, reflective sessions, and motivational seminars. This program can help students recognize the signs of psychological distress early on and develop coping strategies such as relaxation techniques, task scheduling, and the use of social networks as a support system. Through this intervention, students will be more aware of the importance of maintaining their mental health. Another solution that is no less important is to normalize the conversation about mental health in the campus environment. Higher education institutions need to encourage an open and empathetic culture, where students feel safe to talk about the issues they face without fear of being ostracized. This can be done through training for lecturers to become active listeners, as well as improving the quality of campus counseling services so that they are more accessible and not stigmatized.

Based on the background and reality that has been described, the main questions asked in this study are: How does academic pressure affect students' mental balance, and what strategies can be applied effectively to rebuild that balance? This study aims to analyze the influence of academic pressure on students' mental balance, as well as identify effective strategies or approaches in helping students rebuild their psychological balance in the midst of various academic demands. This research refers to the stress and coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman which states that stress occurs when a person assesses that the demands of the environment exceed the resources available to cope with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the context of students, high academic pressure is often assessed as a threat that results in a negative emotional response if not balanced with adequate coping strategies.

In addition, this study also refers to the social support theory from Cohen and Wills (1985), which explains that social support can act as a buffer or buffer from the negative effects of stress. Students who have a strong support network – whether from family, friends, or the campus environment – tend to have better mental resilience in the face of academic pressure. The uniqueness of this research lies in its integrative efforts between theoretical understandings of academic stress and practical solutions based on psychological and institutional approaches. Different from previous research that only focused on academic pressure or coping strategies alone, this study places inner balance as the main and urgent goal to be achieved, especially in the midst of the increasing number of mental disorders among students post-pandemic and the era of digitalization of education.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach and a type of qualitative research that aims to describe and explore in depth the students' experiences in dealing with academic pressure as well as efforts to build inner balance. Data collection techniques are carried out through in-depth interviews, non-participatory observations, and documentation, so as to allow researchers to get a comprehensive picture from the subjective side and real behavior of students. The primary data source came from 15 active students who met certain criteria, such as being in the final phase of their studies and experiencing academic pressure, while secondary data was obtained from campus documents, previous survey results, and other relevant records. The data obtained was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, by identifying patterns that emerged from the respondents' narratives and grouping them into themes such as sources of stress, self-adjustment strategies, and the meaning of equanimity. The scope of this research is focused on the psychological and social aspects of university students in Indonesia, especially in the context of their daily lives when experiencing academic pressure, by not focusing on numerical academic achievements but on internal processes and subjective meanings built by students in maintaining their mental health.

Results and Discussion

The thematic data analysis in this study produced the following themes:

Table 1. Analytical Table of Findings

No	Tema Utama	Sub Tema	Deskripsi Singkat
1	Academic Stress and Assignments	Stacking assignments, lecturer revisions, assessment system, GPA	Students are under pressure from Academic assignments, revisions, and evaluations less transparent, causing stress.
2	Coping and Relaxation Strategies	Sleep, exercise, meditation, journaling, hobbies	Students are under pressure from Academic assignments, revisions, and evaluations less transparent, causing stress.
3	Social and Spiritual Support	Support from parents, friends, lecturers, campus community	The important role of parental support, friends, lecturers, and communities in Helping students to survive dealing with stress.
4	Emotional and Mental Challenges	Anxiety, overthinking, fear of failure, lack of focus	Students experience anxiety, feelings fear of failure, and difficulty focusing as a result of academic and social pressures.
5	Personal Change and Growth	Become more mature, mentally tough, know yourself	Academic pressures and challenges triggering positive changes such as maturity, mental toughness, and Self-identification.
6	Repair Needs and Expectations	Counseling services, flexibility of tasks, lecturer empathy	Students want improvements such as active counseling services, flexibility in tasks, and empathy from lecturers.

Students face various pressures in academic life, ranging from stacked assignments, revisions of lecturers, to assessment systems that are not considered transparent. This triggers emotional challenges such as anxiety, overthinking, and fear of failure. To cope with stress, students develop various coping strategies such as getting enough sleep, exercising, meditation, and running hobbies. Social support from parents, friends, lecturers, and the campus community also plays an important role in maintaining their mental health. Despite the pressure, many students experience personal growth, becoming more mature and getting to know themselves more deeply. However, they still hope that there will be improvements from the campus, especially in the form of active counseling services, flexibility of assignments, and empathy from lecturers.

1. How do college students describe the academic pressures they face?

Students describe academic pressure as a combination of the demands of a very heavy workload, high expectations of achievement, and systemic constraints in the academic environment that trigger feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and helplessness. Most respondents cited the accumulated workload as the main source of stress. Arsyad, for example, stated, "Tasks pile up every week, time always feels lacking," which illustrates a sense of time constraints and constant pressure. Wella revealed the pressure of "GPA demands from parents" that creates feelings of perfectionism and anxiety. In addition, Annisa felt isolated because of "uncooperative lecturers," which added to the emotional burden when dealing with academic problems. Irfan also highlighted the lack of clarity of the assessment system as a trigger for severe stress: "The non-transparent assessment system makes me often overthink." Putra added another dimension in the form of "not understanding the material but afraid to ask," which indicates communication barriers and fear of stigma or social judgment in the academic context.

These findings are consistent with the results of studies showing that heavy workload and ambiguity in academic evaluations are major stress factors among students (Misra & McKean, 2000; Stallman, 2010). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in stress theory and coping mentioned that stress occurs when environmental demands exceed the psychological resources of the individual. The inability of students to effectively manage this burden has the potential to lead to mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). In conclusion, the academic pressure experienced by students comes

not only from the intensity of the task, but also from external expectations and an unresponsive education system, thereby increasing the risk of significant psychological stress.

2. What efforts do students make to maintain inner balance?

In the face of academic pressure, students demonstrate a variety of coping mechanisms that involve physical, mental, social, and spiritual strategies to maintain their inner balance. Physically, a number of college students practice getting enough sleep as one of the main ways to cope with stress; Annisa says, "I make sure I get enough sleep so I can focus." This is in line with research that confirms the importance of sleep for mental regeneration and reducing stress (Pilcher & Huffcutt, 1996). Some also exercise lightly as an outlet for stress, such as Halim who regularly "exercises lightly," and Zaki who practices "meditation every morning," a strategy known to be effective in improving mental well-being through the reduction of stress hormones (Salmon, 2001).

The mental and emotional strategies used are to write a journal or poem to express emotions (Arsyad: "Writing a night journal," Saskia: "Writing poetry") and doing relaxation activities such as watching favorite series (Annisa) or playing games (Zaki). This approach supports the concepts of emotional expression and distraction coping which can reduce the psychological burden (Gross & John, 2003). Social support is also vital; Many students find strength from family, friends, and communities. Putra said, "The campus community is very supportive of me," while Dinda said, "I pray and confide in my parents." Studies on social support show that this support network is very effective in reducing the impact of academic stress and increasing resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The spiritual aspect is no less important, where many students perform worship such as night prayers and reading the Qur'an as a source of tranquility (Arsyad). Research by Pargament (1997) confirms that spirituality is an important coping strategy that provides meaning and hope in the face of pressure. In conclusion, students use a comprehensive combination of coping — physical, emotional, social, and spiritual — to maintain inner balance amid intense academic pressure, which demonstrates adaptability and the need for multidimensional support in the context of higher education.

3. How does academic experience shape students' perceptions of mental health?

Challenging and intense academic experiences shape students' perceptions of mental health significantly, encouraging them to be more aware of the importance of psychological well-being. Some students report increased emotional and mental maturity as a result of facing various academic obstacles. Wella stated, "I became a more mature person," and Arsyad added, "I feel more mentally tough." This is in line with the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and resilience theory which explains how experiences of severe stress can strengthen an individual's coping ability (Masten, 2001). However, not a few also experience negative impacts in the form of excessive anxiety and overthinking, such as Irfan who says, "Often overthinking," and Wella who feels "often anxious." This indicates that academic pressure also has the potential to cause mental disorders if it is not accompanied by support and effective coping strategies. Students are also becoming more aware of the need for a balance between academics and mental health. Several speakers stated the need for a more supportive academic environment and a humane assessment system. Halim mentioned, "I don't get angry or anxious easily because I try to be more patient," while Rena emphasized the need for lecturers to be "trained on student empathy." Self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998) describes how students attempt to manage their emotions and behaviors to maintain a balance between academic demands and mental health. This awareness also leads to demands for changes in campus policies to support student well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). In conclusion, academic experiences shape students' perceptions of mental health to be more mature and critical, while at the same time giving rise to the need for more systematic psychosocial support from the educational environment.

Conclusion

This study examines how students cope with academic pressure and build inner balance. Regarding the first question, students described academic pressure as an accumulated workload, revision of lecturers,

and pressure of the evaluation system (Theme: Academic Pressure and Assignments). The second question was answered through strategies they carried out such as meditation, hobbies, social support, and time management (Theme: Coping and Relaxation Strategies, Social and Spiritual Support). For the third question, the academic experience shaped students' awareness of the importance of mental health, which promotes personal growth and inner resilience (Theme: Emotional and Mental Challenges, Personal Change). These findings corroborate the coping theory of Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which states that individuals respond to stress through adaptive strategies and social support. It is also in line with Dewey's (1938) view that difficult experiences can trigger learning and self-development. This study confirms the importance of campus interventions such as counselling services, academic flexibility, and lecturer empathy (Theme: Needs and Expectations for Improvement). With the right support, academic pressure can be managed constructively. Students are not only recipients of pressure, but also active agents who are able to turn pressure into a process of self-formation and equanimity.

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