

From Academic Pressure to Compulsive Busyness: Stress Addiction-Like Behaviors Among University Students

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Abstract: University students are frequently exposed to sustained academic, social, and career-related pressures. For some students, prolonged exposure to high-pressure routines may be accompanied by difficulty disengaging from tasks, guilt during rest, persistent busyness, and feelings of anxiety, emptiness, or restlessness when external demands subside. This paper uses the term "stress addiction-like behaviors" descriptively, rather than as a clinical diagnosis, to refer to recurrent patterns of compulsive busyness, dependence on high-pressure routines, and psychological discomfort during unstructured time. As an exploratory component, interviews with 74 Chinese first-year undergraduates indicated that 69% reported high-stress inertia, such as automatically planning study tasks during otherwise neutral daily activities, while 35% described behaviors suggesting dependence on fast-paced routines and difficulty relaxing. Drawing on research on academic stress, study addiction, perfectionism, psychological recovery, and student mental health, this paper discusses possible contributing factors, including habits formed under prolonged academic pressure, internalized family and social expectations, limited stress-regulation skills, narrow pathways for self-worth, and behavioral inertia. Potential consequences include anxiety, emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance, reduced well-being, and lower academic efficiency. Practical strategies include cognitive reframing, structured recovery, mindfulness and relaxation practices, regular physical activity, adequate sleep, social support, and access to professional counseling. Recognizing these patterns may help universities identify maladaptive forms of over-engagement before they develop into more serious mental health difficulties.

Keywords: *University Students; Academic Stress; Study Addiction; Compulsive Busyness; Mental Health; Stress Management*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Background

University life is often characterized by a combination of academic demands, competition for scholarships and awards, preparation for postgraduate study, career uncertainty, and the need to develop multiple competencies. Research consistently shows that university students experience substantial levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological distress, and that these difficulties may affect both well-being and academic functioning [1-4]. Academic stress is therefore not simply an occasional response to examinations or deadlines; for many students, it becomes a recurrent feature of daily life [2].

Compared with the highly structured environment of secondary education, university students are expected to regulate their own time, set long-term goals, and make independent decisions about study, career development, and

personal life. This transition may be especially challenging for students who have spent many years in highly competitive educational settings. Habits that were adaptive during entrance-examination preparation - such as constant time monitoring, intensive self-discipline, and a tendency to equate effort with worth - may persist after students enter university. In some cases, students may find it difficult to relax even when immediate academic demands are low.

To obtain an initial understanding of this phenomenon, the original exploratory work underlying this paper involved one-to-one interviews with 74 Chinese first-year undergraduates. Sixty-nine percent of the interviewees described what may be termed high-stress inertia: while walking alone on campus, especially when heading toward a library or classroom, they reported automatically planning subsequent study tasks, reorganizing schedules, or accelerating their pace even when no immediate deadline was present. In addition, 35% described behaviors suggestive of dependence on a fast-paced routine, such as eating unusually quickly when alone, minimizing unstructured free time, or feeling uncomfortable when no productive activity had been planned.

These observations should not be interpreted as prevalence estimates of a psychiatric condition. The interviews were exploratory and did not use a validated diagnostic instrument. Nevertheless, the reported experiences resemble established constructs in the literature, particularly study addiction, compulsive over-engagement, maladaptive perfectionism, insufficient psychological recovery, and chronic academic stress [2,5-8]. The present paper therefore uses the expression "stress addiction-like behaviors" as a descriptive umbrella term for a pattern in which students become psychologically dependent on busyness or high-pressure routines and experience discomfort when attempting to rest.

B. Research Significance

Mental health is a central component of students' academic development and long-term functioning. Studies across different countries have shown that university students may experience higher levels of psychological distress than comparable groups in the general population [3], and college years are also a developmental period in which mental health problems may first emerge or become more apparent [4]. Consequently, identifying less visible patterns of maladaptive coping is important even when such patterns do not meet criteria for a formal mental disorder.

A particular concern is that excessive busyness can be socially rewarded. Students who study for long hours, continuously add tasks to their schedules, and rarely rest may be perceived as highly motivated. However, excessive studying is not necessarily equivalent to healthy engagement. Research

on study addiction defines the problem as compulsive and excessive involvement in studying that interferes with other areas of life and may be associated with poorer sleep, lower quality of life, higher perceived stress, and even lower academic performance [5]. Similarly, perfectionistic concerns are positively associated with burnout, whereas healthy striving and engagement are conceptually distinct from compulsive over-involvement [5,7,9].

Examining stress addiction-like behaviors may therefore help students and universities distinguish productive effort from maladaptive over-engagement. It may also support the development of mental health education that does not simply encourage students to "work harder" or "relax more," but instead teaches them how to alternate effectively between effort and recovery, manage internalized expectations, and build a broader sense of self-worth.

II. CONCEPTUALIZING STRESS ADDICTION-LIKE BEHAVIORS

A. Definition and Conceptual Boundaries

The term "stress addiction" is commonly used in informal psychological discourse, but it is not a recognized diagnosis in major psychiatric classification systems. For academic purposes, it is therefore more appropriate to speak of stress addiction-like behaviors or stress-dependent patterns. In this paper, the term refers to a habitual psychological and behavioral reliance on high-pressure routines, characterized by persistent self-imposed busyness, difficulty disengaging from tasks, discomfort during rest, and repeated creation of new demands even when external pressure is temporarily low.

This concept overlaps with, but is not identical to, study addiction. Atroszko and colleagues conceptualized study addiction as compulsive over-involvement in studying that interferes with functioning in other life domains and is detrimental to the individual or the surrounding environment [5]. Their Bergen Study Addiction Scale was developed around core addiction-like symptoms such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, relapse, and problems. Stress addiction-like behavior is broader because the object of dependence may not be studying itself; rather, the student may become attached to the state of being busy, challenged, pressured, or constantly productive.

It is also important to distinguish this pattern from normal short-term stress. Acute stress can be adaptive because it mobilizes attention and energy in response to a specific demand. Once the demand is resolved, the individual normally returns toward baseline. Chronic stress, by contrast, can create cumulative physiological and psychological costs when activation is sustained without sufficient recovery [10]. The key concern in stress addiction-like behavior is therefore not the presence of stress itself, but the inability or unwillingness to disengage from a high-pressure state even when disengagement would be appropriate.

B. Emotional and Behavioral Manifestations

A common emotional feature is discomfort during rest. Students may report anxiety, guilt, emptiness, irritability, or restlessness when they have no immediate task to complete. Instead of experiencing free time as restorative, they may interpret it as evidence that they are falling behind. This reaction is especially likely when self-worth is strongly tied to achievement or when students believe that continuous productivity is necessary for future success.

At the behavioral level, students may attempt to eliminate unstructured time. They may continuously add tasks to daily schedules, multitask during leisure, or convert recreational activities into productivity-oriented activities. For example, a walk may become an opportunity to listen to educational audio, a meal may be shortened to save time, and a period intended for relaxation may be replaced by reviewing notes or organizing future work. Such behaviors can create the appearance of high efficiency while reducing genuine opportunities for psychological detachment and recovery.

Another feature is the subjective sense that pressure provides stability. Some students may feel more focused, secure, or purposeful when they are busy. A demanding schedule can temporarily reduce uncertainty because it provides clear tasks and immediate goals. When the schedule becomes less demanding, unresolved concerns about identity, future plans, or self-worth may become more noticeable. As a result, the student may recreate pressure to restore a familiar sense of control.

Social patterns may also change. Students who increasingly prioritize productivity may reduce time spent with friends and family or begin to view leisure-oriented social interaction as inefficient. Over time, this can narrow sources of emotional support. Importantly, this does not mean that every highly motivated or introverted student has a problem. The pattern becomes concerning when busyness is compulsive, rest repeatedly triggers distress, and academic or personal functioning begins to deteriorate.

C. Potential Psychological, Physical, and Academic Consequences

Persistent high stress can contribute to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, reduced positive affect, and depressive symptoms. University students already represent a population in which stress-related mental health concerns are common [1-4]. When stress is combined with perfectionistic concerns and inadequate recovery, the risk of burnout may increase [7-9]. The issue is therefore not simply that students are "too busy," but that prolonged over-engagement can gradually reduce their capacity to regulate emotion and recover from demands.

At the physiological level, repeated activation of stress-response systems can create what McEwen described as allostatic load - the cumulative cost of repeated or chronic adaptation to stress [10]. Although the present paper does not diagnose physiological disease, chronic stress is known to interact with cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and sleep-related processes. Sleep is particularly relevant for university students: a large study of college students found substantial levels of poor sleep quality and linked disturbed sleep with stress and mood-related factors [11]. Students who treat sleep as expendable study time may therefore worsen both emotional regulation and academic functioning.

Excessive studying may also produce diminishing returns. Atroszko et al. found that higher study-addiction scores were associated with longer study time but lower academic performance, along with poorer general health, lower quality of life, poorer sleep quality, and higher perceived stress [5]. This finding challenges the assumption that more time spent working always produces better outcomes. Academic success depends not only on effort but also on concentration, memory, decision-making, recovery, and sustainable engagement.

III. POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

A. Habits Formed in Long-Term High-Pressure Education

Many university students have experienced years of examination-oriented education in which performance is closely monitored and future opportunities appear to depend on continuous effort. Under these conditions, highly structured schedules and intensive studying may be adaptive. The difficulty arises when strategies developed for a temporary period of high-stakes preparation become generalized to everyday life.

After entering university, students often encounter greater autonomy and more unstructured time. Those who have learned to associate rest with falling behind may experience this freedom as uncertainty rather than relief. They may therefore recreate the familiar rhythm of secondary school by filling their schedules with courses, competitions, certificates, internships, and self-improvement activities. Over time, the high-pressure routine can become habitual even when the original external pressure has changed.

B. Family, Institutional, and Social Expectations

Stress-related over-engagement is rarely produced by a single source of pressure. Family expectations, peer comparison, institutional reward systems, career competition, and personal ambition can interact. Students may internalize the message that they must continuously accumulate achievements in order to remain competitive. In such an environment, busyness can become a visible signal of seriousness and competence.

This interpretation is consistent with research on perfectionism. A large meta-analysis of college-student samples from 1989 to 2016 found increases over time in self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented perfectionism, suggesting that contemporary young adults increasingly perceive both internal and external demands for high performance [6]. Perfectionism is not uniformly maladaptive, but perfectionistic concerns - particularly fear of mistakes, doubts about performance, and perceived pressure from others - are associated with burnout [7]. Students who believe that slowing down means failure may therefore be especially vulnerable to compulsive busyness.

C. Limited Stress-Regulation and Recovery Skills

Another contributing factor is the absence of deliberate recovery skills. Students are often taught how to plan study tasks but receive much less instruction on how to disengage from them. As a result, they may know how to intensify effort but not how to stop working without guilt. Psychological recovery involves more than physical inactivity; it includes mental detachment from demands, relaxation, a sense of control over leisure time, and engagement in activities that restore psychological resources [8].

Without these skills, free time can become cognitively occupied by unfinished tasks. Even when students are not physically studying, they may continue rehearsing plans, worrying about future goals, or monitoring their productivity. This pattern prevents genuine recovery and may reinforce the belief that pressure is unavoidable.

D. Narrow Pathways for Self-Worth and Identity

University students are still developing stable adult identities. When academic performance becomes the primary source of self-esteem, each period of inactivity can feel threatening because it temporarily removes the activity through

which the student proves personal worth. Completing tasks provides immediate feedback and a sense of progress; rest provides no comparable performance signal.

This can produce a self-reinforcing cycle. The student feels uncertain or inadequate, adds tasks to regain a sense of competence, experiences temporary relief after completing them, and then requires new tasks to maintain that relief. The behavior may therefore resemble an addiction-like pattern even though the underlying mechanisms may include perfectionism, anxiety regulation, identity concerns, and learned reinforcement rather than addiction in a clinical sense.

E. Behavioral Inertia and the Normalization of Busyness

Repeated behavior becomes easier to repeat. Students who spend years operating under high pressure may develop automatic routines: walking quickly, checking schedules repeatedly, studying whenever a free period appears, or feeling uncomfortable without a task. Eventually, busyness is no longer experienced as a deliberate choice but as the default mode of daily life.

The normalization of busyness is also socially reinforced. When peers constantly discuss productivity, examinations, internships, publications, or career plans, students may interpret any reduction in activity as evidence that they are losing ground. This creates a feedback loop in which individual anxiety and social comparison maintain each other.

IV. COPING AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

A. Cognitive Reframing and a More Balanced View of Stress

The first step is to reconsider rigid beliefs about stress, rest, and achievement. Students may benefit from identifying automatic assumptions such as "rest is laziness," "if I am not busy, I am falling behind," or "my value depends on how much I accomplish." These beliefs can be replaced with more flexible interpretations in which effort and recovery are viewed as complementary rather than opposing processes.

Research on stress mindset shows that beliefs about stress influence how people respond to stressful situations [12]. This does not mean that students should simply label all stress as beneficial. Instead, they can learn to differentiate between manageable challenge, which may support growth, and chronic uncontrolled pressure, which requires recovery or problem solving. A balanced stress mindset allows students to take academic demands seriously without treating constant tension as evidence of commitment.

B. Structured Recovery, Relaxation, and Mindfulness

Recovery should be treated as a deliberate component of effective performance rather than as time left over after work. Evidence from recovery research highlights psychological detachment and relaxation as important processes through which people restore resources after demands [10]. For students, this may involve setting clear stopping times for academic work, creating periods without productivity goals, and allowing recreational activities to remain recreational.

Relaxation techniques can include slow breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, quiet walking, or other practices that reduce arousal. Mindfulness-based interventions have also shown promise in university populations. A meta-analysis found that cognitive, behavioral, and mindfulness interventions can reduce stress-related outcomes in university students [13], while a pragmatic randomized controlled trial at the University of Cambridge

found that a mindfulness course improved students' resilience to stress [14].

For students who feel guilty while resting, initial recovery periods may themselves be uncomfortable. This discomfort should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that rest is unhelpful. Instead, it may reflect the strength of the existing habit. Gradually increasing tolerance for unstructured time can help weaken the association between inactivity and self-criticism.

C. Sleep, Physical Activity, and Sustainable Daily Routines

A sustainable routine should protect basic physiological needs. Regular sleep is particularly important because poor sleep is common among university students and is associated with stress, mood disturbance, and impaired daytime functioning [11]. Students should avoid routinely sacrificing sleep to create additional study time, especially when the extra hours are accompanied by declining concentration or emotional exhaustion.

Regular physical activity can also support mental health. A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis of undergraduate students found that physical-activity interventions were associated with reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress, although the authors noted substantial heterogeneity and generally low certainty of evidence [15]. Physical activity should therefore be understood as one useful component of a broader stress-management strategy rather than a universal treatment.

Time planning can also be redesigned. Instead of filling every available minute, students can schedule both focused work blocks and protected recovery periods. The goal is not to reduce ambition but to make effort more sustainable. A productive schedule should leave enough cognitive and emotional capacity for sleep, relationships, exercise, and activities that are not evaluated in terms of achievement.

D. Social Support and University-Level Resources

Students should be encouraged to maintain social connections rather than treating relationships as distractions from productivity. Supportive interaction with friends, roommates, family members, mentors, and teachers can provide perspective and reduce the tendency to evaluate every day exclusively through academic output. When students notice persistent anxiety, severe guilt during rest, sleep disturbance, depressed mood, or an inability to reduce compulsive studying, professional counseling should be considered.

Universities also have a role. Student-support systems can incorporate stress-management education into orientation programs, first-year seminars, counseling services, and academic advising. Interventions should normalize help-seeking and explicitly challenge the idea that chronic exhaustion is a necessary sign of excellence. Evidence-based university programs that use cognitive-behavioral, mindfulness, or other structured approaches may reduce stress-related symptoms [13,14].

V. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present paper is primarily conceptual and exploratory. The interview observations from 74 first-year undergraduates provide useful phenomenological examples but should not be treated as epidemiological prevalence data. The original interview exercise did not employ a validated scale for stress addiction-like behavior, and the construct itself is not a

recognized clinical diagnosis. Accordingly, the percentages reported in this paper describe the proportion of interviewees who reported particular behaviors, not the prevalence of a mental disorder.

Future studies should use clearer sampling procedures, validated measures of perceived stress [16], study addiction [5], perfectionism, burnout [9], sleep quality, and psychological well-being. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable because they could determine whether compulsive busyness predicts later burnout or mental health difficulties, or whether students with pre-existing anxiety and perfectionism are more likely to develop stress-dependent routines. Qualitative research could also examine how students interpret guilt during rest, productivity norms, family expectations, and social comparison.

Another priority is conceptual clarification. Stress addiction-like behaviors may overlap with study addiction, workaholism-like tendencies, anxiety-driven over-preparation, perfectionism, and high engagement. Future research should determine whether the construct adds explanatory value beyond these established concepts. Until such evidence is available, the term should be used cautiously and descriptively.

CONCLUSION

Some university students appear to develop a pattern in which high pressure and constant busyness become psychologically familiar and difficult to disengage from. When academic demands decrease, these students may experience anxiety, emptiness, guilt, or restlessness and may respond by creating new tasks or compressing leisure time. This paper refers to this pattern as stress addiction-like behavior, while emphasizing that it is a descriptive concept rather than a clinical diagnosis.

The pattern may be shaped by long-term high-pressure educational experiences, internalized expectations, perfectionistic concerns, limited recovery skills, narrow sources of self-worth, and behavioral inertia. If sustained, it may contribute to emotional exhaustion, sleep disturbance, reduced well-being, and inefficient studying. Importantly, healthy striving is not the same as compulsive over-engagement. Sustainable academic development requires both effective effort and effective recovery.

Universities and students can address these patterns by promoting flexible beliefs about stress, protecting time for psychological detachment, encouraging adequate sleep and physical activity, strengthening social support, and improving access to evidence-based stress-management and counseling services. More rigorous empirical research is needed to define and measure stress addiction-like behaviors and to clarify their relationship with established constructs such as study addiction, perfectionism, burnout, and chronic stress.

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