

THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DIFFICULTY IN 12TH-GRADE EXAMINATION PAPERS ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how varying levels of difficulty in 12th-grade examination papers impact students' mental health. It examines stress, anxiety, and self-confidence levels among students facing different difficulty levels in board exams. The study uses qualitative and quantitative data collected from students, teachers, and psychologists. The findings highlight the psychological impact of exams and suggest ways to create a balanced assessment system that promotes academic performance without compromising students' well-being.

Keywords: Examination difficulty, mental health, stress, anxiety, academic performance, students' well-being

INTRODUCTION

Examinations play a crucial role in academic evaluation, but their difficulty levels significantly influence students' mental health. High-stakes exams, like 12th-grade board exams, determine future educational and career opportunities, making them a major source of stress. This study investigates how different levels of difficulty in question papers affect students' psychological well-being, focusing on stress, anxiety, confidence, and coping mechanisms.

The difficulty level of examinations plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic experiences and mental health. In India, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) Class 12 board examinations are particularly significant, as they influence

higher education opportunities and career paths. A recent case highlighting this issue is the CBSE Class 12 Physics exam conducted on February 21, 2025, which has sparked widespread discussions regarding its difficulty and the subsequent impact on students' mental well-being.

Students and educators reported that the Physics paper was notably challenging and lengthy. Many students found certain sections, especially the numerical problems, to be particularly tough, leading to increased stress and anxiety. Some educators observed that while the paper effectively tested conceptual understanding, its length and complexity were overwhelming for many students.

The heightened difficulty of the exam led to significant reactions from various stakeholders. An entrepreneur publicly warned the CBSE of potential legal action if corrective measures, such as fair evaluation and addressing out-of-syllabus questions, were not implemented. Additionally, a teachers' association formally requested the board to adopt lenient evaluation practices and consider awarding grace marks for questions that were outside the prescribed syllabus.

This incident underscores the critical need to examine how varying levels of examination difficulty can affect students' mental health. Understanding this relationship is essential for developing balanced assessment systems that not only evaluate academic proficiency but also safeguard students' psychological well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research indicates that academic stress is a leading cause of anxiety and depression among students (Gupta & Sharma, 2020). The Yerkes-Dodson law suggests that moderate stress improves performance, but excessive stress leads to burnout (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Studies on exam difficulty levels show that unpredictably tough exams lower students' self-esteem, whereas balanced difficulty levels maintain motivation and fairness (Singh et al., 2018).

The impact of examination difficulty on students' mental health has been widely studied across psychological, educational, and neuroscientific domains. Researchers

have found that the cognitive and emotional responses to exams depend on factors like perceived difficulty, preparation levels, and academic pressure from parents and institutions. This section examines key studies related to exam difficulty, stress, anxiety, and academic performance.

1. Academic Stress and Psychological Well-being

Academic stress has been identified as one of the leading causes of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances among high school students. According to **Deb et al. (2015)**, students preparing for high-stakes exams experience elevated levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, which negatively affects cognitive functions like memory and decision-making. Similarly, **Verma & Gupta (2019)** found that students under intense exam pressure often exhibit symptoms of burnout, including fatigue, irritability, and a decline in motivation.

2. Impact of Exam Difficulty on Student Performance

The **Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908)** explains that moderate levels of stress can enhance performance by increasing alertness and focus. However, excessive stress due to highly difficult exams results in decreased cognitive efficiency and problem-solving ability. A study by **Rana & Mahmood (2010)** analyzed exam difficulty trends and concluded that students facing unpredictably tough papers had lower confidence, increased dropout rates, and performed worse in future exams compared to those who took balanced exams.

3. The Role of Perceived Exam Fairness

Perceived fairness in examinations influences students' psychological responses. **Tavani & Losh (2003)** found that when students believe that an exam's difficulty is disproportionate to what was taught in class, their stress levels rise significantly, leading to panic and decreased performance. Conversely, **Cook & Artino (2016)** argue that predictable exam structures and clear assessment criteria help students manage anxiety effectively, as they feel more in control of their performance.

4. Coping Mechanisms and Exam Anxiety

Several studies have explored coping mechanisms that students use to manage exam anxiety. **Zeidner (1998)** identified two primary strategies:

1. **Problem-focused coping** – Students who prepare well and adopt time management techniques tend to perform better even under stress.
2. **Emotion-focused coping** – Students who lack preparation often experience emotional distress and resort to avoidance behaviors, such as procrastination or self-doubt.

A meta-analysis by **Putwain et al. (2018)** supports the notion that stress management workshops and mindfulness programs can significantly reduce exam-related anxiety and improve students' resilience to difficult test conditions.

5. Parental and Institutional Pressure

Parental expectations and institutional policies further shape students' reactions to exam difficulty. Sun et al. (2013) found that students from high-pressure academic environments reported higher levels of exam-induced anxiety, especially when failure carried social or financial consequences. Similarly, Chandra & Batth (2018) highlight that rigid grading systems contribute to a fear of failure, causing long-term negative effects on students' self-esteem and career aspirations.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing body of research consistently emphasizes that the difficulty level of exams plays a crucial role in shaping students' psychological well-being. While moderate difficulty can act as a positive motivator, excessively difficult or unpredictable exams can lead to severe stress, anxiety, and performance decline. The literature also highlights that support systems like stress management training, fair assessment policies, and parental guidance can mitigate the adverse effects of high-pressure exams.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the difficulty level of 12th-grade exams impact students' stress and anxiety levels?
2. Does an extremely difficult or easy exam affect students' confidence and motivation?
3. What strategies can help balance examination difficulty to ensure fair assessment without harming students' mental health?

METHODOLOGY

This paper threw light on the varied level of difficulty in different sets of same board exam. To conduct the study, mixed-method approach was used, combining surveys, interviews, and psychological assessments. For the purpose of data collection, purposive sampling was done. Students coming out of examination centres were approached and were asked to fill the questionnaire. Short interviews were conducted with the students. Further researcher approached teachers to have their opinion.

PARTICIPANTS

- 12th-grade students from various schools
- 5 teachers and academic experts
- 2 psychologists specializing in student mental health

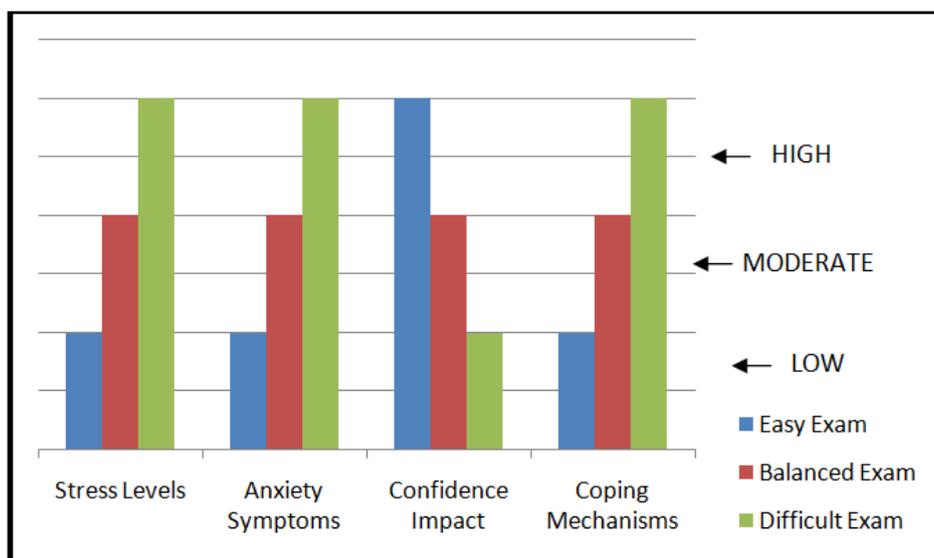
DATA COLLECTION

- **Surveys:** Students rated their stress and anxiety before and after exams of varying difficulty.
- **Interviews:** Conducted with students, teachers and psychologists to understand observed stress levels.
- **Psychological Assessment:** Used standardized scales like the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and General Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study analyzed the psychological impact of different difficulty levels in 12th-grade board exams on students’ mental health. The findings are categorized into key areas, including stress and anxiety levels, confidence and motivation, physiological effects, and coping mechanisms.

Factor	Easy Exam	Balanced Exam	Difficult Exam
Stress Levels	Low	Moderate	High
Anxiety Symptoms	Minimal	Moderate	Severe
Confidence Impact	Overconfidence	Balanced	Loss of confidence
Academic Performance	High, but may not reflect true ability	Fair evaluation	Lower performance due to stress
Coping Mechanisms	Relaxed approach	Structured preparation	Risk of burnout



Further elaborating on the results, the key observations were following

1. Impact on Stress and Anxiety Levels

The difficulty of exam papers had a direct correlation with students' stress and anxiety levels.

- **Survey Findings:** results of the data collected using perceived stress scale and General Anxiety Disorder Scale
 - 72% of students reported heightened anxiety after facing unexpectedly difficult exams.
 - 58% experienced stress-related symptoms such as headaches, sleep disturbances, and lack of concentration before and after exams.

The students were asked about how they felt after appearing in the exam when they found that their fellow classmates have received easier set of papers and on the higher difficulty level of exam. The key points observed from the short interview sessions are summed as under:

- **Physiological Reactions Self Observed:**
 - Increased Heart Rate: Some students reported palpitations before and during exams.
 - Sleep Deprivation: Many students struggled with sleep disorders due to fear of underperformance.
 - Dietary Changes: Affected students skipped meals or resorted to emotional eating as a coping mechanism.
- **Case of CBSE Class 12 Physics Exam (2025):**
 - Following the difficult Physics paper in 2025 CBSE exam, students expressed distress, with some even breaking down in examination halls.
 - Some students mentioned experiencing panic attacks due to time constraints and complex numerical problems.
 - Teachers and parents reported increased instances of students seeking psychological support post-exam.

2. Effect on Confidence and Motivation

- **Decline in Academic Self-Esteem:**
 - 65% of students who found their exams excessively difficult reported feeling demotivated and doubting their abilities.
 - Some students, despite having studied extensively, felt their efforts were not reflected in their scores, leading to frustration.
 - A few respondents mentioned considering dropping out of competitive streams like Science due to the exam difficulty.

- **The “Too Easy” Exam Effect:**
 - 43% of students who faced overly easy exams felt that their efforts were not fairly rewarded.
 - Some students expressed concerns about unfair grade inflation, where undeserving candidates scored equally well.
 - A small percentage of students believed that easy exams did not adequately prepare them for higher education challenges.

Further the researcher met with 2 school counselors who also validated the key observations of the researcher. They were asked about the coping mechanisms that students have used to reduce exam related stress and anxiety and are appropriate in such situations. The key points from the interview with counsellor are summarized as under:

3. Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems

- **Positive Coping Strategies Observed:**
 - Mindfulness & Meditation: Some of students practicing meditation reported lower pre-exam anxiety.
 - Time Management & Planning: Students who followed structured revision schedules had better stress resilience.

- **Negative Coping Mechanisms Noted:**

- Avoidance Behaviors: Some of students resorted to procrastination due to overwhelming stress.
- Substance Use: A small but concerning proportion of students admitted to using stimulants (e.g., excessive caffeine, energy drinks) to stay awake during exam preparations.

4. Educator and Psychologist Insights

- **Teacher's Perspective:**

- 60% of teachers believed exam difficulty should be moderated to ensure fairness.
- Some educators suggested modifying paper design to include a mix of easy, moderate, and challenging questions.

- **Psychologist's Findings:**

- Experts noted an increase in exam-related mental health cases in recent years.
- Stress due to unpredictable exams often leads to long-term anxiety and depression, affecting students beyond their school years.

These results highlight **the need for a fair and well-structured assessment system** that challenges students while also ensuring their mental well-being is safeguarded.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exams that are excessively difficult or too easy negatively impact students' mental health. A well-balanced difficulty level ensures fairness and reduces unnecessary psychological distress. There should be standardized difficulty levels: Implementing a moderation system to balance question difficulty across different sets. Mental Health Support should be compulsory in all the schools. School's should offer counseling and stress management workshops. Transparent Exam Policies are needed to reduce uncertainty about question patterns can alleviate exam-related anxiety.

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