

Effect of UPSC Exam Competition on the Mental Health of Students

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Abstract

The UPSC exam is very tough and puts a lot of pressure on students. Many who prepare for it experience mental health issues like anxiety and depression. This happens because of the constant fear of failing, feeling isolated from friends and family, and the intense competition. This paper looks at these challenges by surveying students preparing for the UPSC. It shows how these factors affect their mental health. The paper also explores how students cope, such as by creating study plans, finding support from others, and using relaxation techniques. It examines how family and coaching centers influence their mental well-being. To address these issues, the paper suggests a multi-pronged approach. This includes support from institutions, raising awareness in society, and helping students build resilience. By offering practical solutions for mental health, this study aims to create a more supportive environment for UPSC aspirants. It emphasizes the importance of prioritizing mental well-being alongside exam preparation for long-term success.

Keywords: UPSC, mental health, competition, anxiety, stress management

INTRODUCTION

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exam, recognized as one of the most rigorous competitive examinations in India, serves as a gateway for aspirants seeking prestigious civil service positions. This high-stake environment not only demands extensive academic and intellectual preparation but also imposes significant psychological pressure on students. The emotional toll of preparing for such examinations is compounded by the socio-cultural expectations placed upon candidates, where success is often equated with personal and familial honor [1]. The exam's rigorous process, spanning multiple stages, requires months or even years of dedicated preparation [2]. UPSC demands extensive knowledge, critical thinking, and consistent preparation from aspirants. Aspirants often dedicate years to preparing for UPSC due to its significance in shaping their careers and contributing to national governance [3]. While many students achieve their dreams, the majority face repeated failures, leading to a decline in their mental well-being [4]. Consequently, intense competition can lead to various mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders. As candidates immerse themselves in exhaustive study schedules and confront the pervasive fear of failure, understanding the impact of this competition on their mental well-being becomes essential [5,6]. This research aims to explore the multifaceted effects of the UPSC exam competition on students'

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mental health, revealing the complexities of ambition, through survey responses and psychological wellness in an increasingly competitive academic landscape [7, 8].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact of Exam Pressure on Mental Health

The intense pressure associated with competitive examinations, like the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) exams, significantly impact students' mental health, manifesting in heightened anxiety levels and emotional distress. The

phenomenon is exacerbated by the societal expectations placed on students to excel in such high-stakes assessments, often leading to a fear of failure [1, 2]. Psychological studies indicate that prolonged exposure to exam-related stress can result in mental health issues, including depression and burnout, particularly among aspirants who invest immense resources into their preparation [3]. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the UPSC exams creates a perpetuating cycle of stress, as students often compare their progress with peers, leading to diminished self-esteem and increased feelings of isolation. Thus, it becomes imperative to recognize and address the detrimental effects of exam pressure, fostering an environment that prioritizes mental well-being alongside academic achievement [6].

Psychological Effects of High-Stakes Competition on Students

High-stakes competition, such as the UPSC exam, exerts profound psychological effects on students, shaping their stress responses and overall mental health. The pressure to excel can induce chronic anxiety, characterized by hyper-vigilance and apprehension regarding performance outcomes [7]. As examined in various contexts, including educational settings, students under intense competitive stress often experience diminished self-esteem and increased feelings of inadequacy, which can lead to mental health issues like depression and burnout [8, 9]. Furthermore, the obsessive focus on success in such competitive environments can foster maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as procrastination or escapism, rather than healthy stress management strategies [10]. Consequently, while the goal of high-stakes testing may be to incentivize academic achievement, the psychological toll it exacts can undermine students' well-being and hinder their academic performance. This paradox illustrates the urgent need for supportive frameworks that mitigate stress and promote resilience among aspirants facing rigorous examinations like the UPSC [11].

METHODOLOGY

Survey Design

We conducted an online survey of 300 UPSC aspirants through google form. The survey aimed to capture the frequency and intensity of mental health challenges, coping mechanisms, and the aspirants' perception of stressors. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions, rating scales, and open-ended responses. The tracks of the investigation included:

- Impact of competition on anxiety and stress.
- Social and familial pressures.
- Physical and emotional health challenges.
- Coping strategies and external support systems.

Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using statistical tools to identify trends and correlations. The findings were classified into thematic categories to provide insights into key stressors and coping mechanisms (Figure 1).

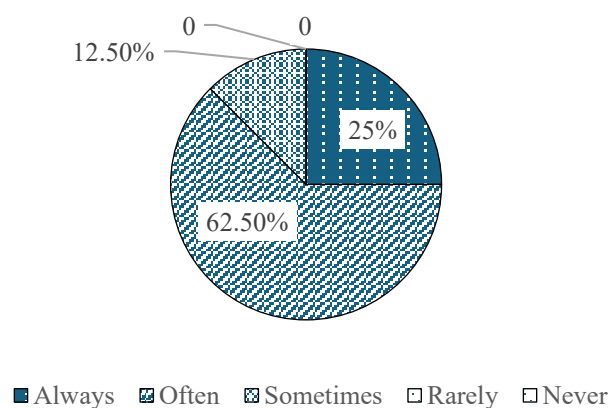


Figure 1. How often do you feel overwhelmed or stressed while preparing for the UPSC Exam.

A significant 87.5% of UPSC aspirants reported experiencing frequent stress during their preparation, emphasizing the immense mental pressure associated with this highly competitive exam. Only a small minority of respondents indicated experiencing stress less frequently or never (Figure 2).

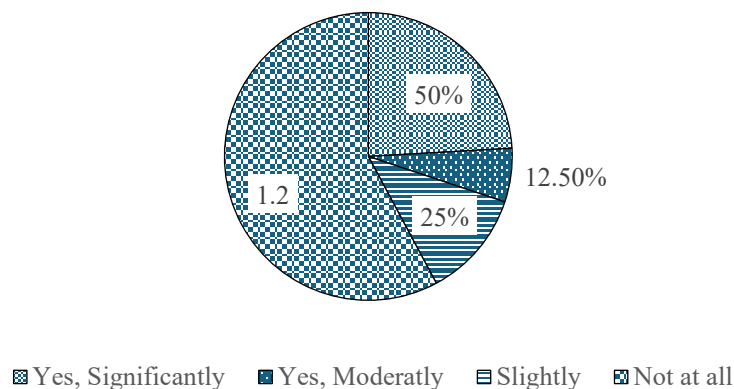


Figure 2. Does the fear of failure affect your mental health during the preparation.

This data reveals that half of the respondents are significantly burdened by the fear of failure, highlighting its substantial impact on their mental health. This fear likely stems from the highly competitive nature of the UPSC exam, coupled with societal and personal expectations. While a portion reported moderate or slight impact, the data underscores the widespread prevalence of this concern among UPSC aspirants (Figure 3).

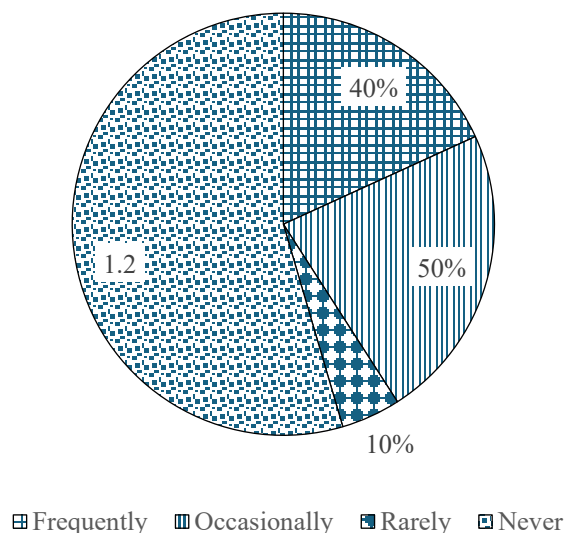


Figure 3. How often do you feel the need for professional help (e.g., counseling) to cope with exam-related stress.

A large percentage of UPSC aspirants (50%) said they occasionally need professional help to deal with the mental stress of the exam. Another 40% said they often need help, showing a consistent need for support. Only a small percentage (10%) said they rarely need help, and 0% said they never do. These results show that easily accessible mental health resources are crucial for UPSC aspirants. This aligns with research [8] that highlights the importance of structured help and guidance from professionals to reduce stress and improve coping skills (Figure 4).

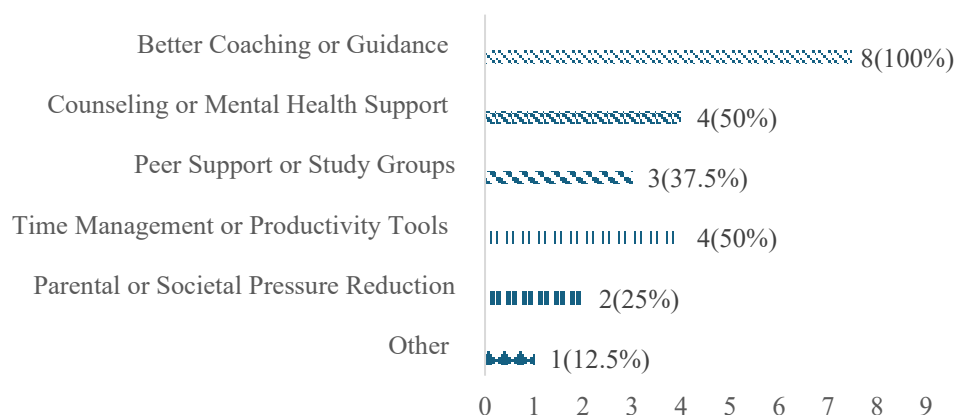


Figure 4. What additional support would help reduce your mental stress during preparation.

These findings suggest a multifaceted approach to reducing stress among UPSC aspirants. While improved coaching and guidance were identified as the most crucial factor, access to mental health support, effective time management tools, and opportunities for peer engagement are also vital. By addressing these areas through targeted interventions, we can significantly enhance the mental well-being of candidates.

Survey Findings

- Common Mental Health Challenges:** The survey revealed significant mental health challenges faced by UPSC aspirants. Many UPSC aspirants experience high levels of stress and anxiety during their preparation. About 72% of participants reported feeling overwhelmed “always” or “often,” with many also dealing with symptoms like insomnia, rapid heartbeat, and excessive worry [1]. Additionally, 54% of respondents admitted to feeling demotivated or burned out, especially during long study periods. Repeated failures and self-doubt contributed to depressive symptoms in 43% of the participants. Social isolation is also a common issue, as 65% of aspirants often withdrew from social activities to focus on their studies, which made feelings of loneliness even worse [4].
- Coping Mechanisms:** 68% of aspirants relied on structured study schedules to manage their preparation, but only 32% made time for breaks or leisure activities, suggesting that many overlook the importance of rest during their studies [5]. To manage stress, 24% of respondents practiced relaxation techniques, such as meditation and yoga, while others turned to more passive forms of relaxation, like listening to music or watching television [6]. However, some aspirants resorted to unhealthy coping strategies during high stress periods. Specifically, 19% admitted to over-caffeination, and 6% reported using substances to cope, highlighting the difficulty of managing stress without turning to harmful habits [7].
- Role of External Factors:** External factors also play a significant role in the mental health of UPSC aspirants. About 57% of respondents reported experiencing significant pressure to succeed due to family and societal expectations [8]. When it comes to support systems, only 28% of participants had access to professional mental health support, while 41% relied on peer groups for emotional support [9]. This highlights the importance of external influences on the well-being of aspirants and the varying levels of support they receive [10].

DISCUSSION

The UPSC exam is incredibly competitive, creating an environment that demands relentless effort and the pursuit of perfection. While this can motivate some students to excel, it also significantly increases the pressure and risk of failure. This intense pressure, combined with prolonged periods of intense study and limited opportunities for relaxation, can significantly impact on the mental well-being of aspirants [11]. Furthermore, the current system often falls short of providing adequate support. Educational institutions and coaching centers rarely prioritize mental health resources [12]. Societal

pressure to succeed in the UPSC exam can be immense, leading to feelings of shame and isolation among those who face repeated failures [13].

To address these challenges, a holistic approach to supporting UPSC aspirants is crucial. This includes:

- Providing easy access to mental health professionals specializing in exam-related stress [14].
- Educating families about the mental health impact of the exam and encouraging their support [15].
- Creating safe spaces for peer support where aspirants can connect and share experiences [16].
- Promoting self-care activities like exercise and relaxation techniques [17].
- Shifting the focus from solely achieving a high rank towards personal growth and overall well-being.

By implementing these measures, we can create a more supportive environment for UPSC aspirants, helping them navigate the challenges of the exam while prioritizing their mental health and overall well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional Interventions

- *Counseling and Therapy:* Counseling and online therapy can significantly help UPSC aspirants deal with the stress and mental health challenges of the exam. Top psychologists in India can provide valuable guidance on how to manage anxiety, depression, and burnout. Online sessions offer a safe space to discuss fears and concerns with professionals. By focusing on mental well-being alongside their studies, aspirants can build resilience, stay motivated, and approach the exam with a healthier mindset. This proactive approach to mental health ensures they perform their best while safeguarding their overall well-being during.
- *Flexible Study Schedules:* Coaching centers should encourage a balanced approach to UPSC preparation, focusing on flexibility rather than rigid schedules. Include leisure activities to prevent burnout. With classes and sleep, you will have around 7–8 hours for other tasks. Use mealtimes to watch educational content. Take a 1-hour break after classes to refresh your mind. Divide the remaining time into study sessions with short breaks. Adjust your study plan based on your energy levels and the tasks at hand. This balanced and adaptable approach will help you prepare effectively, reduce stress, and manage your time better [8].

Societal Awareness

- *Family Support Programs:* Family support is crucial for UPSC aspirants. Preparing for this competitive exam is stressful and uncertain. During this challenging journey, families, especially parents, play a vital role. Their encouragement and support create a stable environment that helps aspirants stay focused and motivated. This support builds their resilience, allowing them to overcome setbacks. Families should actively provide a positive and understanding environment to help aspirants navigate the ups and downs of their preparation [9–12].
- *Public Awareness Campaigns:* Public Awareness Campaigns should aim to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues, promote early identification and intervention, encourage help-seeking behavior, and foster a supportive environment within educational institutions and communities [11–13].
- *Peer Networks:* Study groups and online forums offer valuable support during UPSC preparation. By sharing knowledge, discussing ideas, and motivating each other, these groups enhance understanding, foster accountability, and provide access to valuable resources. This collaborative approach can significantly improve your preparation and make the journey less isolating.

CONCLUSIONS

The UPSC exam is very tough and can negatively impact students' mental health. This study shows that many students experience stress, anxiety, and burnout due to the intense competition and pressure and to help, students need to use coping strategies like flexible study schedules, support from friends,

and professional counseling. Institutions should provide better counseling services, encourage balanced study plans, and educate families about these mental health challenges. Research by Reddy [8] emphasizes the importance of counseling to manage stress and build resilience. Singh [9] highlights the need for sustainable study practices to prevent burnout, Kapoor [10] stresses the value of family and friends for emotional support. Public awareness campaigns, as suggested by Sharma [6], can help reduce the stigma around mental health and encourage students to seek help so, ultimately, addressing these challenges require a combined effort from students, families, institutions, and society and by working together, we can create a more supportive environment that prioritizes both academic success and the overall well-being of UPSC aspirants and this version uses simpler language and avoids jargon while maintaining the core message of the original conclusion.

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