Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: Reimagining Society: AI's Role in Cultural Transformation and Learning Environments
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.BO25651

The Impact of Academic Stress on Risk-Taking in Teen Decision-Making

Melanie Chen

Midwood High School, Brooklyn, USA
chenmelanie61@gmail.com

Abstract. Academic pressure has become a major part of modern teenage life, especially in this generation, and it doesn't just affect grades—it impacts mental health and decision-making, too. This paper explores how academic stress can lead teens to make risky decisions like procrastinating, cheating, or avoiding tasks altogether. It goes deeper into how stress affects the brain, especially the parts responsible for judgment and emotional control, and how those changes can push teens toward unhelpful coping behaviors. On the other hand, not all teens respond to stress in the same way. For example, those with stronger academic self-efficacy—basically, the belief that they can handle their schoolwork—are more likely to manage stress in healthy ways. They make smarter choices and stay focused even when things get overwhelming. This review overall highlights the research on anxiety, burnout, and self-belief, focusing on the need for supportive environments at home and school. To help teens thrive, we should teach them how to manage pressure and gain confidence to believe in themselves.

Keywords: Academic stress, teen decision-making, self-efficacy, burnout, anxiety.

1. Introduction

For most teens nowadays, school is more than just learning; it's all about getting good grades and performing well. Some teens have to cheat just to get good grades with all the academic stress. With constant tests, a ton of homework, and the pressure to get into good colleges, it's no surprise that so many teens feel overwhelmed. Academic stress is just a normal part of life now. While adults might think it's just part of growing up, it can really have serious effects. Stress doesn't just make students tired or anxious; it can actually change how they make decisions and approach certain situations or obstacles in their life.

When stress kicks in, your brain changes. The part that helps you plan and make good decisions gets weaker, and your emotions end up taking over. Since teens' brains are still developing, this can lead to risky behaviors as a way to cope. They might put off work, result in cheating, or give up. These aren't just bad habits; they show how stress pushes students to seek quick fixes instead of just thinking ahead.

This paper explores how academic stress affects teen decision-making and what happens in the brain and body during that process. It also looks at one major protective factor: academic self-efficacy. That's the belief that you can handle school challenges. Teens who believe in themselves

© 2025 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.BO25651

tend to resist the pull of stress better—they're less likely to give in to risky behavior and more likely to stay calm under pressure. By looking at research in psychology, neuroscience, and education, this review shows why self-efficacy matters and how we can help students build it.

2. Method

This paper is a literature review, meaning it brings together and analyzes past research on a specific topic—in this case, academic stress and risky decision-making in teens. The sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals in psychology, neuroscience, and education. The key terms used to find relevant studies were: "academic stress," "teen decision-making," "burnout," "self-efficacy," and "adolescent coping."

One central article used is Academic Stress and Academic Burnout in Adolescents: A Moderated Mediation Model, which surveyed nearly 1,000 teenagers in China to explore how stress leads to burnout and risky behaviors, and how self-efficacy plays a role in that. Other sources were chosen based on how directly they explored the emotional and cognitive effects of stress on teens. This review looks for patterns across the research to understand what happens when academic stress pushes teens to make poor choices, and what helps prevent that.

3. Results

3.1. Stress increases anxiety

One of the most obvious effects of academic pressure is anxiety. When students feel overwhelmed, they can't think straight. Studies show that anxiety activates the amygdala (the brain's "alarm system") and makes it harder for the prefrontal cortex—the part responsible for thinking ahead and making careful choices—to function properly [1]. This imbalance makes it harder for teens to stay focused, weigh consequences, or control their impulses. When the brain is in panic mode, risky behaviors like putting off work or cheating suddenly seem like the only way out.

3.2. Anxiety can turn into burnout

If anxiety sticks around long enough, it doesn't just make school harder—it leads to burnout. Burnout is that feeling of being mentally and emotionally drained to the point where you just don't care anymore. You stop trying, stop believing you can do it, and start disconnecting from school altogether. A 2023 study by Zhou et al. showed that the more academic stress students felt, the more likely they were to report symptoms of burnout—exhaustion, cynicism, and low performance. When students are burnt out, they often take risks not because they're reckless, but because they're desperate for relief [2].

3.3. Low self-efficacy makes things worse

A big factor that decides how a student responds to stress is whether they believe in their ability to handle school challenges. This belief is called academic self-efficacy. If a student feels like no matter how hard they try, they're going to fail, they're more likely to panic, shut down, or look for shortcuts. They might avoid studying or even cheat—not because they're lazy, but because they think they have no other option [3]. Low self-efficacy makes stress more powerful and decision-making more impulsive.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.BO25651

3.4. High self-efficacy is a game-changer

On the flip side, students with high self-efficacy are way more likely to stay calm under pressure. They believe they can figure it out, even when school gets tough. That belief helps them push through stress without falling into bad habits. Research by Hayat et al [4]. found that students with strong academic self-efficacy use better learning strategies, manage their emotions more effectively, and perform better even when under academic pressure. This doesn't mean that they don't feel stress; they just know how to handle it without letting it take control or take over them negatively.

3.5. Peer pressure doesn't help

Don't forget that these teens aren't on their own. Friends, classmates, and social media really influence and affect how they deal with stress. This also correlates to who teens are surrounding themselves with, as they may be a negative impact for them. Additionally, a study by [1] showed that teens are way more likely to take risks when their friends are around. When you're stressed about school and also trying to look cool or not embarrass yourself, it makes risky choices even more likely. For example, you might cheat off someone's answers, skip class, or not ask for help—just to avoid judgement and embarrassment to look cool.

3.6. Lasting effects of stress

The scary thing? These patterns can stick around. Dealing with stress and negativity all the time during the teenage years can mess with how the brain grows, especially in parts that help with emotions and making smart choices [5]. If students keep relying on risky ways to cope, they might carry those habits into college, work, and adulthood. That's why it's super important to spot these patterns early and show healthier ways to handle pressure, so they don't carry these bad habits later on in their life.

4. Conclusion

Academic stress isn't just about worrying over tests—it really affects how teens mentally, emotionally, and physically think, feel, and act. When the pressure gets too high, it can lead to anxiety, burnout, and risky decisions that can hurt them down the line. Teens might cheat, put things off, or dodge their responsibilities, not because they don't care, but because stress is messing with their brains, which causes them to make such decisions.

But there's hope—and it lies in self-efficacy. When teens believe they can handle school, they're much more likely to stay calm, focused, and rational, even under pressure. Self-efficacy doesn't make stress go away, but it definitely helps students deal with it in healthier ways. When students feel confident, they're more likely to keep trying, accept help, and avoid giving up or cutting corners. So, the question is what can we do about it? Schools and families need to create spaces that lower stress and boost self-confidence. For example, the teachers can offer flexible deadlines, focus on growth instead of perfection, and make classrooms where students feel safe asking for help. Parents, on the other hand, can back their kids up emotionally, encourage effort over just results, and remind them that struggling doesn't mean they've failed.

Future studies should look into how things like social media, remote learning, and cultural pressure impact teen stress and decision-making. But one thing is clear: helping students believe in themselves is super important. If schools and families want teens to succeed, they must provide more than just grades and deadlines.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.BO25651

References

[1] Chein, J., Albert, D., O'Brien, L., Uckert, K., & Steinberg, L. (2011). Peers increase adolescent risk taking by enhancing activity in the brain's reward circuitry. Developmental Science, 14(2), F1–F10. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2010.01035.x

[2] Zhou, Y., Yang, Z., Zhang, H., & Wang, Y. (2023). Academic stress and academic burnout in adolescents: A moderated mediation model. Frontiers in Psychology, 14, 1133706. https: //www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1133706/full

[3] Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. W.H. Freeman.

[4] Hayat, A. A., Shateri, K., Amini, M., & Shokrpour, N. (2020). Relationships between academic self-efficacy, learning-related emotions, and metacognitive learning strategies with academic performance in medical students: A structural equation model. BMC Medical Education, 20, Article 76. https: //bmcmededuc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12909-020-01995-9

[5] Lupien, S. J., McEwen, B. S., Gunnar, M. R., & Heim, C. (2009). Effects of stress throughout the lifespan on the brain, behavior, and cognition. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 10(6), 434–445. https: //doi.org/10.1038/nrn2639