

# Stress Management Strategies Employed by Lecturers of Special Education in Selected Public Universities of Ghana

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## Abstract

The study investigated stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana, namely: University of Education, Winneba; University of Cape Coast, and, University for Development Studies. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A sample of 22 lecturers of special education students was selected from three (3) public universities using census technique. A four-point likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. Descriptive statistics was employed to analyse the data. The study revealed that lecturers of students with special educational needs of universities of Ghana experience stressful situations in the discharge of their duties. The study also found out that special education lecturers have appreciable information about the indications of stress. It was also clear that the lecturers used various stress coping strategies known to them. Based on the key findings, the study recommended that the management of universities in Ghana should employ additional special education lecturers to reduce the workload of individual lecturers as a means of managing their conditions. This research also recommended that management of the universities should sensitize lecturers to make use of counselling services provided by the universities to enable them manage the stress that beset them.

**Keywords:** Stress management, Strategies, Lecturers, Special education, Public Universities

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background to the Study

Efficient and successful performance in any profession is heavily reliant on the workers' psychological well-being. A suitable workplace, excellent interpersonal interactions, effective communication among personnel and management, workload, salary, and a slew of other physical and psychological boosting aspects are also important. When all or some of the above mentioned prerequisites are not met, work becomes exceedingly boring and frustrating. Stress is a severe occupational danger. Indeed, without stress, many workers' complacency may not be broken, resulting in low productivity and inefficiency. Adom, Essel and Chukwuere (2020) contend that mild stress can be very beneficial for Lecturers as it serves as a motivator for hardwork and eventual productivity. Avoiding stress completely is seen as leading to a very boring life (Veena & Shastri, 2016; Wani, Nagar & Buhroo, 2018). However, a high degree of stress may mar the whole process of performance. Adasi et al. (2020) confirmed that stress may be a beneficial or detrimental kind of psychological and functional stimulation that a person may experience in situations that they perceive as risky to their psychosocial wellbeing. Since stress affects everyone, regardless of age, educational background, location, or socioeconomic position, it has a variety of effects on countless people. Stress is not culture or group-specific and affects people of all ages, educational levels, and socio-economic status. (Adasi, Amponsah, Mohammed, Yeboah & Mintah, 2020).

Different authors have defined stress in various ways. Borg, Riding, and Falzon (1991) noted that stress is any emotional, mental or emotional reaction caused by one's response to environmental demands and how effectively one can handle those pressures. According to Onyemerekeya (1996), stress is a reaction or response within an individual that arises when an external incident threatens him or her. It should be emphasized that all occurrences in life cause stress at some point. This is because stress is a constant visitor in every person's life. A circumstance in which one's behaviour is being judged by someone else can be unpleasant. However, different duties bring varying degrees of stress, and excessive stress affects performance. Teaching is one of the more demanding professions.

Being a teacher is a very hard career. To accomplish a certain objective, it challenges all facets of human existence and necessitates considerable work. Due to the wide range of individual characteristics present in classroom settings, satisfying the everyday learning and behavioral demands of students makes teaching difficult and unpleasant. According to Hastings and Brown (2002), Nagel and Brown (2003), and Brown and Nagel (2004), teachers often suffer more stress at work than other types of workers. These scholars contend that while teaching is stressful, teaching students with special needs or exceptionalities can be much more so given their distinctive characteristics and varied learning challenges. According to Danku et al. (2017), the most stressful aspect arises from the workload and work environment. Kusi, Codjoe and Bampo (2018) further contend that teachers teaching higher education institutions experience excessive stress owing to excessive workload, large

class-sizes, supervision of large number of undergraduate and graduate students, and the numerous administrative roles they play. According to a study conducted by Hastings and Brown in 2002, it was found that Special Education teachers experience elevated levels of anxiety, perceive a lack of support, and exhibit lower job satisfaction when compared to their counterparts (Hastings & Brown, 2002). These factors contribute to significant stress and strain on teachers working with special needs students.

It is important to acknowledge that the responsibilities of special educators within the educational system are intricate and diverse. These encompass the adept anticipation of students' challenges, facilitating the adjustment and integration of individuals with special needs into society, particularly during this era of complete inclusion. Special educators must possess a comprehensive understanding of the general education curriculum and be capable of modifying it to meet the requirements of exceptional children. Additionally, they play a vital role in assisting students with their homework and establishing effective communication between the school and home. However, it is crucial to recognize that these expectations can potentially lead to stress or burnout among special needs teachers.

Moreover, educators play a crucial role in engaging with parents, their own students, as well as other faculty members, particularly when instructing students who face learning challenges. According to research conducted by Lazarus (2006), it is indicated that teachers specializing in special education experience elevated stress levels compared to their counterparts in general education. This readily brings to mind how teachers cope with stress in course of their duties. In this regard, this research investigates stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

It is evident that educators specializing in special education face significant stress within the teaching profession. This can be attributed to the substantial amount of work they handle, as well as the emotional and psychological pressures associated with supporting students who have diverse disabilities. The frustration experienced by these educators is particularly high. Consequently, the demands of the job are considerable, leading some individuals to seek alternative employment and job satisfaction outside the realm of teaching students with special needs. Humara (2002) contends that lecturers go through activities such as listening to music, positive thinking, reading for pleasure, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal to reduce stress. Being a lecturer comes with a lot of prestige and respect. Nonetheless, the workload is so enormous since the number of students per class is always large. This makes lecturers experience a lot of burnout moments. This study therefore, attempts to investigate the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public universities in Ghana.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

The study sought to investigate stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The study sought to find out about the:

1. Stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in the public Universities of Ghana.
2. Special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress.
3. Various ways special education lecturers deal with stress

### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. What stressful situations are experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in the public Universities of Ghana?
2. What is special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress?
3. In what ways do special education lecturers deal with stress?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The study was guided by Folkman and Lazarus' (1984) Cognitive appraisal theory of stress. According to this theory, stress is believed to be the result of an imbalance between the demands placed on a person and their available coping resources. Lazarus further contend that people's reactions to stress varies greatly depending on how they interpret an incident and the outcome of a certain sequence of thought patterns known as appraisals (Lazarus, 1991). Central to Folkman and Lazarus (1984) cognitive appraisal theory are two important concepts: appraisal (individuals' assessments of the relevance of what is happening for their well-being) and coping (individuals' attempts in thought and behavior to manage particular demands).

This signifies that when faced with a stressful situation, a person first determines if the task is threatening or otherwise, and then determines whether he or she has the resources to effectively respond to or cope with the situation. An emotion-focused coping strategy, such as wishful thinking, withdrawing from the situation, or stressing the positives, is more likely to be adopted if the person lacks confidence in their ability to handle the problem or feels out of control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). A problem-focused coping strategy, such as analysis, will often be developed if the person has the resources to handle the situation. It is theorized and empirically demonstrated that a person's secondary appraisal then determines coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

### **2.2 Philosophical Underpinning**

The positivist research perspective served as the guiding philosophy for this study. Positivists assert that reality exists independently and can be empirically observed. This perspective emphasizes the need to maintain objectivity by minimizing human perceptions and biases. By adhering to strict rules and procedures (Sarantakos, 2005), this philosophy aims to produce objective results. Hence, the study employed a quantitative approach for

several reasons. Firstly, it facilitated the researcher's detachment from personal emotions or biases (Neuman, 2007). The researcher believed that knowledge on stress management strategies could be discovered through the use of the scientific method by numerically describing and representing the data. This enables the to provide possible explanations of the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

### **2.3 Research Design**

A research design refers to the strategy employed by a researcher to investigate and comprehend a particular group or phenomenon within its specific context (Ary, Jacobs, Sorenson & Walker, 2014). Based on that theory, this study employed a descriptive survey research design to explore the stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana. Descriptive survey research portrays an accurate profile of persons, events, or situations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Miller, 1991). This research design provides researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the significant factors related to the phenomena of interest, considering the perspectives of individuals, organizations, and industries. Consequently, this particular research design facilitated data collection from a diverse group of participants to explore stress management strategies adopted by special education lecturers in specific public universities in Ghana

### **2.4 Population**

Population consists of all the units in which the findings of the research can be applied (Shukla, 2020),. In other words, population is a set of all the units which possess variable characteristics under study and for which findings of the research can be generalised. The study population for this study consisted of the twenty-two (22) lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana.

### **2.5 Sample and Sampling techniques**

A sample refers to a subset of individuals, objects, or items that are selected from a larger population for the purpose of measurement (Vogt & Johnson, 2015). It is crucial for the sample to accurately represent the population to ensure that the findings derived from the sample can be generalized to the entire population. Sampling involves the careful selection of a specific portion of the population under study (Turner, 2020). Since it is often impractical to involve the entire population of interest, researchers rely on a smaller group for data collection.

There are fifteen public universities in Ghana. Out of this number, the researcher purposively selected three of them; the University of Cape Coast, University of Development Studies, and, the University of Education, Winneba. This is because, these universities are the only ones that have established Department of Special Education. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their judgment when choosing members of the population to

participate in their surveys (Schwandt, 2014). Census technique was employed in including all the twenty-two (22) members of the accessible population (from the three purposively selected public universities) in the study. Census technique is a technique in which all the elements in the population are involved in a study (Best & Khain, 2006). This implies that, with census technique, all the participants of the accessible population are involved in the study.

## **2.6 Instrumentation**

The data collection for this study involved the utilization of a questionnaire, primarily because the entire study population possessed literacy skills. The questionnaire was chosen because it comprised of inquiries and statements that directly aligned with the study's objectives or research questions, enabling verification to occur. Additionally, the questionnaire ensured consistency, uniformity, and stability in responses. By employing this method, respondents were able to complete the questionnaire at their convenience while maintaining a higher level of anonymity. Two types of structured questionnaires, namely closed-ended and open-ended, were utilized. The open-ended questions granted respondents the freedom to express their opinions openly regarding the raised issues. On the other hand, closed-ended questions were employed when the researcher sought specific answers that did not necessitate further explanation.

## **2.7 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments**

To establish the validity of the instruments, the questionnaire items were given to colleague senior lecturers within the faculty of educational studies for a comprehensive review. The constructive and informative feedback were used to improve the instrument. This satisfied face validity. On top of that, the instruments were given to some professor emeritus within the faculty of educational studies to inspect closely and thoroughly. This satisfied content validity. To establish the reliability of the instrument, 15 questionnaires were pilot-tested among lecturers at the University of Cape Coast. A Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of .787 was obtained.

## **Results**

### **Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Table 1 displays the distribution of respondents' background information. From Table 1, majority of the respondents (n = 12; 54.5%) were males. More than half of the respondents (n = 14; 68.6%) were between the ages of 31-40. This was followed by those aged between 41-50 (n = 6; 27.3%). Also, a greater number of the respondents (n = 16; 72.7%) were married. The majority of the respondents (n = 11; 50.8%) fell in the category of assistant lecturer rank. Eight (8) respondents representing (36%) had a working experience of 5-10 years whereas six (6) respondents representing (27.3%) had worked for 1-4 years.

*Table 1: Distribution of the Respondents based on Demographic Characteristics (N = 22)*

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	12	54.5
Female	10	45.5
<b>Age</b>		
21-30	1	4.5
31-40	14	68.6
41-50	6	27.3
51-60	1	4.5
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	16	72.7
Widowed	2	9.1
Single	4	18.2
<b>Academic Rank</b>		
Senior Lecturer	4	18.2
Lecturer	7	31.8
Assistant Lecturer	11	50.8
<b>Working Experience</b>		
1-4	6	27.3
5-10	8	36.4
11-14	1	4.5
15-20	5	22.7
Above 20	2	9.1

*Source: field data, 202*

### **Research Question 1**

*What stressful situations are experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs in public Universities?*

The purpose of this research question was to identify some of the stressful situations lecturers of students with special educational needs experience. Based on this purpose, respondents answered eight questions relating to the stressful situation on a four-point Likert scale type of measurement as 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. For the purpose of analysis and discussions, the average mean score for all the responses is 2.5. Hence, a mean value of 2.5 and above suggest an agreement that the statement is a stressful situation they experience. In contrast, a mean score below 2.5 suggests disagreement. The same measurement and interpretation were given to research question 3. Table 2 shows the details of responses to the stressful situations lecturers of students with special educational needs experience.

The respondents agreed that limited time for submission of assessment mark ( $M = 2.9, SD = .64$ ) was the most predominant stressful situation they encountered. This was followed by inadequacy of instructional material ( $M = 2.8, SD = .85$ ), insufficient assistive devices ( $M = 2.7, SD = .84$ ) and the low level of administrative support ( $M = 2.6, SD = .66$ ). The respondents however indicated that having lecture sessions with their students with disabilities ( $M = 1.7; SD = .94$ ) was the least stressful situation they encountered.

*Table 2: Stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
I get stressed out when having lecture sessions that include students with disabilities	1.7	.94
I feel easily tired when I am assigned an extra teaching load	2.2	.87
Addressing concerns of students with exceptional needs presents stressful situations to me	1.8	.73
Inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities puts so much strain on me	2.8	.85
Insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities puts me in stressful conditions	2.7	.84
Limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students stresses me out	2.9	.64
Low level of administrative support for lecturers overburdens me	2.6	.66
The time-consuming nature of teaching students with disabilities frustrates me	1.8	.73
<b>Mean of Means</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>.78</b>

*Source: field data, 2022*

## **Research Question 2**

*What is special education lecturers' knowledge about indications of stress?*

The aim of this research question was to ascertain the knowledge special education lecturers have regarding indications of stress. In view of this, respondents were asked to indicate how informed they were on twelve (12) indicators of stress. The responses followed a four-point Likert scale type of measurement as 1 = "Totally Uninformed", 2 = "Uninformed", 3 = "Informed", 4 = "Totally Informed". For the purpose of analysis and discussions, the average mean score for all the responses was pegged at 2.5. Therefore, a mean value of 2.5 and above suggest that respondents are informed that the statement is an indication of stress. In contrast, mean scores below 2.5 indicated that respondents are uninformed. Results for research question 2 is presented in Table 3.

Results from Table 3 shows that generally, special education lecturers are highly informed about the indications of stress ( $M = 2.8, SD = .82$ ). Specifically, respondents are aware that, feeling of frustration ( $M = 2.8, SD = .91$ ), feeling of tension on the job ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.1$ ), frequent and prolonged headaches ( $M = 2.9, SD = .75$ ), sustained trends of high blood



pressure ( $M = 3.0, SD = .65$ ), getting upset and either not eating or eating too much ( $M = 2.8, SD = .81$ ), difficulty focusing on task ( $M = 2.6, SD = .73$ ), as well as having heart palpitation and hurting stomach when thoughts of returning to work occurs ( $M = 2.7, SD = .84$ ) are all indications of stress.

*Table 3: Special education lecturers' Knowledge about indications of stress*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Feeling of frustration	2.8	.91
Feeling of tension on the job	2.8	1.1
The amount of work done falls short of how well it gets done	2.7	.88
Getting upset and impacting negatively on eating habits (either can't eat or eat too much)	2.8	.81
Finding it difficult to sleep/ do not sleep well at night (traces of insomnia)	2.8	.87
Difficulty focusing on task/ job	2.6	.73
Heart palpitation and hurting stomach when thoughts of returning to work occur after a weekend or a hard day's work	2.7	.84
Frequent and prolonged headaches	2.9	.75
Easily feels tired on the job	2.9	.83
Seeking medical care often but always told to take time off for rest	2.8	.75
Sustained trend of high blood pressure	3.0	.65
Intermittent drowsiness after executing a task.	2.5	.67
<b>Mean of Means</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>.82</b>

*Source: field data, 2022*

### **Research Question 3**

*In what ways do special education lecturers deal with stress?*

This research question aimed at identifying the various ways special education lecturers handle stress associated with their work. The results for this research question is presented in Table 4.

As shown in Table 4, there are various ways special education lecturers handle stresses they go through. The predominant ways include listening to music ( $M = 3.1, SD = .75$ ), engaging in professional development both formal and informal ( $M = 3.1, SD = .68$ ), relaxing after school hours ( $M = 3.0, SD = .98$ ), engaging in reading for pleasure ( $M = 2.9, SD = .83$ ) and outdoor activities ( $M = 2.9, SD = .89$ ) and also involving in professional organisation activities ( $M = 2.6, SD = .73$ ). On the contrary, respondents indicated that they do not take tobacco products ( $M = 1.2, SD = .39$ ), alcohol ( $M = 1.3, SD = .46$ ) nor prescribed medication ( $M = 2.1, SD = .92$ ) when dealing with stress.

Table 4: *Ways special education lecturers deal with stress*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
I engage in reading for pleasure	2.9	.83
I engage in writing/ journaling	2.5	.74
I listen to music	3.1	.75
I engage in outdoor activities	2.9	.89
I engage in yoga/meditation	2.0	.82
I go for counselling	2.0	.95
I relax after school hours	3.0	.98
I involve myself in a professional organisation's activities	2.6	.73
I talk to my immediate superior	2.3	.94
I engage in professional development (formal or informal)	3.1	.68
I take prescribed medication	2.1	.92
I eat regularly without skipping meals	2.1	.71
I get some nap	2.8	.75
I take tobacco products	1.2	.39
I take alcohol	1.3	.46
<b>Mean of Means</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>.78</b>

*Source: field data, 2022*

## **Discussions**

These data provide important insights concerning stress management strategies employed by lecturers of special education in selected public Universities in Ghana. Regarding the stressful situations experienced by lecturers of students with special educational needs, the study revealed that there are stressful situations that these lecturers experience. The respondents indicated that limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students, inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities, insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities, low level of administrative support, and extra teaching load were often stressful circumstances they experienced. In line with this finding, Hastings and Brown (2002) indicated that special education teachers have higher levels of anxiety, feel less supported and have lower job satisfaction than their contemporaries. These stressful situations experienced by the teachers arise from the workload and work environment (Danku et al., 2017).

Analysis of the findings further revealed that special education lecturers have an appreciable information about the indications of stress. The highest indications of stress that could be associated with special education lecturers of public universities of Ghana included sustained

trend of high blood pressure, frequent and prolonged headaches, easy tired-feeling on the job, feeling of frustration, feeling of tension on the job, seeking medical care often but always told to take time off for rest, traces of insomnia and intermittent drowsiness after executing a task.

Again, it could also be inferred from the study that special education lecturers of universities of Ghana adopt some strategies to deal with the stress they face. Some effective stress coping strategies adopted by special education lectures of universities of Ghana included engaging in reading for pleasure, engaging in writing/journaling, listening to music, engaging in outdoor activities, relaxing after school hours, involving in a professional organisation's activities, talking to my immediate superior, engaging in professional development (formal or informal), and getting some nap. This finding is partly consistent with Humara (2002) who indicated listening to music, positive thinking, reading for pleasure, relaxation, focused attention, and imagery and mental rehearsal are the most effective strategies used for reducing stress.

### **Key Findings**

The following were the main findings of the study:

1. It was realized that lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana experience some stressful situations. The reported stressful situations include limited time for the submission of assessment marks for students, inadequacy of instructional material for students with disabilities, insufficient assistive devices for students with disabilities, low level of administrative support, and extra teaching load were often stressful circumstances they experienced.
2. The study also revealed that special education lecturers of universities in Ghana have an appreciable information about the indications of stress. The highest indications of stress that are associated by lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana included sustained trend of high blood pressure, frequent and prolonged headaches, easy tired-feeling on the job, feeling of frustration, feeling of tension on the job.
3. The study showed that lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana used various stress coping strategies. Some effective stress coping strategies adopted by special education lectures of universities of Ghana included engaging in reading for pleasure, engaging in writing/journaling, listening to music, engaging in outdoor activities, relaxing after school hours, involving in a professional organisation's activities, talking to my immediate superior, engaging in professional development (formal or informal), and getting some nap

### 3. Conclusion

The study recorded that lecturers of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana experience some stressful situations. Such situations tend to reduce lecturer output and ultimately affect their health and wellbeing. The inference is that, stress reduces lecturer work efficiency and effectiveness. Even though lecturers mention that they have an appreciable information about the indications of stress, it became clear that they could not do anything to prevent it since it recurs as they engage in their daily lecture work. It however emerged that avenues such as; counselling services and taking precautionary measures, exist for lecturers to manage stressful situations, so as to maintain their health and wellbeing in their profession, as they attend to the learning needs of students with special educational needs in universities of Ghana.

### Recommendations

1. The study recommends that the management of universities in Ghana should employ additional special education lecturers so as to reduce the workload of individual lecturers.
2. Again, they should employ graduate assistants to assist lecturers in the marking of scripts, especially the multiple-choice based questions and support them with minor administrative work.
3. The study also recommends that the management of universities of Ghana should sensitize lecturers to make use of counselling services provided by the universities to enable them manage the stress they go through.
4. Again, management should also have a recreational centre where lecturers can relax when they are stressed from their work.

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Respondents were treated as autonomous individuals, and their consent was sought before the instruments were administered. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. On the basis of this, I have adhered to the ethical principles described in the aforementioned in the conduct of the research.

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