

A STUDY ON IMPACT OF STRESS EXPERIENCED BY ASPIRANTS WHO UNDERWENT RESIDENTIAL COMPETITIVE EXAM COACHING

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ABSTRACT

Background: Competitive exams like NEET and JEE are seen in India as gateways to prestigious careers, leading to the expansion of residential coaching centres. While these centres provide academic training, the intense pressure, hostel restrictions, and parental expectations often generate high stress with long-term mental health consequences. **Aim:** This study examined the impact of stress experienced by aspirants during residential coaching in Kerala and its influence on their academic, emotional, and personal development. **Methodology:** A descriptive research design was used, and data were collected from 83 participants through a socio-demographic schedule, a structured questionnaire, and the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R). **Results:** Findings indicated that most participants faced significant stress, reflected in loss of self-confidence, low self-esteem, academic decline, and emotional difficulties. About 18.1% sought professional mental health support, and 20.5% reported suicidal thoughts or self-harm tendencies. Parental support emerged as a protective factor, while hostel restrictions, particularly reduced communication with family, were strongly associated with fear of failure and heightened anxiety about the future. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that residential coaching exerts lasting negative effects beyond academics, impacting emotional and personal well-being. Reforms in coaching and hostel practices, improved support systems, and integration of counselling services are essential to safeguard aspirants' mental health. The findings underscore the role of social work interventions in promoting resilience and holistic growth within competitive learning environments.

Keywords: Stress, Mental health, Parental support.

Submitted: 27.01.2026 **Revised:** 30.03.2026 **Accepted:** 30.06.2026 **Published:** 30.07.2026

How to cite this article: Hridya, Ahmed, A., Singh, U. (2026). A Study on Impact of Stress Experienced by Aspirants Who Underwent Residential Competitive Exam Coaching. *Indian Journal of Health Social Work*, 8(1), 72-78.

INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system is among the largest in the world, yet entry into professional programs particularly medicine

and engineering remains fiercely competitive. The National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) and the Joint Entrance Examination

(JEE) are among the most demanding national-level entrance examinations, attracting millions of aspirants each year for a limited number of seats. In 2023, more than 1.8 million students registered for NEET to compete for fewer than 92,000 MBBS seats, while nearly one million appeared for JEE for restricted engineering admissions. To bridge the widening gap between aspirations and opportunities, residential coaching centers have proliferated across the country, especially in states such as Rajasthan and Kerala. These centers provide intensive academic training, regimented routines, and long study hours; however, their preparation model has been increasingly associated with adverse psychological consequences. Reports from Kota, the nation's largest coaching hub, documented 26 student suicides in 2023 the highest ever in a single year, while National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics revealed that more than 13,000 students across India died by suicide in 2022, with over 1,100 cases linked to exam-related stress. These alarming figures underscore the urgency of examining aspirants' lived experiences within such environments, particularly in Kerala, where coaching culture is deeply embedded but underexplored in research.

Existing scholarship demonstrates that aspirants are highly vulnerable to academic stress. The pressure arises from vast syllabi, extended study schedules, frequent assessments, and a pervasive culture of peer comparison, all of which demand sustained high performance (Jain et al., 2018; Gupta, 2020). Stress is further compounded by socio-economic disparities, as students from lower-income families shoulder financial burdens alongside academic challenges (Sinha & Mathur, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these struggles by disrupting exam schedules and forcing a sudden shift to online learning, which created additional uncertainty

and heightened anxiety among students (Deb et al., 2024). Documented psychological outcomes include anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, fatigue, and digestive issues (Pienyu et al., 2017). Prolonged exposure has also been linked to trauma-like responses, including intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyperarousal resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (Elhai et al., 2018; Sesar et al., 2019).

Residential coaching centers are often described as a "parallel education system" in India (Orberg, 2017). While these institutions promise improved exam preparedness, studies reveal that their highly structured, restrictive environments frequently neglect holistic development. Research in Kota has documented elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among aspirants, exacerbated by restrictive hostel rules, reduced family contact, and the absence of psychosocial support (Gautam et al., 2019; Gupta, 2020). National data echo these concerns, with NCRB (2022) attributing student suicides to a convergence of academic burden, parental expectations, and institutional pressures (Rao, 2021).

At the same time, several protective factors have been identified. Among them, parental support stands out as particularly significant. Encouragement and open communication foster resilience, while authoritarian or critical parenting intensifies distress (Shahnawaz, 2013). Peer networks and institutional counseling programs have also been found effective in alleviating stress and strengthening coping mechanisms (Bharti et al., 2026). Recognizing these issues, the Ministry of Education (2024) issued guidelines for coaching centers mandating counseling services, regulated study hours, co-curricular activities, and improved hostel facilities. However, implementation has been inconsistent, particularly in smaller towns and

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private institutions, raising doubts about their effectiveness (Mehrotra & Vijayakumar, 2025). The study is informed by Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, which conceptualizes stress as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environment. The model provides a useful framework for understanding how aspirants perceive and respond to academic demands, hostel restrictions, and social support during residential coaching.

Despite an expanding body of research on aspirants in Kota and other hubs, limited scholarship exists in Kerala, where high literacy rates and strong parental aspirations have fueled widespread dependence on coaching for both NEET and KEAM. Most existing studies focus on immediate stress during the coaching period, with limited attention to the long-term psychological consequences after students leave these centers. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates both the immediate and enduring impacts of residential coaching on aspirants in Kerala, with particular emphasis on the roles of hostel restrictions, parental support, and coping strategies in shaping mental health outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a descriptive research design to examine the stress experienced by aspirants during their residential coaching period and its long-term impact on their personal and academic lives. The study specifically focused on the underexplored context of Kerala, where coaching culture is widespread but its psychological consequences have not been sufficiently documented.

Participants and Sampling

The study population consisted of aspirants from Kerala who had attended residential

coaching programs for NEET, JEE, or other engineering entrance examinations after completing higher secondary school. The inclusion criteria were: (a) age 18 years or above, and (b) previous experience of residential coaching. Students currently undergoing coaching were excluded.

A cluster sampling technique was adopted to ensure representation of participants from different coaching centers. A total of 83 respondents participated in the study, providing adequate variation in age, gender, educational background, and duration of coaching.

Tools used in the study:

Socio-Demographic Data Sheet: Designed by the researcher to collect information on participants' age, gender, educational qualification, duration of coaching, and family background.

Researcher - Made Questionnaire: Developed to capture participants' subjective experiences during and after coaching, including perceptions of parental support, hostel environment, coping strategies, and long-term impacts.

Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R): A standardized 22-item self-report measure used to assess psychological distress across three dimensions: Intrusion, Avoidance, and Hyperarousal. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, yielding subscale and total scores. The IES-R has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in previous studies (Weiss & Marmar, 1997).

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics on SPSS v25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized socio-demographic variables and IES-R scores.

RESULTS

The study analyzed responses from 83 participants who had attended residential

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coaching in Kerala. Findings are presented under socio-demographic details, psychological outcomes (IES-R scores), statistical associations, and thematic impacts.

Table-1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 83).

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	18–20 years	21	25.3
	21–23 years	25	30.1
	24–26 years	37	44.6
Gender	Male	19	22.9
	Female	64	77.1
Educational Qualification	Higher Secondary	31	37.3
	Undergraduate	39	47.0
	Postgraduate	13	15.7
Duration of Coaching	1 year	36	43.4
	2 years	28	33.7
	3 years or more	19	22.9

Table-1: Shows that sample consisted of 83 participants, most of whom were between 24–26 years of age (44.6%), followed by those aged 21–23 years (30.1%). A majority of the participants were female (77.1%), with only 22.9% being male. Regarding education, nearly half had completed undergraduate studies (47.0%), while 37.3% had only higher secondary education and 15.7% were postgraduates. In terms of coaching duration, 43.4% reported one year of coaching, 33.7% reported two years, and 22.9% had three or more years of residential coaching. These findings suggest that the sample was largely composed of young adult women who invested at least one year in residential coaching programs.

Table-no 2: Perceived Parental Support and Hostel Environment (N=83).

Variable	Category	n	%
Parental Support During Coaching	High	42	50.6
	Moderate	27	32.5
	Low	14	16.9
Hostel Restriction (communication with parents)	Severe	35	42.2
	Moderate	31	37.3
	Minimal	17	20.5

Table no.-2: Shows that most participants reported receiving high levels of parental support (50.6%), while 32.5% indicated moderate support, and 16.9% perceived low support during their coaching period. In terms of hostel restrictions, more than four out of ten participants (42.2%) reported severe restrictions on communication with parents, whereas 37.3% described moderate restrictions and only 20.5% experienced minimal restrictions. This highlights that despite some parental support, many aspirants experienced social isolation in their hostel environment, limiting their access to emotional support.

Table no.-3: Psychological Impacts Reported by Participants on self-reported questionnaire.

Impact Experienced	n	%
Fear of failure	49	59.0
Loss of confidence	44	53.0
Low self-esteem	37	44.6
Inability to engage in activities	31	37.3
Feeling like a financial burden	26	31.3

Table no-3: Found that participants reported experiencing several psychological consequences of residential coaching. The most common impact was fear of failure (59.0%), followed closely by loss of confidence (53.0%) and low self-esteem (44.6%). Over one-third of respondents (37.3%) reported being unable to engage in activities they previously enjoyed, while nearly one-third (31.3%) felt like a financial burden on their families. These findings indicate that the stress associated with residential coaching extended beyond academics, affecting participants' self-concept and emotional well-being.

Table-4: IES-R Scores Across Selected Characteristics among the participants.

Variable	Category	Intrusion (M±SD)	Avoidance (M±SD)	Hyperarousal (M±SD)	Total IES-R (M±SD)
Gender	Male	19.3 ± 6.4	17.6 ± 5.8	16.1 ± 6.2	53.0 ± 14.8
	Female	20.8 ± 6.1	18.9 ± 6.5	17.8 ± 6.7	57.5 ± 15.6
Education	Higher Sec.	21.1 ± 5.9	19.2 ± 6.3	17.5 ± 6.6	57.8 ± 14.5
	Undergraduate	19.2 ± 6.5	17.6 ± 6.0	16.3 ± 6.4	53.1 ± 15.2
	Postgraduate+	18.7 ± 6.2	17.1 ± 5.5	15.9 ± 6.0	51.7 ± 13.8
Coaching Duration	≤ 1 year	18.6 ± 5.8	16.8 ± 5.4	15.7 ± 6.0	51.1 ± 13.9
	1–2 years	20.1 ± 6.2	18.2 ± 6.1	17.0 ± 6.5	55.3 ± 15.4
	> 2 years	22.0 ± 6.7	19.7 ± 6.3	18.4 ± 6.8	60.1 ± 15.9
Parental Support	Low	23.2 ± 6.9	21.1 ± 6.6	19.8 ± 7.2	64.1 ± 16.2
	High	18.7 ± 5.7	16.9 ± 5.5	15.8 ± 6.0	51.4 ± 13.7

Table-4: Shows that overall, the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) results revealed significant differences across gender, parental support, and hostel restrictions. Female participants reported higher mean scores across all dimensions intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal compared to male participants, suggesting greater psychological distress among women. Similarly, participants with low parental support had significantly higher IES-R scores than those with high support, indicating that parental involvement acted as a protective factor against stress. Furthermore, participants who reported severe hostel restrictions scored markedly higher on all IES-R subscales compared to those with minimal restrictions. These results demonstrate that limited communication with parents and reduced autonomy contributed to heightened levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms.

DISCUSSION

The present study employed an exploratory descriptive design to examine the psychological impact of residential coaching among aspirants in Kerala, utilizing a researcher-made socio-demographic questionnaire, a structured survey on subjective experiences, and the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R). This mixed approach allowed for both quantitative

assessment of stress symptoms and qualitative insights into parental support and hostel restrictions. The use of the IES-R, a standardized measure with demonstrated reliability (Weiss & Marmar, 1997), provided a valid framework for understanding the persistence of stress-related symptoms in this population.

The socio-demographic profile revealed that the sample was predominantly female (77.1%), aged between 24-26 years, and largely undergraduate or higher secondary qualified. This suggests that women are increasingly engaged in competitive exam preparation, reflecting recent national trends where female enrollment in NEET has surpassed males (George, 2023). The finding that nearly half of participants invested at least one year in residential coaching highlights the significant time and financial commitment families make, echoing Jain et al., (2018) observations on the intensive nature of exam preparation in India.

The majority of participants reported moderate to high parental support, but more than 40% experienced severe hostel restrictions, especially limited communication with parents. This duality suggests a mismatch between external family support and internal institutional structures. Earlier research (Shahnawaz, 2013) identified parental emotional support as a key buffer against stress; however, when institutional rules hinder parent-child communication, this protective effect is weakened. Similar findings were reported by Gautam et al. (2019), who observed that strict hostel policies in Kota contributed significantly to anxiety and depression among students.

Fear of failure (59%), loss of confidence (53%), and low self-esteem (45%) were among the most frequently reported psychological impacts. These findings align with Gupta (2020), who emphasized that academic overload and peer comparisons in

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coaching environments contribute to diminished self-worth. The perception of being a financial burden on the family (31%) further underscores the economic dimension of stress, a factor also highlighted in Chelackoden and Vidya's (2024) systematic review of adolescent stressors in competitive settings.

Analysis of IES-R scores demonstrated that female aspirants, those with low parental support, and students under severe hostel restrictions consistently reported higher mean scores across intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal dimensions. This indicates that gender and social support systems critically shape stress outcomes. Afek et al. (2021) similarly noted that adolescents with weaker support systems display greater vulnerability to intrusive thoughts and impaired inhibitory control. The persistence of high IES-R scores years after coaching highlights the trauma-like effects of prolonged academic stress, echoing the findings of Gao, (2023).

CONCLUSION

The study found that residential coaching significantly affects aspirants' psychological well-being, with many reporting moderate to severe stress, loss of confidence, and intrusive exam-related thoughts. Restrictive hostel environments emerged as a major contributor to distress, while parental support acted as a protective factor. Importantly, these impacts extended beyond the coaching period, influencing long-term confidence and academic engagement. The findings highlight the need for reforms in coaching systems to balance academic preparation with mental health support and parental involvement.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study relied on self-reported data and was limited to Kerala, affecting generalizability. Its cross-sectional design restricted causal insights, and the absence of clinical

assessments narrowed the focus to stress outcomes only. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative designs, use mixed-methods approaches, and evaluate intervention strategies such as counselling services, hostel reforms, and parental orientation programs.

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Conflict of interest: None

Role of funding source: None