ADAPTING TO ACADEMIC LIFE: PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Abstract
University is a new stage in a student's life. However, this period of time can be stressful for students. The main objective of the study is to investigate the psychological problems of students’ adaptation, e.g., stress, anxiety, depression, etc. based on the survey, attended by N=31 first-year students at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative Studies (Kuban State University, Russia).

Keywords: first-year students, fear, anxiety, stress, depression, adaptation.

Introduction
The age of students belongs to the period of youth, where the leading role is played by both educational and professional activities. This period has its own characteristics and is the most important stage of personal development. During
this period, there is the formation of such professional, moral and psychological characteristics as thinking, moral values, world outlook, beliefs, moral attitudes, etc. University life should be perceived both as preparation for future professional activity, and as the first step to independent conscious life. When adapting to rapid changes in the long-term academic work, students risk of sliding into depression, anxiety or stress. The development of depressive symptoms can lead to negative consequences, the worst case scenario of which is a suicide.

Recent studies have shown that 40% of all students from America fail to receive a degree or a diploma; 57% of first-year students were expelled by the beginning of the second year of education. The first year at the university seems to be the most critical for adaptation due to the large number of various difficulties [9, C. 1-6].

The problem of fear and/or anxiety in first-year students is reflected in many theoretical and practical studies of Western researchers. Uncertainty is at the heart of anxiety. Freshmen often ask themselves, “What if I don't make friends? What if it's harder than I thought? What if I don't like University? What if I can't find my audiences? What if I don't like my roommate? What if my roommate doesn't like me? What if I'm homesick? What if I can't live on my own?” Every first-year student feels anxious. Anxious thinking and physical symptoms of anxiety are the norm. However, how first-year students respond to these thoughts and symptoms varies. While some students overcome this, others will not be able to cope. [6, C. 32, C. 416–422].

Depression among university students is an extremely prevalent and widespread problem across the country [8, C.15-21]. University students are a special group of people that are enduring a critical transitory period in which they are going from adolescence to adulthood and can be one of the most stressful times in a person’s life. Trying to fit in, maintain good grades, plan for
the future, and be away from home often cause anxiety in many students [3, C. 21-42]. Previous studies reported that depression in university students is noted around the world [5, C.13–27]. “As a reaction to academic stress, some students get depressed. They think that they cannot get themselves together [4, C.250–256]. They may cry all of the time, skip classes, or isolate themselves without realizing they are depressed” [7, C.638–647].

**Adaptation procedure for first-year students at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative Studies (KubSU, Krasnodar)**

Each university has its own methods of adapting first-year students. The Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative Studies provides freshmen with creative clubs and scientific societies which students can join with respect to their interests. Adaptation training sessions conducted before the studies are aimed at students’ familiarity with the traditions and customs of the University as well as the group’s cohesion. The situation suggests that this is a must for both first-year students and their parents, as the current academic life is significantly different from the university life of their parents.

Furthermore, each group of students has a mentor who spends a lot of time showing them how to find the right room, helping them to solve emerging issues, trying to answer their questions. For faster and easier adaptation to the learning environment, there are undergraduate students assigned to a certain group available for first-year students in case they need to clarify some information or ask a question, without distracting the mentor.

Traditionally, every autumn the University holds a Stereo picnic. It helps first-year students make new acquaintances. The event is held on the street, where there is an incredibly cozy atmosphere conducive to a casual conversation. The program of the event includes “Open microphone”, which allows students to show their talent, thereby finding people with similar hobbies and interests.
Current research

The main objectives of the current research are:

- to diagnose and measure the level of stress, anxiety or depression in first-year students before adaptation activities;
- to trace the changes in students’ behavior and wellbeing after the activities for first-year students’ adaptation;
- to identify what contributes more to the process of adaptation of first-year students.

Method and participants

47 volunteers (N=31 students Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative, N=16 students from other Universities) were asked to complete a modified test (Beck Depression Inventory + Spielberg Anxiety Questionnaire).

Results

According to the results obtained, before adaptation activities 28% of the respondents reported that they were experiencing difficulties in communication and social networking; 68% were facing such problems as shyness and isolation. Significant or minor increases in stress levels were diagnosed in 59% of the respondents. Fear and anxiety were revealed in 45% of the respondents; depression and bad mood were registered in 37%.

After the adaptation program for first-year students at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative Studies, the participants were asked to repeat the test. The number of the respondents experiencing difficulties in communication, shyness, isolation decreased by 16%. The level of stress also decreased in 62% of the survey participants. Furthermore, the indicators of stress have declined significantly with fear and anxiety at 25%, depression and bad mood at 17% and communication problems at 10%. It is noteworthy that the respondents from other universities reported that they found it harder to cope with their fears to feel comfortable.
Conclusion

Analyzing the first-students’ answers, we can conclude that the adaptation methods proved to be effective and work especially well at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Communicative Studies.

References


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