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# Association Between Perceived Stress and Academic Adjustment Among First-Year Health Sciences Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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## Abstract

Background: The transition to higher education requires students to adapt to new academic demands, social environments, and responsibilities. These changes may increase stress and potentially affect students' ability to adapt academically.

Purpose: This study aimed to determine the association between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta.

Methods: This study employed a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional approach. The population consisted of 340 first-year students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta aged 18–21 years. A total of 93 respondents were selected using random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation test.

Results: The findings showed that 53 respondents (56.99%) experienced severe stress, 33 respondents (35.48%) experienced moderate stress, and 7 respondents (7.53%) experienced mild stress. Regarding academic adaptability, 60 respondents (64.52%) demonstrated high adaptability, while 33 respondents (35.48%) demonstrated moderate adaptability. The Pearson Product-Moment analysis showed a statistically significant negative association between stress level and academic adaptability ($p = 0.002$; $r = -0.315$).

Conclusions: There was a statistically significant negative association between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta. The low-strength negative correlation indicates that students with higher stress levels tended to have lower academic adaptability.

**Keywords**: academic adaptability; higher education; nursing students; stress level; students

## Introduction

The transition into higher education is particularly challenging for nursing students because it involves simultaneous academic, social, emotional, and professional demands. Nursing education requires students to manage theoretical coursework, practical learning, clinical expectations, interpersonal relationships, and the development of professional competencies. These demands may become important sources of

psychological stress, particularly during periods of transition and adjustment. Previous research has shown that undergraduate nursing students experience substantial stress, with the sources of stress differing according to the stage of education. Among first-year students, academic coursework and the novelty of the university environment are particularly important sources of stress (Mariano et al., 2026).

Stress among university students is not determined solely by academic workload. Stressors may also arise from changes in the learning environment, interpersonal relationships, financial circumstances, family expectations, and the need to establish new patterns of daily life. A cross-sectional study involving 676 university students found that approximately two-thirds of participants experienced moderate levels of stress, demonstrating that stress is a common concern in higher education. For nursing students, these challenges may be intensified by the combination of academic requirements and professional preparation. Research on nursing students has identified academic demands, clinical requirements, and adjustment to new situations as important components of their stress experience (Alanazi et al., 2023; Haver et al., 2025).

The first semester may represent a particularly vulnerable period. A recent study among first-semester nursing students in Indonesia emphasized that entering university involves changes in the environment, learning methods, friendships, and other unfamiliar situations that may affect students' psychological well-being. The study specifically examined stress, self-esteem, and quality of life among first-semester nursing students, highlighting the importance of understanding psychological challenges during the early phase of university education (Warwas et al., 2024).

The ability to adapt to academic demands may therefore be an important component of students' adjustment to higher education. Academic adaptability involves students' ability to respond to changing academic demands, manage challenges, and adjust their behavior and resources to the educational environment. Adaptation may be influenced by psychological resources such as coping, resilience, emotional intelligence, social support, and students' perceptions of their educational environment. Evidence from nursing education indicates that resilience and social support are associated with psychological well-being, suggesting that individual and interpersonal resources may help students manage the demands of nursing education (Hendy et al., 2026; Huang et al., 2023)

Coping is also an important mechanism in the relationship between stress and students' adjustment. Research among nursing interns found that coping may play a mediating role between perceived stress and

professional identity, indicating that the way students respond to stress may influence how they experience and manage challenges in their educational and professional development. Similarly, research on nursing students during clinical practice has demonstrated the importance of stressors and coping styles in understanding students' responses to demanding educational situations (Wille et al., 2025)

Emotional intelligence may represent another protective factor. Recent research among Indonesian baccalaureate nursing students identified emotional intelligence as an important factor in relation to education-related stress. Emotional intelligence may help students recognize, understand, and regulate their emotions when facing academic and personal challenges. Qualitative evidence from nursing education further suggests that emotional intelligence development may strengthen self-awareness, emotional regulation, peer connectedness, and emotional resilience, including students' ability to adapt to challenges (Huang et al., 2023).

The importance of coping competence is also increasingly recognized in health-professions education. A controlled pedagogical intervention among nursing trainees demonstrated the potential value of systematically developing competence in assessing stressful situations and selecting appropriate coping strategies. In addition, an integrative review of pre-licensure nursing students reported that maladaptive coping behaviors may be associated with depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and negative consequences for students' memory and performance (Charlton & Wofford, 2022; Martinez et al., 2025)

Although previous studies have extensively examined stress, coping, resilience, and psychological well-being among nursing students, fewer studies have specifically examined the relationship between stress level and academic adaptability among students during the early period of higher education, particularly within the context of Indonesian health sciences institutions. Therefore, examining the association between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta is important to provide institution-specific evidence that may support student academic and psychological support programs (Aljohani et al., 2021; Naz et al., 2024).

**Materials and Methods**

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional approach. The study population consisted of 340 first-year students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta, aged 18–21 years, from various study

programs. The respondents were selected using random sampling, resulting in a total sample of 93 students. Data were collected using two standardized self-report questionnaires: the *Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale–21 items (DASS-21)* and the *Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ)*. The DASS-21 was used to assess students' psychological distress, particularly the level of stress, while the SACQ was used to assess students' adaptation to the college environment. The collected data were analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation test to determine the association between stress level and academic adaptability. Statistical significance was assessed at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. The study received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee under ethical clearance number 034/KEPK/IV/2024.

**Results**

The characteristics of the respondents in this study were described based on sex, age, study program, and area of origin. A total of 93 respondents participated in the study. The distribution of respondents according to these characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Respondents' Characteristics by Sex, Age, Study Program, and Area of Origin (n = 93)

| Responden Characteristic | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Sex | | |
| Male | 17 | 18,27 |
| Female | 76 | 81,73 |
| Age | | |
| 17-21 years | 82 | 88,18 |
| 22-29 years | 11 | 11,82 |
| Study Program | | |
| D3 Radiology | 26 | 27,95 |
| D3 Midwifery | 9 | 9,67 |
| D3 TBD | 10 | 10,75 |
| D3 Medical Laboratory Technology | 18 | 19,35 |
| Bachelor of Midwifery | 9 | 9,68 |
| Bachelor of Nursing | 21 | 22,6 |
| Area of Origin | | |
| Java | 23 | 24,7 |
| Out of Java | 70 | 75,26 |

Source: Processed Primary Data, 2024

Based on the data presented in Table 1, the distribution of respondent characteristics showed that the highest proportion of respondents were female, with 76 respondents (40.86%). The largest age group consisted of respondents aged 17–21 years, accounting for 44.09%. In addition, based on study program, the highest proportion of respondents was from the D3 Radiology program (13.98%), while 37.63% of respondents were from outside Java. Overall, the characteristics of the respondents in this study were predominantly female, aged 17–21 years, enrolled in a D3 program, and originating from outside Java.

The univariate analysis was conducted to describe the distribution of stress levels and academic adaptability among the respondents. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Stress Levels and Academic Adaptability Among Respondents (n = 93)

| Variable | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Stress Level | | |
| Mild | 7 | 7,53 |
| Moderate | 33 | 35,48 |
| Severe | 53 | 56,99 |
| Academic Adaptability | | |
| High | 60 | 64,52 |
| Moderate | 33 | 35,48 |

**Source : Processed Primary Data, 2024**

Based on Table 2, the majority of respondents experienced severe stress, with 53 respondents (56.99%), followed by moderate stress in 33 respondents (35.48%), while only 7 respondents (7.53%) experienced mild stress. The number of respondents experiencing mild stress was the lowest (7.53%).

This finding is consistent with the study by Sutjiato (2019), which reported that female students were 2.7 times more likely to experience severe stress than male students. Thus, among the mild, moderate, and severe stress categories, the proportion of female students experiencing stress was higher than that of male students. This finding is further supported by Sundari (2012), who reported that both low and high levels of stress were more prevalent among female students than male students.

Bivariate analysis was conducted to determine the association between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta. The analysis was performed using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation test, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Association Between Stress Level and Academic Adaptability Among Students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta in May 2024 (n = 93)

| Stress Level | Academic Adaptability | | | | | | Sig | CoeficientCorrelation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High | | Moderate | | Low | | | |
| | f | % | f | % | f | % | | |
| Mild | 6 | 5,00 | 1 | 1,52 | 0 | 0,00 | 0,002 | -0,315 |
| Moderate | 23 | 19,17 | 10 | 15,15 | 0 | 0,00 | | |
| Severe | 31 | 25,83 | 22 | 33,33 | 0 | 0,00 | | |

**Source : Processed Primary Data, 2024**

Based on the results presented in Table 3, the Pearson Product-Moment correlation analysis showed a statistically significant association between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta, with a p-value of 0.002 ($p < 0.05$). The correlation coefficient was −0.315, indicating a negative association with a low strength. This finding indicates that higher stress levels tended to be associated with lower levels of academic adaptability.

The negative direction of the correlation indicates that the two variables moved in opposite directions. In other words, as the stress level increased, academic adaptability tended to decrease. However, the correlation coefficient of −0.315 indicates that the strength of the association was low. Therefore, stress level may be one of the factors associated with academic adaptability, while other factors may also contribute to students' ability to adapt to academic demands

**Discussion**

The present study found a statistically significant negative relationship between stress level and academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta ($p = 0.002$; $r = -0.315$). The negative direction indicates that students with higher levels of stress tended to demonstrate lower levels of academic adaptability. Although the strength of the association was low, the finding suggests that stress remains an important factor to consider when examining students' ability to adjust to academic demands.

This finding can be understood within the context of the transition to higher education. Students are required to adjust not only to academic expectations but also to changes in their social environment, learning methods, interpersonal relationships, and daily routines. These challenges may be particularly relevant for first-year students. Lavoie-Tremblay et al. (2022) found that sources of stress among undergraduate nursing students

varied according to the year of study and that first-year students particularly experienced stress associated with academic courses. This supports the possibility that the transition into higher education itself may create conditions in which stress and academic adaptation become closely interconnected (Liu et al., 2022).

The current finding is also consistent with evidence showing that stress is a common experience among university students. Alkhawaldeh et al. (2023), in a study of 676 university students, reported that approximately two-thirds of participants experienced moderate stress. Their findings further demonstrated that stress was associated with multiple sources and coping responses rather than academic demands alone. Therefore, the negative association identified in the present study may reflect the interaction between academic demands and the broader process of adjusting to university life.

The finding that 53 respondents (56.99%) experienced severe stress is particularly important. This proportion indicates that stress should not be viewed solely as an individual problem but also as an issue relevant to nursing education. Nursing students may experience stress from academic workload, practical learning, clinical expectations, and the need to develop professional competencies. Lavoie-Tremblay et al. (2022) identified different stress sources across nursing education stages, while Liu et al. (2022) demonstrated that stress and coping styles were important considerations among nursing students during clinical practice.

At the same time, the present study found that 60 respondents (64.52%) had high academic adaptability. This finding is important because it demonstrates that high stress does not necessarily mean that students are unable to adapt academically. Students may continue to demonstrate adequate or high adaptation despite experiencing substantial stress. The low correlation coefficient ($r = -0.315$) supports this interpretation because stress explains only a limited part of the variation in academic adaptability. Other psychological and social resources may contribute to students' ability to maintain academic functioning under stressful circumstances (García-Fernández et al., 2025; Tu et al., 2024).

One possible explanation is the role of coping. Students may respond differently to similar stressors depending on the coping strategies they use. Tu et al. (2024) demonstrated that coping plays an important role in the relationship between perceived stress and professional identity among nursing interns. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of understanding stressors and coping styles among nursing students. Thus, the relationship identified in this study may not represent a direct and uniform effect of stress

on adaptation; rather, students' coping resources may influence how stress is translated into academic difficulties or successful adjustment (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2022).

Emotional resources may also help explain why the relationship observed in this study was statistically significant but relatively weak. Recent research among Indonesian baccalaureate nursing students identified emotional intelligence as an important factor related to education-related stress. Emotional intelligence may support students in recognizing and regulating emotional responses, allowing them to respond more effectively to academic challenges. Haver et al. (2025) similarly found that emotional intelligence development in nursing education was associated with greater self-awareness, emotional regulation, peer connectedness, and emotional resilience, including adaptability to challenges (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2023; Visier-Alfonso et al., 2024).

Resilience and social support may also contribute to academic adaptability. Naz et al. (2024) reported a relationship between resilience, social support, and psychological well-being among nursing students. A recent narrative review further emphasized that resilience and competence should be considered important components of nursing education because students need psychological resources alongside clinical competence to deal with educational challenges (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2022; Mariano et al., 2026; Martinez et al., 2025). These findings provide a possible explanation for why some students in the present study maintained high academic adaptability despite experiencing severe stress.

The present findings are also relevant to educational interventions. Stress management should not be limited to reducing stress levels but should also aim to strengthen students' capacity to cope with academic challenges. Warwas et al. (2024) demonstrated that structured educational approaches can promote students' competence in assessing stressful situations and selecting appropriate coping strategies. This supports the recommendation that academic institutions provide structured support that combines counseling, stress-management education, emotional regulation, and opportunities for students to develop adaptive coping skills.

Furthermore, maladaptive coping may have consequences beyond temporary psychological distress. Charlton and Wofford (2022) reported that maladaptive coping behaviors among pre-licensure nursing students were associated with depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and consequences for memory and performance. Therefore, identifying students who experience high stress and providing early support may

be important not only for their psychological well-being but also for maintaining their academic functioning (Charlton & Wofford, 2022; Talbi et al., 2025).

The findings of this study should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. The correlation coefficient of -0.315 indicates a low-strength relationship, and the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions to be drawn. It cannot be concluded that increased stress directly causes decreased academic adaptability. Other variables, including coping strategies, emotional intelligence, resilience, social support, self-esteem, and institutional support, may contribute to academic adaptability and should be examined in future research.

The Indonesian context is particularly relevant. Komariah et al. (2025) demonstrated that first-semester nursing students in Indonesia face changes in learning environments, friendships, and other unfamiliar situations that may affect stress and psychological well-being. Therefore, interventions designed for students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta should consider the specific transition experiences of students, including adjustment to a new academic environment and, for students from outside Java, adjustment to a different social and cultural environment (Komariah et al., 2025).

Overall, the present study contributes evidence that stress level is significantly associated with academic adaptability among students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta. The low negative correlation suggests that reducing stress may be beneficial, but improving academic adaptability should also involve strengthening protective resources such as coping competence, emotional intelligence, resilience, social support, and students' connection with the educational institution.

## Conclusions

The study found that the majority of students at STIKES Guna Bangsa Yogyakarta experienced severe stress, with 53 respondents (56.99%), while most students demonstrated high academic adaptability, with 60 respondents (64.52%). The analysis showed a statistically significant negative association between stress level and academic adaptability ($p = 0.002$; $r = -0.315$), with the strength of the association categorized as low. These findings indicate that higher stress levels tend to be associated with lower academic adaptability among students. However, the low correlation strength suggests that stress is only one of the factors associated with students' academic adaptability. Other factors, such as coping strategies, emotional resources, resilience, social support, and institutional support, may also contribute to students' ability to adapt to

academic demands. Therefore, student support programs, including counseling and stress-management strategies, may be important to support academic adaptation and student well-being.

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