

The Impact of Academic Pressure on the Mental Health of Vietnamese Students

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Abstract:

The pursuit of knowledge is a fundamental aspect of personal and intellectual growth, which is widely respected by many people. High achievement, because of such dedication, is often recognized and celebrated. In Southeast Asian cultures, including Vietnam, academic achievement holds a significant place, often seen as a key to personal success and social mobility. This respect for education is deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and social factors, and it manifests in various aspects of life. In Southeast Asian cultures, including Vietnam, academic achievement holds a significant place, often seen as a key to personal success and social mobility. This respect for education is deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and social factors, and it manifests in various aspects of life. However, too much academic pressure may lead to mental health issues. Excessive academic pressure, while often rooted in well-intentioned aspirations for success, can have detrimental effects on students' health. The research has surveyed nearly 300 students in Vietnam to find the relationship between Academic Pressure on Mental Health and make some suggestions to improve the situation.

Keywords: Academic Pressure, Mental Health, Vietnamese Students

1. Introduction:

Vietnam is not an English-speaking country, which is an obstacle in international exams and competition. Despite that, Students from Vietnam have been known to perform well academically. PISA is The Program for International Student Assessment, testing the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading, and science. The tests explore how well students can solve complex problems, think critically, and communicate effectively. According to PISA, in 2022, Vietnamese students scored 438 points - one of the highest scores for students with similar socio-economic backgrounds - showcasing considerable success in the scholarly environment.

In the same years, the amount of Vietnamese students' proficiency in mathematics at level 2 is 72%, even higher than the OECD average of 69%. Not only in math, but Vietnamese students also achieve a high level of knowledge in science with 79% of them in level 2, compared to 76% of OECD's average. (PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) - Country Notes: Viet Nam, 2022). These achievements are quite impressive because they were among the most disadvantaged students who took the PISA test in 2022.

Mental health refers to the state of emotional, psychological, and social well-being (WHO, 2022). It influences how we think, feel, and behave, as well as how we handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Mental health issues can affect

anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, or socioeconomic status. However, certain groups of people are more vulnerable or at higher risk for mental health challenges including adolescence and young adulthood. They are in periods of significant change, including physical, emotional, and social development. The pressures of academic performance, peer relationships, identity formation, and the transition to adulthood can contribute to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Students' mental health can be negatively impacted by various factors. While there is no single cause for deteriorating mental health, psychological problems have been linked to adverse childhood experiences, such as trauma or a history of abuse (child abuse, sexual assault, witnessing violence, and so on); experiences related to chronic medical conditions, such as a traumatic brain injury, cancer, or diabetes; biological factors or chemical imbalances in the brain, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, or feelings of loneliness or isolation (CDC, 2024).

Academic pressure or studying-related stress is defined as the anxiety, tension, and unease stemming from the pressures of school, family, and society related to grades and academic performance is a prevalent phenomenon in Vietnam (Luo et al., 2020). Specifically for high school students, the rate of experiencing stress has been relatively high within different institutions and areas: 62.7% in Ha Noi (Nguyen et al., 2018), 71.9% in Da Nang (Nguyen et al., 2019), 52.1% in Hau Giang (Danh et al., 2021), and so on. Academic pressure can significantly contribute to mental health issues, especially among students because of high expectations, intense competition, and the fear of failure.

The correlation between academic pressure and indications of mental disorders has been established by prior research, with mixed anxiety and depressive symptoms being the most commonly assessed outcome (Stearé et al., 2023). As aforementioned, most Vietnamese high school students experience extensive amounts of academic stress, which likely leads to their mental health states being compromised. Additionally, the

negative effects of poor mental health have been proven to be magnified in low- and middle-income countries due to undertreatment (Fjolla Kondirolli & Sunder, 2022). As Vietnam is a lower middle-income country (World Bank, 2024), it stands to reason that the mental states of Vietnamese students may be highly and collectively wounded by rampant levels of academic stress, particularly schoolwork pressure and examination expectations.

Although well-known, academic pressure in Vietnam has yet to be clearly and comprehensively documented. Among published research, the effects of academic pressure are measured sectionally - such as within the context of healthcare students in Can Tho (Thanh Thao Nguyen Thi et al., 2023), health science students in Da Nang (Thi Nhu Hoang N et al., 2023), or students of Van Lang University (Tuan Pham Van, 2024) only. To date, there is no existing research topic able to quantify the effects of academic pressure on all Vietnamese students' mental health, proving an examination of academic pressure's overall impact on the entirety of Vietnam is missing and yet necessary. As such, this research aims to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the effects of widespread academic pressure on Vietnamese students' mental states - contributing to our society's currently limited understanding.

2. Main content:

The data was collected from our self-conducted questionnaire, consisting of 16 questions focusing on the respondents' identity, and various aspects related to the pressure state stemming from academic affairs. This survey was carried out mainly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, gaining a total of 285 responses. After reviewing inconsistencies and the validity of each answer, the official sample size of this study is 283 respondents currently studying in junior high schools, senior high schools, and universities.

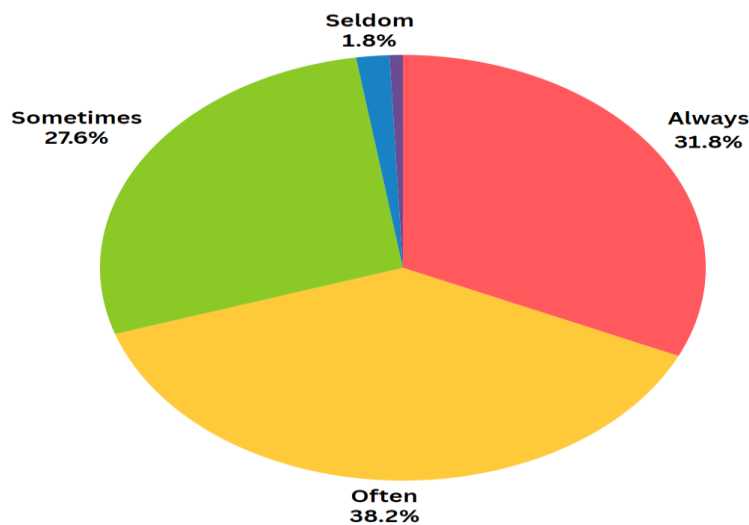
2.1. Mental health problems of students in Vietnam:

After conducting the survey, we uncovered a significant issue: most participants reported feeling

anxious about their studies, a pursuit that students are generally expected to find enjoyable and fulfilling. This anxiety not only detracts from their academic experience but also suggests a deeper underlying problem that needs to be addressed to

ensure that learning remains a positive and enriching experience for all students. More than two-thirds of them (70%) frequently must face tension and pressure from academic activities.

Figure 1. The frequency of nervousness about studying?

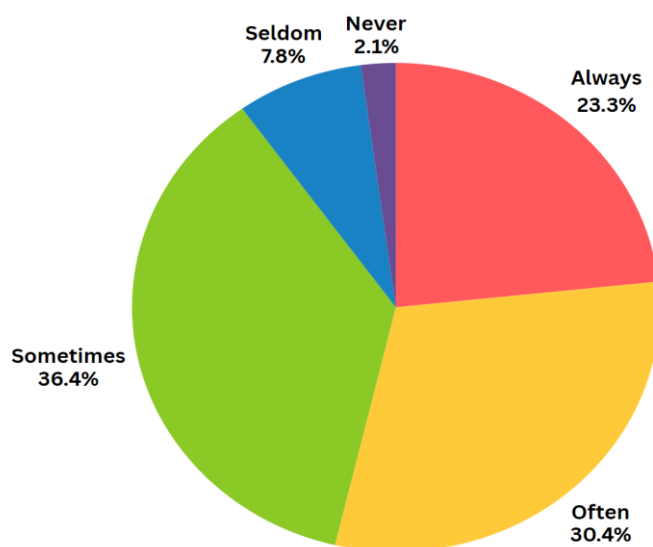


Source: Author's survey

Similarly, majority of students feel stress symptoms, such as sleep deprivation, headache, and fatigue, regularly - ranging from always (23.3%), sometimes (36.4%), often (30.4%). A combined total would be 90.1% - an alarming number. This figure would mean that 9 out of 10 students feel symptoms of stress on a frequent basis. The consequences of stress can be detrimental to students' health, causing difficulty in concentrating, increased irritability, loss of

appetite, and much more (WHO, 2024). Long-term exposure to stress and its effects may lead to or exacerbate certain mental health conditions, most commonly depression and anxiety. Stress among students can have far-reaching effects on various aspects of their lives. When stress becomes chronic or overwhelming, it can seriously undermine both their academic success and overall well-being. The constant pressure to succeed can make their student life feel like a burden rather than a journey.

Figure 2. How often do you feel stress symptoms (sleep loss, headaches, fatigue)?

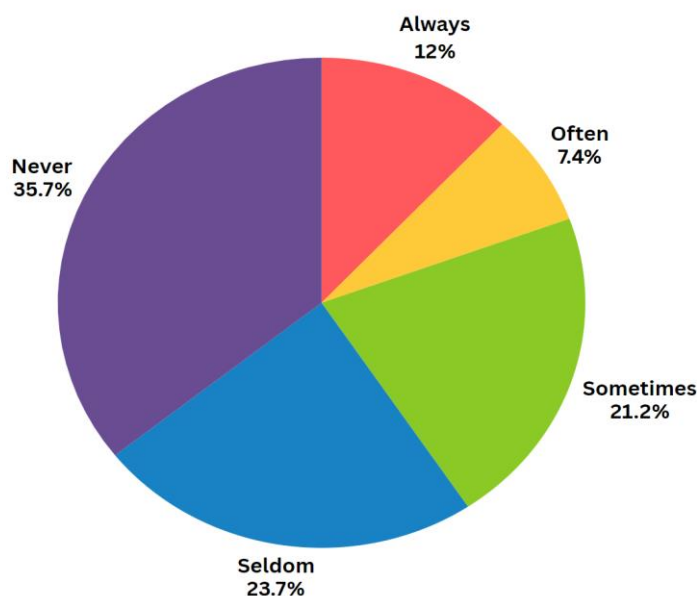


Source: Author's survey

The prevalence of thoughts about abandoning one's studies due to overwhelming stress has become a pressing concern. A combination of factors, including heightened academic competition, increasingly demanding curricula, and societal pressures to achieve academic excellence, has contributed to a significant increase in student stress levels. While the chart below displays the majority (a combined percentage of 59.4%) of respondents seldomly or never have thoughts related to quitting studying, a concerning number of students proclaim they do - from sometimes to always. This figure - 40.6% - shows how stressful academic affairs currently are, a large number of

students have already considered the possibility of dropping them and focusing on their well-being. The situation is even more alarming, as some students are contemplating abandoning their studies. 19.4% of the participants frequently entertain the idea of quitting their learning. This statistic highlights a concerning trend that could have long-term implications for their academic and personal futures. The fact that nearly one in five students is considering such a drastic step underscores the urgent need for intervention and support to address the factors contributing to this widespread dissatisfaction and stress among the student population.

Figure 3. How often do you want to relinquish studying?



Source: Author's survey

The survey results highlight several key factors contributing to the stress and pressure experienced by students. These factors include the curriculum and workload, extracurricular activities, family expectations, and psychological aspects.

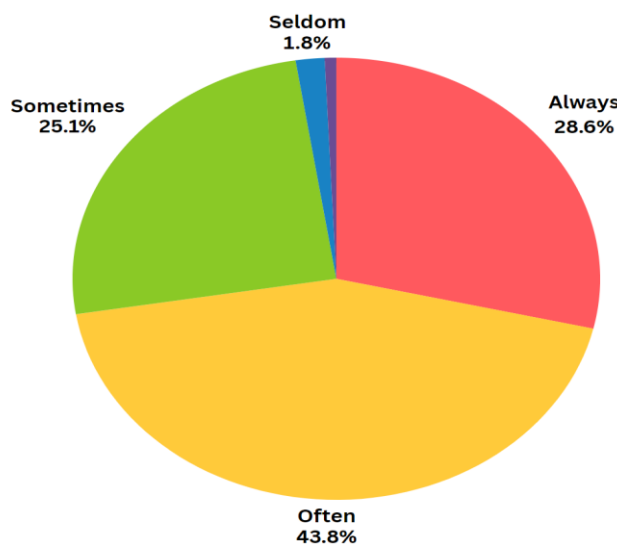
2.2. Academic pressure:

2.2.1. Curriculum and workload:

The curriculum for students in Vietnam is structured by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and follows a national framework that is consistent across the country. Depending on the objectives, private and public schools can design a full-day or half-day study

schedule with or without studying on Saturday. In Vietnamese traditional culture, heavy stress is placed on the importance of studying to become a successful person. As such, the curriculum of students accurately reflects that with continuous periods starting from 7 A.M. Besides, students also have to complete their daily assignments at home, adding to the burden students face while striving to achieve academic success. Most students attend extra classes in main subjects or foreign languages after school time to improve their knowledge and attain high marks in the exams. Of the 283 people surveyed, the majority (72.4%) reported feeling stressed out from schoolwork from often to always.

Figure 4. How often do you experience academic pressure?

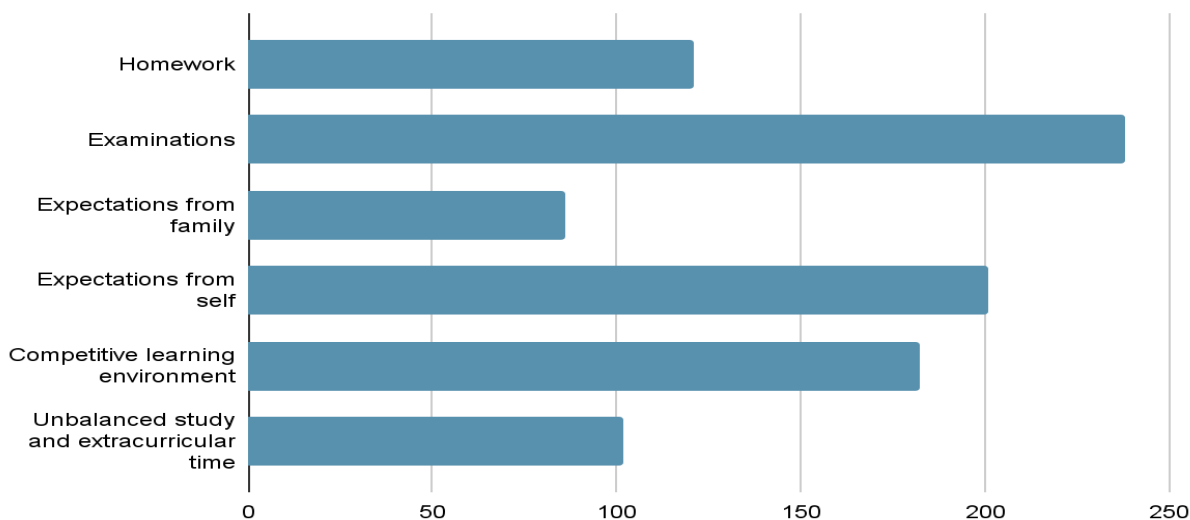


Source: Author's survey

Academic pressure is highly prevalent among Vietnamese youth, as seen above. Many factors can influence the severity of the stress students face, consisting of internal and external aspects. These reasons can range from expectations from the student's relatives to expectations within the student. According to the author's survey, examinations, expectations from the student, and a competitive learning environment are the top 3 reasons causing and advancing studying-related stress (with 238, 201, and 182 people respectively deeming them as their reason for stress). These results match the current study culture in Vietnam. Examinations are held in high regard, as they account for most, if not all the student's grades and academic performance. As such, the pressure to cram all the information learned may be increased by the difficulty of future exams. As mentioned,

Vietnam places great importance on education. Because of this, many internalize this belief, developing expectations for themselves related to curriculum and scores. If these expectations are not met, negative emotions can fester, causing further stress. Vietnam also has a somewhat competitive quality in its learning environment. With institutions such as Trần Đại Nghĩa and Lê Hồng Phong high schools being heralded as "the best of its kind" alongside great prizes offered by schools like scholarships and awards, competition is increasing more and more. Consequently, students may feel stressed out by the desire to work to the top or stay on top. Other reasons that lead to pressure for students also come from high expectations from themselves, competition, and a heavy amount of workload.

Figure 5. Main reasons for academic pressure

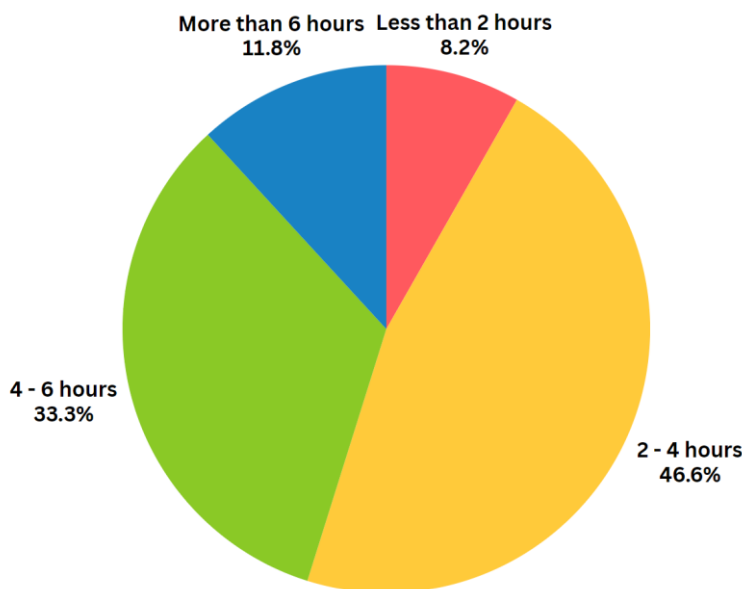


Source: Author's survey

As mentioned above, extreme importance is placed on studying in Vietnam. Consequently, many Vietnamese families decide to put their children in extra classes, helping them improve their knowledge alongside their grades. Forms of extra classes can vary, ranging from classes that teach material beforehand, to make-up lessons that help students catch up and onto the current program in their school. This can result in academic pressure outside the school environment. Furthermore, many students also need to complete their homework and study for upcoming exams. This further lengthens the time they use to study outside of class, leading to an increase in stress levels. From the figure below, it is evident that

Vietnamese students often study outside of school - with varying duration. Of the 283 valid responses, the 2 - 4-hour time frame is the dominating answer choice (46.6%). This means most students engage in academic affairs for 11 hours or more daily, which may lead to an abundance of stress. From the results of the author's survey, it is crucial to note that 1 out of 3 students study from 4 to 6 hours a day, adding to the stress they may have already faced at school. Though small, the quantity of students who study outside of class for over 6 hours every day (11.8%) is concerning, as these students study for more than 15 hours a day in total. This can be heavily detrimental to their mental and physical health.

Figure 6. Time for studying after school schedule

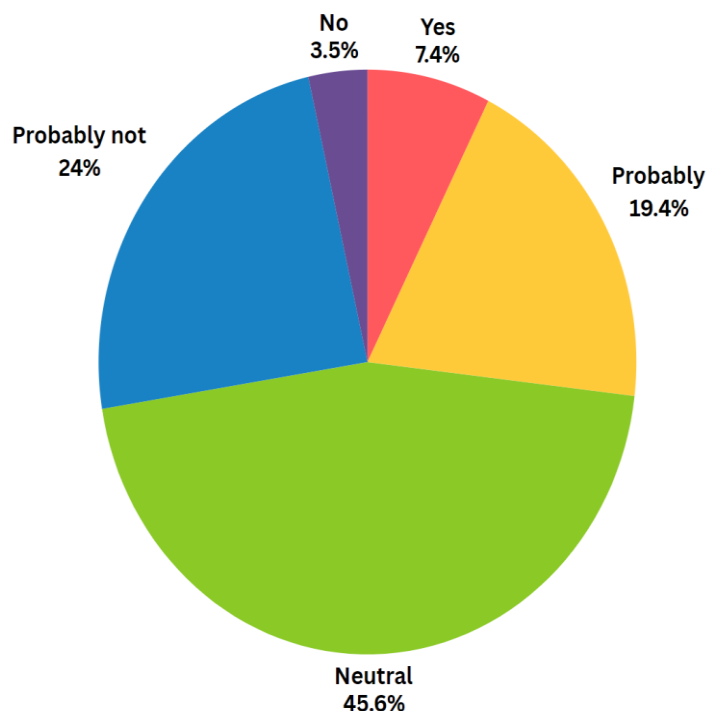


Source: Author's survey

2.1.2. Extracurricular activities:

Alongside academics, extracurricular activities are also heavily emphasized in Vietnam. Intending for their children to develop comprehensively, parents often push them to do various sports outside school to obtain life skills. Popular extracurriculars include playing an instrument, learning a sport, and so on. From a parent's point of view, these activities can help their children develop a wide range of skills, therefore enriching their capability

and quality of life. However, this reasonable desire from parents may increase the burden placed on their children. Due to participating in multiple extracurricular activities, combined with extra classes and homework, students' dissatisfaction regarding the sufficiency of free time is prevalent. According to the author's survey, most are neutral concerning the amount of free time they are allowed. However, almost 1 out of 3 (27.4% combined) students believe they do not possess enough free time to wind down and relax.

Figure 7. Do you have enough time to relax?

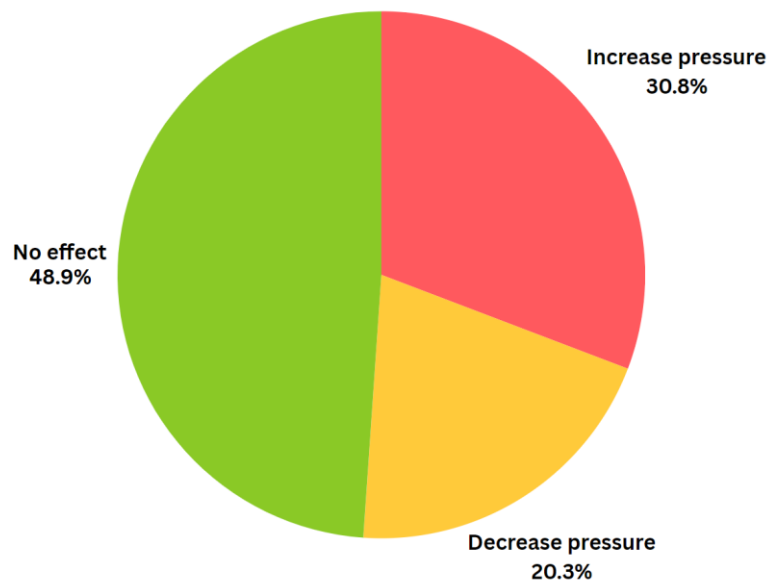
Source: Author's survey

It's necessary to emphasize that relaxation time is not just a luxury but a necessity for students. It supports their academic performance, emotional well-being, and physical health, helping them achieve a balanced and fulfilling life. By making relaxation a regular part of their routine, students can manage stress effectively, prevent burnout, and maintain a positive outlook on their studies and life. The demands of school, homework, exams, and extracurricular activities can lead to significant stress and mental fatigue. Without enough leisure time, students are denied a source for releasing their build-up of stress, resulting in heightened levels of stress. This can cause a phenomenon known as "burn-out", leading to students losing motivation in both studying and general life. Furthermore, this can result in lasting consequences. Long-term intensified stress may cause or exacerbate certain mental health conditions in students, affecting their mental, psychological, and societal well-being. Free time is important, and as such, it needs to be emphasized in students' lives and curriculums.

2.1.3. Parental expectations:

Parents undoubtedly play a large role in a child's life. Starting from birth, parents influence every

aspect of a child's upbringing, helping to shape their beliefs. Combined with the intense academic culture in Vietnam, it can be surmised that parents have considerable influence on a child's stresses regarding education. Parents' expectations can be engrained into a student's mind since childhood, leading them to strive to fulfill external anticipations by earning academic achievements and success. However, with the ever-growing want of comprehensive development for their children, parents in current times have begun to shift their mindsets. Extracurricular activities and the development of soft skills are now taking up increased market share in the worries of parents - causing less pressure on students to academically perform well. The results of this survey accurately reflect this change, as almost half (48.9%) of respondents proclaim that their parents do not affect the stress they carry. Nevertheless, the number of students who report feeling pressured by parents (30.8%) should still be scrutinized. This figure may show how the traditional emphasis on solely studying has not fully left contemporary parents' mindsets.

Figure 8. How do parents affect your pressure?

Source: Author's survey

When students solely chase parental and societal expectations, they run the risk of failing and facing great disappointment from their parents as well as themselves. In the long term, this may lead to anxiety about always succeeding, harsh self-criticism, and total sorrow. Expectations, especially when unrealistic, can cause tense parent-child relationships, friction in family dynamics, misunderstandings, frustrations, and so on. Moreover, striving to meet others' expectations may result in a loss of individualism in students. Individualism is the defining feature of youth, as student life is mainly a period of growth and development to become a full-fledged distinctive adult. Racing to satisfy outside expectations leads to children following the footsteps of others, never fully becoming their own. Instead, they just become a duplication of those around them, without unique individualism.

2.1.4. Psychological impact:

Due to the rigorous study culture in Vietnam, alongside the burdens of stress placed on students as discussed earlier, students may be psychologically impacted. Long-term stress has been proven to negatively impact the human brain, causing symptoms akin to mental disorders

(Mariotti, 2015). These effects are worsened in emerging youth, as they have not yet possessed the capabilities of the adult human brain. From the 283 responses to the survey, it can be gleaned that most students feel great worry because of school, with severity ranging from always (31.8%), often (38.2%), to sometimes (27.6%). With most of the youth worrying over education relatively often, the risk of developing mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, or bipolar disorder may increase.

The causes of psychological problems in Vietnam are ample. The core of these factors comes from Vietnam's societal and cultural setting. With a moderately traditional mindset, mental health is often seen as a taboo subject, and the mention of it can come with an abundance of stigma. This results in underreporting of problems related to mental health, and delayed seeking of help. There is a widespread underreporting of mental health issues, as individuals may feel ashamed or fearful of being judged by their community. This reluctance to acknowledge psychological struggles prevents many from seeking the necessary help at the early stages when intervention could be most effective. The delay in seeking professional assistance often exacerbates the severity of mental health problems.

Without timely support, conditions such as depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders can worsen, leading to a deterioration in overall well-being. The stigma also discourages open conversations about mental health, which hinders public awareness and education on the topic, further perpetuating the cycle of silence and neglect. Moreover, traditional values that emphasize self-reliance and familial honor can pressure individuals to internalize their struggles, avoiding external help to avoid bringing perceived shame to their families. This cultural expectation often results in a lack of emotional support within the family unit, as mental health issues are either dismissed or misunderstood.

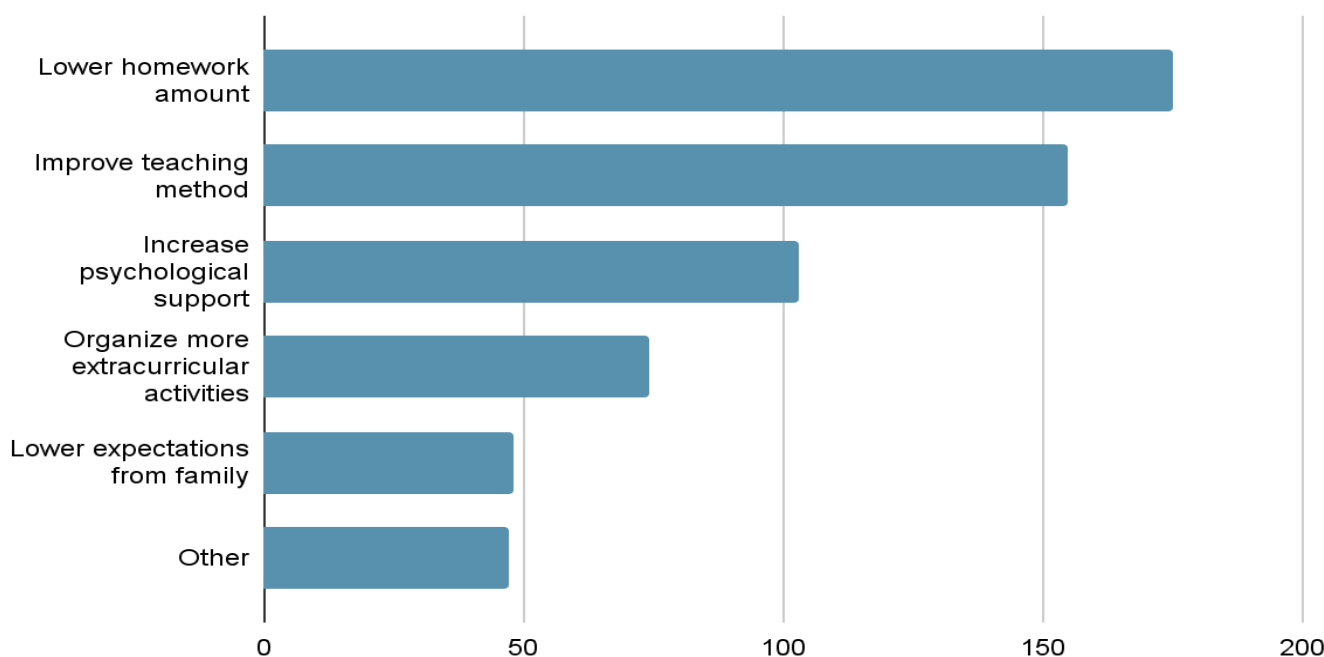
Additionally, traditional gender roles in Vietnam can limit emotional expression and coping mechanisms, particularly for boys. This can internalize the burden of stress in both men and women, causing or exacerbating innate mental health conditions. In Vietnamese culture and mindset, men represent strength, stoicism, and resilience, while emotional vulnerability or expressions of distress are seen as signs of weakness. As a result, boys are socialized from a young age to suppress their emotions, which can

have long-term consequences on their mental health. This societal expectation to maintain a composed exterior can lead to the internalization of stress, as men may feel compelled to deal with their problems silently rather than seeking support or discussing their feelings openly. The pressure to conform to these traditional masculine ideals often means that men are less likely to develop healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with emotional challenges. Over time, this repression of emotions can contribute to the onset or worsening of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and even substance abuse, as men may turn to unhealthy outlets to manage their unexpressed stress.

For female, traditional gender roles also impose significant emotional burdens. While women in Vietnam are often expected to be nurturing and supportive, they are also expected to maintain the harmony of the household, often at the expense of their own emotional needs. This can lead to a situation where women feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities of studying and doing housework at the same time.

2.3. Recommendations:

Figure 9. Solutions to reduce stress



Source: Author's survey

Based on the survey and study's findings, it is recommended that parental figures and educational institutions in Vietnam consider lessening the burden of academic stress placed on students. Some specific recommendations are as follows:

1. Lower homework amount:

With a consistent amount of homework, students may find it challenging to wind down and relax after hours spent at school. The notion of homework innately means spreading schoolwork to the home, blurring the line between studying and leisure time for students. While homework helps students review the material they learned during class, it is imperative to consider how a multitude of homework from various subjects may affect the student's health.

2. Improve teaching method:

By improving the method of teaching, students may be able to engage more with the lesson - thereby absorbing knowledge in class more effectively. This, in turn, can reduce students' stress levels, as difficulty in learning in and out of the classroom is decreased. The quality of education methods can be increased in a myriad of ways, such as applying teaching techniques like inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, cooperative learning, and more in the academic environment.

3. Increase psychological support:

With the ever-increasing number of people afflicted with mental health conditions, it is key for both parents and institutions to focus on the mental well-being of students. By helping them alleviate psychological problems, schools and parents can help students handle stress more effectively. Mental health support can be improved by prioritizing mental health education, providing accessible mental health services, creating a supportive school and family climate, and open communication. Specifically, institutions can improve the efficacy and efficiency of school counseling - letting students release their stress and access help when needed.

By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions and parental figures can help lessen students' pressures and lead them toward a healthier relationship with both studying and stress.

4. Conclusions:

In Vietnam, education is often regarded as the cornerstone of future success, with students facing intense academic demands early on. The educational system is highly competitive, with rigorous entrance exams and high expectations from parents and teachers driving students to excel. This environment fosters a culture where academic achievement is prioritized above all else, leading to significant pressure on students. Academic pressure, characterized by the stress and anxiety stemming from the demands to perform well academically, is a pervasive issue in many societies. Still, its impact is particularly pronounced in Vietnam. In the survey conducted with 283 students in Vietnam, more than two-thirds of them (70%) frequently face tension and pressure from academic activities. They often have stress symptoms, such as sleep deprivation, headache, and fatigue. Up to 19.4% of the participants even have the idea of quitting their learning because of pressure. The high stakes associated with educational attainment, coupled with social and family expectations, contribute to a mounting burden on students. As they strive to meet these expectations, many students experience considerable psychological strain. Understanding the impact of academic pressure on mental health is crucial, as the mental well-being of students is fundamental to their overall development and prospects. It's necessary to have aligned solutions to help students overcome these difficulties such as reschedule study workload, improve teaching method and psychological support from schools, families and society.

5. Research methodology:

Researching the impact of academic pressure on the mental health of Vietnamese students is a complex topic that requires a well-structured methodology.

- The survey method was employed to collect data and information from many students across Vietnam to gain an overview and assessment of the academic pressure they experience. This method allowed for efficient

gathering of responses from numerous participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of the pressures students face in their studies.

- Data Collection Methods: Data collection methods were used to systematically gather information from participants, enabling the study to analyze the relationship between academic pressure and mental health among Vietnamese students. These methods ensured the accurate and reliable collection of data, providing a solid foundation for understanding the impact of academic challenges on student well-being.
- Data Analysis: Data analysis was used to systematically examine and interpret the collected data, allowing the study to identify patterns, relationships, and trends between academic pressure and mental health among Vietnamese students. Through statistical techniques and qualitative assessments, the analysis provided insights into how different levels of academic pressure correlate with various mental health outcomes, such as stress, anxiety, and depression.
- Information collection is used to systematically gather relevant data and insights from various sources or participants. This process is essential for understanding the scope of a research topic, ensuring that all necessary details are obtained to support analysis, draw conclusions, and make informed decisions or recommendations based on the gathered information.

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