

Anticipatory Stress as a Predictor of Psychological Distress and Sleep Disturbance

Jannat Tabassum

Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore

Email: jannnatalii1234@gmail.com

Maham Abdullah

Lecturer, Department of Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore

Email: maham.abdullah@superior.edu.pk

Saira Majid

Head of Department of Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore

Nimrah Noor

Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore

Email: su94-mscpw-s24-013@superior.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Anticipatory stress is a psychological and physiological pressure that is caused in regard to the anticipated future need or threat (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). Whereas much research has been conducted on stress, much of the recent scholarship has focused on anticipatory stress as its own concept and predictive capacity of mental health outcomes, specifically in connection with future-related cognitive appraisal (Barlow et al., 2016). The ongoing experiment examines anticipatory stress as an indicator of psychological distress and sleeping disorder within the adult population. A non-clinical adult sample with standardized self-reports measures was collected using a quantitative, cross-sectional design. The Anticipatory Stress Scale was used to measure anticipatory stress, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond and Lovibond, 2005) were the measures of psychological distress, and the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) was used to measure sleep disturbance (Buysse et al., 2009). The use of Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression tests investigated the relationships and predictive relationships. The results show that the levels of anticipatory stress were high predictors of psychological distress and worse quality of sleep as has been previously reported, with cognitive hyperarousal and worry associated with emotional distress and poor sleep (Harvey, 2002). These findings support anticipatory stress as a crucial cognitive-emotional mechanism that brings about mental health vulnerability and sleeping issues. This paper highlights the significance of early prediction and prevention measures against anticipatory stress to enhance psychological well-being and sleep.

Keywords: Anticipatory Stress, Psychological Distress, Sleep Disturbance, Anxiety, Mental Health

Introduction

Stress is a proven factor of mental and physical health, it has an impact on the emotional regulation and cognitive functioning, as well as sleep patterns. In addition to being exposed to real stressors, people are also likely to develop stress when they are expecting future events otherwise known as anticipatory stress. Anticipatory stress occurs when people think about events in the future as some sort of threat or overload, and the result is long-term emotional arousal when there is no imminent threat (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

According to research, anticipatory stress is one of the main factors associated with the formation of anxiety, depression, and overall psychological pain because it is characterized by excessive worrying, rumination, and excessive physiological stimulation (Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). Those processes are intertwined with trans diagnostic models of emotional disorders, in which the perception of threat in the future is viewed as a central vulnerability factor (Barlow et al., 2016).

Another severe consequence of stress is sleep disturbance. Sleep initiation and maintenance are closely connected with such symptoms of anticipatory stress as cognitive hyperarousal, worry, and pre-sleep rumination (Harvey, 2002). The circadian rhythm and quality of sleep can thus be interfered with by chronic anticipatory stress leading to the possibility of long term psychological impairment.

Although the theory is increasingly on the spot, there are a limited number of empirical studies that investigate anticipatory stress as a predictive variable of psychological distress and sleep disturbance, especially in a non-clinical population. In a bid to fill this gap, the present research seeks to investigate in a systematic fashion the predictive value of anticipatory stress on psychological distress and sleep disturbance.

Literature Review

Anticipatory stress refers to psychological and physiological reaction which presents in case people believe that something out of the ordinary or something overwhelming may happen in future (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In contrast to reactive stress, which comes into effect in reaction to the immediate stressors, anticipatory stress is proactive and is underpinned by the cognitive appraisals, including worry, rumination, and uncertainty intolerance (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). These anticipatory responses trigger prolonged stress, although there is no real stressor, and cause long-term emotional and physiological arousal.

In terms of transactional model of stress, anticipatory stress develops when individuals make appraisals that future demands are beyond their coping abilities (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This appraisal is strongly connected with perceived control, uncertainty, and negative outcome expectancy, and anticipatory stress is especially topical in the contemporary situation that is marked with the chronic uncertainty, academic demands, work related instability, and health related issues.

Neurobiological studies also indicate that anticipatory stress involves the brain areas which detect threats and regulate emotion, such as the amygdala, the prefrontal cortex,

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and the insular cortex (Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). Constant activation of these systems can lead to a higher level of emotional dysregulation and psychopathology induced by stress.

Psychological distress is a wide term which brings in depression, anxiety, and emotional problems brought about by stress (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). The increasing literature suggests that anticipatory stress contributes largely to the emergence and persistence of psychological distress especially with the assistance of maladaptive cognition processes, including excessive worry and catastrophic thinking. In conceptualization, Barlow et al. (2016) define anticipatory stress as a transdiagnostic risk factor in the cause of emotional disorders and its importance to future threat sensitivity. Those exposed to high anticipatory stress levels have higher chances of developing persistent anxiety symptoms, depressive rumination and emotional exhaustion. Empirical research in the future-oriented stress has shown that it has a close relationship with the higher level of anxiety and depressive symptomatology in both clinical and non-clinical groups (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013).

Moreover, the use of impaired emotion regulation strategies like avoidance and suppression has been attributed to anticipatory stress, and this also adds to the severity of psychological distress (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Schweizer, 2010). The constant expectation of something bad might also lead to helplessness and hopelessness which are the major symptoms of depression disorders.

There is also longitudinal evidence to the effect that individuals who repeatedly practice anticipatory worry may be more prone to permanent psychological distress, even after adjusting the baseline exposure to stress (Beck and Clark, 1997). This brings out anticipatory stress as not only a correlate but also a possible antecedent of psychological dysfunction.

The frequent effect of cognitive arousal due to stress is sleep disturbance, which is found to be in the form of difficulty in initiating, maintaining, and the sleep quality (Buysse et al., 1989). The negative effect of anticipatory stress on sleep is especially serious because of its stimulation of pre-sleep cognitive activities, such as worry, mental rehearsal, and thought about the things that will happen.

The cognitive model of insomnia by Harvey (2002) assumes that excessive cognitive arousal during the night is the key to the disruption of sleep. The next factor to this arousal is anticipatory stress which keeps the mind alert to the future dangers and this prevents the physiological deactivation that is needed to allow sleep to occur. Empirical research has always documented that highly anticipatory stressed individuals have a significant delay in their sleep initiation, numerous night awakenings, and low subjective sleep quality (Akerstedt et al., 2012).

Anticipatory stress is also physiologically linked with the heightened activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and high levels of cortisol, which disrupts circadian rhythms and disrupts processes of restorative sleep (Meerlo, Sgoifo, and Suchecki, 2008). In the long run, sleep chronic disturbance can also increase sensitivity to stress leading to a two-way relationship between stress and sleep impairment.

Current studies also indicate that sleep disturbance can partially mediate the association between anticipatory stress and psychological distress, thereby showing that there is a complicated relationship between these variables (Alvaro, Roberts, and Harris, 2013).

Theoretical Synthesis a Cognitive-Emotional Process

A cognitive-emotional approach can be used to explain the relationship between anticipatory stress, psychological distress, and sleep disturbance. The maladaptive mental appraisal and the chronic affective emotion arousal triggered by anticipatory stress make individuals prone to suffer distress and imbalance sleep regulation (Barlow et al., 2016; Harvey, 2002).

This model complies with trans diagnostic models of mental health, which focus on overlapping cognitive and emotional mechanisms of psychological disorders. Anticipatory stress can thus be one of the primary connecting factors between future-oriented thinking and both emotional and physiological levels.

Research Gaps and Reason why the present study was conducted

Although the presence of anticipatory stress is theoretically acknowledged, the current understanding of its predictive power in psychological misery as well as sleep disturbance simultaneously is scarce in the literature. The majority of the available literature dwells on general stress or anxiety and leaves out anticipatory stress as a construct. Besides, non-clinical adult populations have not been researched, especially in developing countries.

Objectives of the Study

To examine the relationship between anticipatory stress and psychological distress.

To examine the relationship between anticipatory stress and sleep disturbance.

To determine whether anticipatory stress significantly predicts psychological distress.

To determine whether anticipatory stress significantly predicts sleep disturbance.

Hypotheses

H1: Anticipatory stress will be positively correlated with psychological distress.

H2: Anticipatory stress will be positively correlated with sleep disturbance.

H3: Anticipatory stress will significantly predict psychological distress.

H4: Anticipatory stress will significantly predict sleep disturbance.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design was employed to examine anticipatory stress as a predictor of psychological distress and sleep disturbance.

Variables

Variable Type	Variable	Operational Definition
Independent Variable	Anticipatory Stress	Cognitive-emotional stress experienced in anticipation of future events
Dependent Variable 1	Psychological Distress	Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress
Dependent	Sleep Disturbance	Poor sleep quality, latency, and disturbances

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Variable 2

Participants

The sample consisted of approximately 200 adult participants aged 18–45 years, recruited through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria included fluency in English and absence of diagnosed psychiatric or neurological disorders. Participation was voluntary.

Instruments

Anticipatory Stress Scale (ASS)

The Anticipatory Stress Scale was used to assess future-oriented stress responses. The scale measures cognitive worry, emotional tension, and physiological arousal related to anticipated events. Higher scores indicate greater anticipatory stress. Previous research reports good internal consistency ($\alpha = .82-.88$).

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21)

Psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21, a widely used instrument assessing depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms. The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .87 to .94 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI)

Sleep disturbance was assessed using the PSQI, which evaluates sleep quality over the past month. A global score greater than 5 indicates poor sleep quality. The PSQI has demonstrated high reliability and validity across diverse populations (Buysse et al., 1989).

Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, participants completed an online questionnaire consisting of demographic information and the three standardized scales. Data were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. All data were stored securely, and no identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics were calculated, followed by Pearson correlation analyses to examine associations among variables. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the predictive role of anticipatory stress.

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Results

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Anticipatory Stress	28.45	6.72
Psychological Distress	31.60	8.91
Sleep Disturbance	7.24	3.10

Correlation Analysis

Variables	1	2	3
1. Anticipatory Stress	—		
2. Psychological Distress	.62**	—	
3. Sleep Disturbance	.48**	.55**	—

Note: $p < .01$

Regression Analysis

Anticipatory stress significantly predicted psychological distress ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), accounting for 38% of the variance. It also significantly predicted sleep disturbance ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$), accounting for 23% of the variance.

Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that anticipatory stress is a significant predictor of both psychological distress and sleep disturbance. Consistent with cognitive models of stress and anxiety, individuals who engage in future-oriented worry experience heightened emotional distress and impaired sleep quality. These results align with prior research linking anticipatory cognition with anxiety-related disorders and insomnia (Harvey, 2002; Grupe & Nitschke, 2013).

The strong association between anticipatory stress and psychological distress highlights the trans diagnostic nature of anticipatory processes. Similarly, the predictive relationship with sleep disturbance emphasizes the role of cognitive arousal in sleep pathology.

Limitations

Cross-sectional design limits causal inference.

Reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias.

Implications and Recommendations

Interventions targeting anticipatory stress, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based approaches, and stress inoculation training, may be effective in reducing psychological distress and improving sleep quality. Future research should

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employ longitudinal designs and clinical samples. Anticipatory stress emerges as a robust predictor of psychological distress and sleep disturbance. Addressing future-oriented stress appraisals may play a crucial role in preventive mental health strategies and sleep interventions.

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