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‘DS View’, an academic activity in which students, researchers and faculty are encouraged to write short academic essays on the Development discourse, aims to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of sixth DS View is **‘Mental Health and Academia: Perform or Perish. An Insidious Hidden Epidemic’** written by Zonia Yousuf Baltistani.

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## **Mental Health and Academia: Perform or Perish.**

### **An Insidious Hidden Epidemic**

Zonia Yousuf Baltistani

“You have brains in your head.  
 You have feet in your shoes.  
 You can steer yourself any direction you choose.  
 You’re on your own.  
 And you know what you know.  
 And YOU are the one who’ll decide where to go.” - Dr. Seuss

The life of a student is subjected to various types of stressors. While the words of Dr. Seuss illustrate a comforting picture, students all over the country are victimised by pressures from educational institutes, parents as well as society. Academic pressures are accompanied by an obligation to succeed. Furthermore, uncertainty regarding the future as well as complexities envisaged for blending into the system, add to the prevailing stress. Many students also face familial as well as financial problems. Hence, they find themselves being confronted by challenges from every direction. In such circumstances, a student's ability to learn and their academic performance are always at a risk for being impacted negatively.

Stress, anxiety and depression have become a common prevalence amongst university going students. A survey conducted by the JED Foundation in 2009 showed that eighty five percent of college going students reported experiencing stress and anxiety on a daily basis. Concerns regarding grades and amount of daily school work were the main stress inducing factors (mtvU, 2009). In turn, it was stress which led to their declining academic performance. This claim is strengthened by the increasing reports of students belonging to various acclaimed universities committing suicide. While some address this pressure as a growing challenge to work hard and perform better, many are unable to cope and therefore lag behind. Stress manifests itself as a pest deteriorating the physical as well as mental health of students. As a result students may revert to various coping mechanisms, not all of which are constructive in nature. Last year, in the month of April alone, two students from a highly reputable medical university of Pakistan, committed suicide due to academic reasons (Dawn, 2016).

A research carried out by the Community Health Services Department at the Aga Khan University, stated that helplessness, increased workload, inability to cope and increased psychological pressures were the main stress factors for students. Symptoms for such a mental state include lack of concentration, low mood and frequent loss of temper. The study further reveals that excessive sleeping and spending a large amount of time in isolation remain the two most popular coping mechanisms (Shaikh et al., 2004).

The matter of concern remains that the context of education has evolved. Education is not simply about learning and building knowledge anymore. Various factors, including family and society, have led to the creation of a circumstance where educational institutes harbor an environment of unhealthy competition. Education is no longer just about personal growth. A student is not viewed in singularity; they are always viewed as a position in class. Students compete with each other to be better than their classmates instead to become better versions of their previous selves. The essence of education is now reduced to mere numbers and cut throat competition.

A 2010 study by the BMC Medical Education reveals that academics and exams are the most dominant stressors for students (Shah, Hassan, Malik, & Sreeramareddy, 2010). Therefore, many students find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of constant self criticism and struggle to establish a healthy sense of self worth. Such sentiments are further aggravated by peer pressure, toxic friendships and bleak employment opportunities.

The rise of mental health issues in the academia can have serious repercussions on its overall success and productivity. Especially for a developing country like ours, where a majority of the population comprises of the youth, the need for healthy, positive and creative individuals is of utmost significance. The World Health Organisation reports on Pakistan that a mere 0.4 percent of the already minimalistic health expenditure is dedicated to mental health by the Government Health Department (World Health Organisation, 2009). This is mainly because we continue to lack the culture of acceptance when it comes to mental health issues.

On a micro level, the one way to fight this hidden epidemic is by creating safe spaces where students can come to share their experiences and where the pervasiveness of such problems can be acknowledged. Heads of educational institutions need to keep up this conversation and build friendlier ties with the student body and facilitate them with student counselors and advisors. It cannot be denied that young individuals are faced with increased pressures to achieve more in less time, work harder and absorb more skill to keep up with the unhealthy level of competition at educational institutes. Hence we need to establish a culture of acceptance; acceptance is the first step towards cure. In the grand scheme of things, a brilliant grade sheet and an unhealthy and despondent mind cannot bring any change. Progress, development and social change are the works of healthy minded, hopeful and future oriented individuals.

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