

## Chapter 12

# Psychological Adjustment Challenges of First- Year Students: A Conceptual Review

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter presents an overview of the psychological adjustment challenges of first-year students. A review of the literature has been carried out to address the main research question of this study: “What are the psychological adjustment challenges that first-year university students face?” The chapter discusses the most common factors that negatively affect adjustment to universities such as stress, anxiety and fears, depression, self-esteem, the importance of self-esteem, signs of high and low self-esteem, and the coping strategies used by first-year university students in the university transition adaptation process. The chapter recommends university authorities initiate stress management programmes such as expanding counselling activities and providing adequate facilities and resources at the campus. Similarly, efficient advisory mechanisms and extracurricular activities and psychological and academic counselling services should be geared toward the needs of the students.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Literature confirms that university adjustment has been of interest to researchers for decades, with the first articles on the topic first appearing in the 1940s. However, there has been a shift in focus over time (O'Donnell et al., 2018). For instance, Barker and Siryk (1980) investigated the relationships between college adjustment and attrition, connected with mental health services, grade point average and social activities and found that those constructs have effects on students' adjustments. Besides, Dennis et al. (2005) in recently years used the constructs of college adjustment as a primary outcome variable which represents a shift from college adjustment as a pure predictor and increased emphasis on university adjustment as a general level of ability or functioning that can be achieved and desirable. According to Wiley and Berman (2013), adjustment problems happen to first-year students because they are at the level of adolescent development. Correspondingly, Parker et al. (2003) echoed that the transition into university involves movement to a larger, more impersonal school structure; interaction with peers from more diverse geographical and sometimes more diverse ethnic backgrounds; and increased focus on achievement and its assessment (Santrock, 2004). It requires making new friends, modifying existing relationships with family members, and adjusting to the new academic environment. Friedlander et al., (2007). Brockelman and Scheyett (2015) and Brook and Willoughby (2016) noted that a lot of university students experience a significant amount of stress which interrupts their performance. Under such transitions, students seem to experience psychological consequences of stress, like anxiety, hopelessness, worry and tension (Majumdar & Ray, 2010). Indeed, it is observed that anxiety-type crises in first-year students tend to occur when adjustments must be made in life such as adapting to changes in social or family relationships or moving to a university. Therefore, Arjanggih and Kusumaningsih (2016) suggest that first-year students need to master how to set up a new social environment, develop an orientation based on the institution to where they are admitted, become productive members of the community in their university, and adjust to new roles and responsibilities. In a situation where students fail to cope under stressful circumstances, stress may lead to many other health-related problems such as anxiety, depression, the feeling of loneliness and despair (Yikealo et al., 2018). This call has an implication for both parents and high school counsellors to guide and empower students with resilient skills to help them cope in any situation they find themselves in if they are to succeed in university life that is full of adversities. Having deliberated on the introduction, the next section discusses the background.

## **Background Section**

As discussed in the introduction section, psychological adjustment is vital for anyone to prosper in life, let alone for a student who wants to excel academically at higher institutions of learning. Psychological adjustment challenges have been long researched, and scholars have identified stress, depression, anxiety, nervous, feeling tense, pain in the neck or shoulders and suffering from migraine headaches, inadequate resources, financial problems, fear of failure and academic overload e.g., tests and assignments (Ongori & Agolla, 2009; Topper, 2007); Keinan & Malach-Pines, 2007). In Hako and Shikongo's (2019) study, a considerable number of students (42.4%) expressed that they lack stress management skills and which affected their learning progress. Students felt that stress distracts them from learning eventually hampered their academic success. Sommer and Dumont's (2011) and Malefo's (2000) studies identified motivation, self-esteem, stress and their capabilities perceived stress and test anxiety, academic overload and performance, students' adjustment self-efficacy, mental distress, and high negative life

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