

# Managing Academic Stress during MBBS: The Role of the Foundation Course and Strategies to Support Late-Joining Students

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Medical students encounter difficulties during their transition process because of academic demands, unfamiliar educational settings, and their need to adapt socially and psychologically. The Foundation Course which the National Medical Commission (NMC) introduced under its Competency-Based Medical Education (CBME) curriculum aims to help students transition by teaching them study techniques and effective communication and professional behavior and stress relief methods and techniques for building social relationships.

**Materials and Methods:** The paper uses narrative review together with perspective-based methods to combine existing research on academic stress in medical training together with the implementation of CBME programs. The research includes both practical experience and organizational methods to discover deficiencies and create successful solutions for students who join the program late.

**Results:** Students who delay their admission process because they miss the Foundation Course face academic stress which occurs most frequently after they complete the national counseling process. The students show higher vulnerability to academic difficulties and emotional distress, and social integration problems. The Foundation Course helps students develop critical skills which enable them to navigate their academic journey with greater success. The gap between the two groups can be successfully closed through structured educational programs which include faculty mentorships and peer learning and flexible orientation programs and institutional assistance.

**Conclusion:** The medical colleges that accept students after their application period will cause students to miss their Foundation Course, which leads to both academic and emotional stress for first-year MBBS students. The implementation of adaptive and inclusive strategies which include modular orientation and mentorship and peer engagement will enable institutions to provide equal access to essential skills for their students. The CBME framework requires these methods to create a positive educational atmosphere which helps students develop their skills while studying.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic stress, MBBS students, Foundation Course, Late admissions, student well-being, mentorship.

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## INTRODUCTION

The move from high school to MBBS has been considered one of the hardest times in a medical student's academic life. The enormous amount of subject matter, the different ways of teaching, the high level of competition, together with the students' first encounters with sickness and death, are some of the aspects that make this stressful period so diverse.

Studies in India indicate that approximately, 60–70% of medical students experience moderate to severe academic stress, especially during the first academic year when foundational subjects and new social expectations come together.<sup>1–3</sup> Stress at this moment is associated with burnout, lack of focus, lower academic performance, disrupted sleep patterns, and emotional pain. These effects do not only pertain to education but also influence long-term health and the ability to perform health-care duties with understanding, lucidity, and professional integrity.<sup>2</sup>

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The NMC's introduction of a compulsory month-long Foundation Course is a responsive measure to the problems faced by students during the transition to the Competency-Based Medical Education (CBME) curriculum.<sup>4</sup> The course aims to do much more than just getting students acquainted with the campus: it is intended to establish their professional identity, build their ability to cope with difficulties, and prepare them with the necessary non-cognitive skills. Nevertheless, the increasing cases of delayed admissions caused by the national counseling schedules and the upgrading of seats have resulted in a situation

where a lot of students are starting their courses several weeks after the classes have opened. These latecomers do not get to participate in the major parts of the Foundation Course, which leads to academic confusion, poor social integration, and increased stress levels. There are studies that indicate the absence of participation in well-organized orientation programs hampers quick settling down and results in the student receiving no academic benefits in higher education.<sup>8</sup> Hence, it is essential to offer the support needed to late-comers as medical schools will not have to disrupt their regular teaching cycle.

In India, 60-70% of MBBS students are under moderate to severe stress due to the amount of academic work, the number of tests, the difficulty of adjusting, and the emotional pressure. The NMC has therefore created a one-month Foundation Course that will orient new students to medical college life, promote safety, professionalism, communication, time-management, and personal well-being.

This article discusses the nature of academic stress, coping strategies, and importantly how the Foundation Course helps minimize transitional stress, including practical solutions for students who join late and miss the Foundation Course.

### **Academic Stress in MBBS Students: Understanding the Landscape**

Medical students often encounter stressors that are unlike those in other undergraduate programs. First-year students dedicate multiple hours to learning challenging subjects which include anatomy and physiology and biochemistry because academic overload has emerged as the primary factor which impacts their studies. Adjusting to fast and sometimes chaotic college life is one of the biggest challenges for many students. They also have to cope with learning styles that are totally new to them, the anxiety of no fixed exams and self-learning methods that could take them a whole semester to get used to. To illustrate, students who were used to rote-learning methods at primary and secondary schools find it hard to make the transition to the new-style exams, which, on the contrary, put a premium on comprehension, practical use, and the showing of skills, i.e., nothing less than understanding, skills application, and demonstration.

The next feature of university life that is particularly taxing on students is the cut-throat competition that is always around. For instance, students who used to be top of the class in school might find themselves suddenly losing their inclinations and falling behind as compared to their bright 'new' contemporaries. This can lead to a fall in confidence. What's more, living away from home, being lonely, not sleeping well, and not having time to relax are all factors that add to mental strain. Research possesses that comparison with peers, fear of not succeeding, and lack of a clear path towards a professional future are all factors that can raise

stress levels even more.<sup>3,5</sup>

There is no denying that the Emotional Challenges - Clinical Exposure would be one such stressor that students have to deal with that would ultimately demand their slicing through the temptation to quit the profession. The mention of pain, seeing grief and communicating with patients and their families may, on the one hand, elicit dread, fear, and moral distress and, on the other, the question concerning the identification of one's own capability to endure the emotional pressure of the profession might arise. Ultimately, these stressors point out the necessity of providing early orientation, structured support, and skill-building to enhance resilience and psychological well-being.

### **Foundation Course as a Stress-Buffering Intervention**

The NMC Foundation Course is purposely made to bring relief to the academic and psychosocial transition into MBBS by introducing students to the expectations, values, and structure of medical training.<sup>4</sup> It contains the modules on orientation to the institution, early clinical exposure, communication skills, professional development, ethics, digital literacy, and stress management. The course is deliberately placed at the beginning of the academic year to help students adjust before coursework intensifies.

One of the strengths of the Foundation Course is its focus on making students familiar with academic processes.

Examples of a typical lecture, practical session, and small-group discussion one after another reduce doubts and fear. Linking physiology mechanisms to anatomical structures students who see how lecturers mesh cross-disciplinary concepts gain confidence in the MBBS curriculum. A mixed-methods evaluation from an Indian tertiary institution showed that students taking the Foundation Course were academically more adjusted, confident and less stressed during the transition.<sup>6</sup>

The Foundation course encourages social adjustment besides academics. Group work, campus visits, playing sports, and talking with peers are some of the activities that foster friendships among students. Studies demonstrate that students with solid peer support systems experience less psychological distress and are more academically engaged.<sup>7</sup> Mental health workshops, reflection exercises, and mindfulness practices facilitate the process of students recognizing their sources of stress and adopting healthy coping strategies at the beginning of their training. All these experiences combined lead to the formation of students' belongingness and their readiness for the demands of medical training.

### **The Foundation Course: A Bridge to Reduce the Transition Gap**

The transition from school to medical college is a highly taxing emotionally and academically phase for the new

MBBS students.

1. Get the students acquainted with the campus, hostels, faculty, and support systems.
2. Develop the necessary skills: communication, stress management, digital literacy, and professionalism.
3. Familiarize the CBME curriculum, the roles of a physician, and the expectations of medical training.
4. Provide students with time management, study skills, and peer interaction strategies.
5. Promote bonding, mental health awareness, and cultural sensitivity.

### How It Lowers Stress and Fills in the Gaps with Examples

#### 1. Orientation Takes Away the Fear of the Unknown

Newcomers from a school are generally worried about the following questions:

- “Where will I find the library?”
- “What are the procedures for the examinations?”

The Foundation Course provides the answers to these queries early on, thus eliminating fear and perplexity.

**Example:** A student who is aware of how to get to the educational materials is not as likely to be in a state of panic before the first internal assessment as the other students are.

#### 2. Creates Networks of Peer Support

Through group work, ice-breakers, sports, and reflective sessions, students get connected with each other.

**Example:** A shy first-year student might during group work find two best friends, thus making the loneliness felt when the actual MBBS classes begin less.

#### 3. Strengthens Study Skills

Sessions on note-making, concept mapping, and integrated learning help students manage difficult subjects.

**Example:** A student who learns the mind-mapping technique during the Foundation Course will not have trouble with renal physiology.

#### 4. Early Mental Health Awareness

The workshops impart knowledge about stress, coping styles, and campus support systems thus ensuring that students go for help at the earliest possible time.

**Example:** A student who knows the right place for counseling is less likely to be a silent sufferer during the exam weeks.

#### 5. Professional Identity Formation

The teaching of the “Role of a Doctor” along with the sessions on ethics and communication nurtures realistic expectations.

**Example:** Understanding that learning medicine is a marathon—not a race—reduces comparison and unhealthy competition.

### When Students Take Late Admission: Challenges and Solutions

In recent years, late admissions have become increasingly common due to seat upgradation, delayed counseling, or migration.

Many students join 2–4 weeks late, by which time the Foundation Course is nearly or fully completed.

**Without proper planning, these students may experience:**

- Academic disorientation,
- Poor peer bonding,
- Confusion about CBME expectations,
- Difficulty coping with the pace of regular classes,
- Higher stress and low confidence.

To address this, teachers and institutions can adopt a “Parallel, Compressed, and Integrated Foundation Program”.

### Ways to Complete Foundation Course for Newcomers

#### 1. Condensed Foundation Course (15-20 hours) on Weekends

Accelerated program that includes only the important topics:

- Orientation to the campus
- Ethical behavior and professionalism
- Fundamentals of communication
- Studying techniques
- Management of stress
- An overview of the curriculum
- Usage of digital tools (LMS, online portals, etc.)
- Language and culture sensitizing (if needed)

**For instance:** A new student who was not present during ICT sessions is taken through a Saturday workshop where he is shown how to access e-modules and recorded lectures.

#### 2. Give Recorded Videos or Online Modules

**Schools can provide:**

- Making of critical Foundation Course lectures

- Online handouts
- Self-learning tasks.

**Example:** A learner who was absent during the lecture "Role of a Doctor" can watch the recorded lecture and do a reflective writing task.

### 3. Assign Peer Mentors or Buddy Groups

Match every late beginner student with a senior or a small peer group.

**Example:** A buddy tells class timings, takes care of books, and shares notes thus, anxiety and confusion are lowered.

### 4. Embed Foundation Competencies in Regular Classes

Instructors can insert short 10–15-minute classes addressing:

- Communicating
- Ethics
- Time management
- Stress management

into morning block lectures and practicals.

**Example:** The very first anatomy tutorial is done, and the instructor briefly goes over effective study methods that would be suitable for new students.

### 5. Hold One-to-One Orientation Sessions

A brief orientation by a faculty mentor can provide immense clarity.

**Example:** A mentor helps the late student create a weekly timetable, reducing the feeling of being "left behind."

### 6. Provide Structured Worksheets for Self-Learning

Give late entrants:

- Campus map
- Study skill worksheets
- Stress management plan
- Professionalism case vignettes
- Reflection templates

**Example:** The student fills in the "My Stress Map" and has a chat with a mentor to pinpoint personal difficulties.

### 7. Flexibility in Attendance for Foundation Sessions

Colleges can permit:

- Completion of modules during the 1<sup>st</sup> 2–3 months
- Assignment submission according to a relaxed timeline

This way, the burden on latecomers is reduced.

### 8. Counseling Support for Late Joiners

The late-comers often sense that they are not part of the group.

A counseling session lasting only a few minutes can help with:

- Adjustment difficulties
- Exam phobia
- Peer influence
- Stress due to lagging behind

**Example:** The counselor offers a student who feels nervous because of his absence for 3-weeks the support and strategies to get through.

### How Teachers Can Support Late-Joining Students

#### 1. Avoid fast-paced teaching for the first two weeks.

Provide short recaps for all students—this helps both late entrants, and those still adjust.

#### 2. Share PPTs, notes, and assignment templates separately

This prevents students from feeling lost.

#### 3. Regular check-ins

A simple "How are you adjusting?" Telephone calls or text messages can enhance well-being.

#### 4. [Encourage active participation

Invite the students who join late to participate in group work, presentations, and clubs so that they can gain social confidence.

### The Evolving Problem of Late Admissions

One of the reasons for the necessity of the Foundation Course is that a considerable number of students get admission to medical colleges after its finishing. The recent years have seen a dramatic rise in this trend due to the lengthy NEET counseling, reshuffling of seats, allotment late, and transfers among states. Late comers very often arrive when the teaching formally has begun already, the classmates have formed in groups, and the students have received the basic orientation regarding the campus, teaching-learning processes, and the university's culture. Sometimes late-comers feel confused, anxious, and disconnected from social life. They might have a hard time going around the campus, recognizing the class expectations, or keeping up with the lecture content. Their classmates might already know the teaching styles, testing patterns, and resource materials which make it a disadvantage for late-comers. Research in higher education shows that students who do not attend early orientation have lower academic

performance and take longer to get adjusted to the new academic environments.<sup>8</sup> In medical training, the early competencies that students develop during their first year of studies serve as the foundation for their later educational progress. Educational institutions need to create adaptable teaching methods which allow students who arrive after the official start time to achieve the same essential skills as their fellow students.

### **Strategies to Support Late-Joining Students: Practical and Feasible Models**

Medical colleges need to establish fair learning environments through their orientation programs and mentorship systems and ongoing assistance services. The Foundation Course needs to operate on weekends as its main solution to teach late arrivals in a shorter program. The new students can learn all essential subjects through two or three 3-hour sessions which occur on consecutive weekends without disrupting their regular academic activities. This approach not only is feasible and resource-efficient but also is very effective as it guarantees the minimum necessary orientation to the students who are regular class members at the same time.

Another valuable approach is to make available recorded versions of the main sessions of the Foundation Course. In case institutions take note of lectures on "How to Study MBBS Subjects", "Introduction to the CBME Curriculum", or "Campus Safety Guidelines", newcomers will be able to watch these clips on their own and do reflective assignments. It enables them to take in the material at their own speed, which in turn lessens the stress linked to being days late for teaching.

Yet another is peer mentorship, which is considered one of the most effective ways to ease the passage. Connecting the incoming late student to a tutor from the upper or same-year group not only offers social acceptance, academic assistance, and emotional support but also fosters the development of friendships. Besides, the mentors will assist the new students in comprehending the class schedules, joining the study groups, getting around the library, sourcing the study materials, and making friends. Different interventional studies provide evidence that peer mentoring increases academic performance, lessens stress, and boosts first-year medical students<sup>9</sup> self-confidence.

Support to the students can be made even more personal through a one-to-one orientation session conducted by the faculty. During such a session, the mentors can talk about the expectations set by the institution, the criteria for internal assessment, the formats of exams, and the strategies of time management. They can also point out the necessary textbooks, online platforms, or anatomy videos that may help students in catching up. Students who receive personal attention experienced a decrease in their feelings of being alone and their doubts about their

circumstances. All the lost competencies from previous classes can be taught during normal class sessions. The faculty members can, for instance, briefly touch upon the subjects of reflective practice, professionalism, ethics, or communication during the early anatomy or physiology sessions. The ultra-short sessions deliver essential learning material to latecomers without requiring them to attend multiple additional sessions. The process of counseling support services delivers vital assistance to students. The newcomers experience overwhelming challenges because they must adjust to their new surroundings while trying to catch up with their academic work. A short counseling session helps students reduce their emotional distress while teaching them coping skills and connecting them with peer support networks. The institution that offers early psychological support has assured the newcomers have academic and emotional outcomes that are better.<sup>5</sup> The high prevalence of moderate to severe stress among MBBS students in India has emerged as a recognized problem which has resulted in the development of multiple initiatives and recommended methods for stress management. The primary sources of student stress include academic demands, heavy coursework, examination requirements, and emotional conditions.

### **Coping Strategies for Students**

#### **Individual strategies can significantly help manage stress levels**

The following individual strategies provide effective methods to help people control their stress levels:

- The Time Management system requires users to develop their schedules through planner or digital calendar tools while they execute their tasks and identify their most important assignments. Users should divide their major projects into smaller tasks which they can complete through their systematic work process.
- The Healthy Lifestyle approach requires people to sleep between 7 and 9 hours per day while they eat nutritious meals and practice active exercise through yoga and sports which serve as natural methods to reduce stress.
- Mindfulness and Relaxation techniques include deep breathing exercises and meditation and guided imagery methods which help people achieve mental peace and better concentration skills.
- Social Support requires users to establish a strong support network through their relationships with friends and family and their connections with peers. People who share their problems with others who understand them will receive emotional comfort and a feeling of connection with those who understand them.
- The Set Boundaries method enables people to refuse

extra work while they create time for their hobbies and relaxation activities which help them achieve their desired equilibrium between work and personal time.

- The Positive Mindset method enables people to develop self-acceptance through self-kindness and positive self-communication while they acknowledge their minor milestones and treat obstacles as chances to develop their abilities.<sup>10-12</sup>

### **Institutional Support and Resources**

Many medical institutions and government programs offer resources to help:

- **On-Campus Counselling:** Many colleges provide confidential counselling services and wellness clinics staffed by psychologists or psychiatrists.
- **Academic Advising and Mentorship:** Seeking guidance from mentors and professors can ease academic burdens and provide professional advice.
- The combination of sports activities and cultural events and student organizations enable students to create social connections while taking necessary breaks from their academic work. The Indian government has created national helplines which provide instant assistance to people who need help.
- The National Tele Mental Health Programme (Tele MANAS) operates free tele-counseling services which deliver 24-hour support in multiple languages. You can reach them through the toll-free numbers 14416 and 1800-89-14416.
- The treatment of serious and ongoing problems requires professional help from a general practitioner or psychologist or psychiatrist. The act of seeking help demonstrates strength instead of showing weakness.<sup>13-15</sup>

### **Strengthening the Foundation Course: From Orientation to Longitudinal Support**

The Foundation Course serves as an essential component which helps students transition into the MBBS program according to the requirements of the Competency-Based Medical Education (CBME) framework. The Foundation Course needs maintenance because different student entrance patterns exist at various institutions while institutions lack necessary resources to support their entire academic programs.

### **Identified Gaps in Current Implementation**

The Foundation Course operates through a well-established framework, yet it encounters multiple operational difficulties:

- The program requires students to complete their training within a fixed one-month timeframe which

prevents late-joining students from participating in the program

- Institutions differ in their available resources and faculty staff members
- Students have restricted ways to reinforce their Foundation competencies after they finish the course
- The institution lacks effective systems to observe student progress during the period after orientation
- The gaps in the program design lead to reduced effectiveness of the Foundation Course while making late joiners vulnerable to academic stress and social isolation.

### **A Strengthened Model: Parallel, Compressed, and Integrated Foundation Program**

The solution to the existing problems requires a three-part enhancement model which needs to be implemented.

#### **1. Parallel Foundation Program**

Institutions need to conduct Foundation programs together with their regular classes for students who arrive after their scheduled start time. The program enables students to develop crucial skills in communication and professionalism and digital literacy and stress management which are essential for their academic success.

#### **2. Compressed Foundation Program**

The program delivers essential academic content through 15-20 hours which students can access during weekend sessions. The program operates efficiently because it requires minimal resources which educational institutions can implement without needing additional faculty staff.

#### **3. Integrated Foundation Program**

The essential Foundation competencies must be taught through all initial academic courses which students will study throughout their educational program. The anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry sessions deliver short reflective exercises which develop professionalism and communication skills while reinforcing fundamental values.

### **Faculty and Peer Support Systems Need Development**

The Foundation Course needs stronger faculty support which should continue after initial training. The faculty mentors need to monitor students who need assistance with their adjustment problems. The system needs to provide academic and social support through structured peer mentorship and buddy systems. The system requires regular check-ins during the first 6-8 weeks of the MBBS program. Academic stress decreases among first-year medical students when they participate in peer mentorship programs which also boost their confidence while creating a sense of community between their peers. First-year

medical students who participate in peer mentorship programs experience decreased academic stress while their confidence levels increase and they develop a connection with their fellow students.

### Digital and Blended Learning to Strengthen Access

Educational institutions should implement blended learning systems which combine multiple teaching methods:

- The Foundation Course needs educational institutions to provide students with recorded lectures, online study skills modules and ethics modules and stress management modules.
- The system needs to use reflective assignments together with self-assessment tools for its operations.
- Students can study Foundation content through digital delivery because they can choose their own study schedule and the system enables latecomers to participate.

### Counseling and Well-Being Integration

The Foundation Course requires formal establishment of mental health support services which need to be integrated into the course. Students who first encounter counseling services and stress-mapping exercises and wellness resources will develop normal help-seeking behaviors because these resources reduce their stigma. Students who experience entry-related stress require this resource. The Foundation Course exists as an institutional obligation which medical colleges must fulfill instead of treating it as a temporary obligation.

### Institutional Accountability and Equity

The institution needs to provide all students with the basic competencies which must be accessible to everyone who enters the program at any time according to the central principles of CBME which focus on learner needs and the need for complete development.

### CONCLUSION

The rigors and stressors of the academic world are unavoidable, but with the proper built-in support, and mentoring right from the beginning, the impact of these stressors can be less serious. The Foundation Course is therefore a most essential intervention for minimizing stressful transition, contributing to the formation of a professional identity, as well as the readiness of the students for the CBME curriculum. The growing trend of late admissions requires, however, that time and inclusiveness, and test-based practices be applied to the situation so that all learners through the different admissions dates can have equal access to the basic curricular competencies. The approaches included are extensive weekend sessions, recorded classes, peer mentors actively

engaged, competencies made part of normal classes, and counseling support all of which are the practical ways that medical institutions can make use of without having to alter academic timings. These elements protect student health while enhancing their performance and professional development through their ability to reduce stress and chaotic situations. The medical school approach provides all students with the required support to develop their medical competencies through a system that uses well-planned methods to create a student-friendly environment. The Foundation Course requires its future implementation to create delivery methods which permit educational programs to work together with existing systems. The program needs to be treated as a complete educational system which should be delivered throughout the entire duration of its operation.

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