

Comprehensive support for blind and visually impaired students: integrating psychotherapy to overcome academic stress – experience of Vladimir State University

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Abstract

This article examines the potential of a comprehensive support framework to address academic stress and promote successful adaptation among students with visual impairments during their higher education journey. Drawing on a decade-long experience (2015–2025) of inclusive education for students with sensory impairments at Vladimir State University, the study analyzes the multifaceted dimensions of psychological, pedagogical, social, and psychotherapeutic support implemented across all educational stages. A mixed-methods approach, involving surveys, psychological testing (e.g., the Academic Stress Test and Strategic Approach to Coping Scale questionnaire), and observational data from 20 students, was employed to assess stress levels and coping mechanisms. The findings indicate that while psychological consultations and pedagogical interventions effectively mitigate stress for many students, approximately one-fifth of senior students exhibit persistent high stress levels, highlighting the limitations of standard support. This underscores the necessity of integrating targeted psychotherapeutic interventions, including existential-humanistic, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral approaches, and innovative art therapy methods (e.g., beading and scrapbooking), which have demonstrated significant potential in reducing stress, enhancing self-actualization, and fostering social integration. These results contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education and offer practical insights for designing tailored support systems to address the complex socio-psychological needs of visually impaired students.

Keywords: blind and visually impaired students; academic stress; psychotherapy; comprehensive support.

Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a transformative framework, offering blind and visually impaired students unprecedented opportunities to pursue modern, promising professions that were historically inaccessible due to societal and educational barriers. However, this shift toward inclusivity places significant demands on these students, requiring not only robust academic preparation but also substantial self-effort to navigate the complexities of higher education. Beyond cognitive and technical skills, these students face unique psychological challenges, necessitating readiness for self-organization, self-actualization, and the development of effective communication skills to engage with diverse academic and social environments [1]. Recent research highlights that one of the primary obstacles to self-actualization among students with disabilities is a chronic lack of internal psychological resources, which they

often mitigate through external social support from peers, educators, and institutional frameworks. This reliance on external support is compounded by an insufficient alignment of their current activities with long-term career aspirations and life prospects, further exacerbating their vulnerability to stress [2].

Students with visual impairments frequently report heightened fatigue and emotional exhaustion, with the majority experiencing stress directly linked to the learning process, including challenges such as inaccessible materials, high academic workloads, and difficulties in social integration. This stress can impede their psychological well-being and academic success, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems that address both practical and emotional needs. In this framework, psychotherapeutic interventions provide effective strategies to strengthen resilience and promote

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Challenge	1st Year (%)	4th Year (%)
High academic workload	100	50
Fear of the future	80	55
Living away from parents	75	20
Problems in personal life	70	50
Strict instructors	60	30
Shyness, timidity	55	40
Inability to properly organize daily routines	50	20
Irregular meals	50	30
Inability to manage limited finances	50	20
Unclear or unengaging electronic textbooks	20	20
Lack of textbooks in Braille	25	13.3
Lack of motivation to study or disappointment in chosen profession	20	13.3
Challenges of cohabitation with other students	10	6.7
Overly serious attitude toward studies	5	-
Conflicts within the group	-	6.7

Table 1. Socio-pedagogical and psychological challenges of blind students

adaptation, overcoming visual impairment-related barriers while cultivating a sense of personal agency. The experience of Vladimir State University, which began integrating blind students into its programs in 2015, provides a valuable case study to explore how tailored psychological, pedagogical, social, and psychotherapeutic support can mitigate these challenges, setting the stage for a deeper investigation into effective strategies for overcoming academic stress in this population.

Academic stress among blind and visually impaired students

Vladimir State University named after Alexander Grigoryevich and Nikolai Grigoryevich Stoletov (VSU) began admitting blind students in 2015. From 2015 to 2025, the Humanitarian Institute of VSU enrolled 20 students aged 18 to 25 with varying degrees of visual impairment. Of these, 2 dropped out in their first year, 1 in their third year, 14 graduated with bachelor's degrees, and 4 are currently pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees. In total, 17 students were successfully adapted during their studies. These students face numerous challenges during their studies. We investigated academic stress among blind and visually impaired first-year

students and their primary coping strategies.

Most blind students experience academic stress, which intensifies during tests and exams, particularly among first-year students. Stress levels among fourth-year students are somewhat lower. High stress levels, observed in 35% of blind and visually impaired first-year students, decrease to 20% by the fourth year. Conversely, 10% of students with low stress levels become more anxious over time (low stress decreases from 30% to 20%). The proportion of students with moderate stress levels increases fourfold over the course of their studies, from 15% to 60%. Let us examine the factors contributing to academic stress among students with visual impairments*.

Many barriers faced by blind and visually impaired students stem from a lack of independent living skills, underdeveloped abilities to manage finances, allocate time, and care for themselves. Over half of first-year students perceive instructors' expectations — aligned with those for sighted students — as excessive, viewing instructors as overly strict. Limited computer literacy among students impedes their ability to access and use electronic educational materials effectively. Fully blind students would prefer textbooks in Braille. Both at the beginning and end of their studies, most students

* The survey included 20 students. Data were collected using the "Academic Stress Test" by Yu. V. Shcherbatykh [3] and the "Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS)" questionnaire, adapted by N. Vodopyanova and E. Starchenkova.

fear their future. For first-year students, this fear is tied to studying, independent living, and navigating new environments, while graduates fear unemployment or failing to meet professional demands.

A distinct group of challenges includes personal issues, which slightly decrease by the fourth year for some students but intensify for others, such as anxiety related to studies and job searches, as well as inadequate self-esteem. The most persistent challenges throughout their education are low interactive communication skills and heightened fatigue among all students.

Surveys of instructors, observations, and testing of students with visual impairments reveal that they tend to communicate primarily with each other or select peers, avoid initiating conversations, express requests through intermediaries, and prefer chatting online over face-to-face interaction. These students typically attend group psychological consultations by invitation; 20% sought individual psychological support, while 80% believed they could manage their challenges independently. These findings align with studies on sighted students [4].

Comprehensive support for blind and visually impaired students

Psychological and pedagogical support helps reduce academic stress, including group and individual psychological consultations, advanced computer literacy training, methodological assistance from instructors, peer support, and improved time management skills. At our university, blind and visually impaired students receive comprehensive psychological, pedagogical, and social support through the Research and Educational Center for Inclusive Education, established at the Department of Personality Psychology and Special Pedagogy. Developmental activities are conducted in various formats, such as:

- Communication training sessions;
- Viewing films and plays with audio descriptions;
- Visiting museums with tactile exhibits;
- Participating in accessible excursions designed for visually impaired individuals, featuring audio guides, audio descriptions, and tactile models of monuments and historical buildings;
- Rehearsals and staging of plays;
- Participating in beading and scrapbooking workshops, and university cultural events.

Our observations indicate that social support for blind and visually impaired first-year students significantly reduces academic stress and improves adaptation. The university provides an accessible

architectural environment, enabling blind students to navigate academic buildings and reside in specially equipped dormitory blocks. Regular training is conducted for university staff — security personnel, librarians, and cafeteria workers — on assisting blind students. The inclusive university environment and joint education with sighted students foster interaction and effective social adaptation [5]. Volunteers assist blind students by escorting them to classes, medical facilities, and key city institutions. They are also prepared to support them throughout their academic journey by assisting with the formatting of written assignments and jointly attending engaging events.

However, we observed that one-fifth of blind and visually impaired senior students continue to experience high levels of academic stress. Therefore, alongside psychological and pedagogical support, we have provided these students with access to psychotherapeutic assistance based on existential-humanistic, psychodynamic, and cognitive-behavioral approaches, as well as art therapy, which has proven with us highly effective and shown significant potential in working with blind students.

We incorporated art therapy methods into the psychological support activities conducted by psychologists, group supervisors, and instructors from the Department of Personality Psychology and Special Pedagogy. For instance, beading is one of the diverse applications of art therapy in our work with blind students. Students choose the object to bead based on their preferences, such as recalling flowers they saw before losing their sight. They verbally describe the flower's image, size, color, and associated emotions while receiving assistance in selecting beads and techniques. Another example of art-therapeutic support is scrapbooking, in which two of our blind students participated. They used pre-made shapes to attach to cards, choosing themes such as figurines of people and animals, flowers, bows, beads, and buttons, and they learned basic composition techniques, assisted by sighted students.

Engaging in collaborative activities, such as beading and scrapbooking workshops, not only fostered closer relationships with peers through meaningful exchanges like sharing tactile cards with classmates but also provided a therapeutic outlet for emotional expression and social integration. By incorporating psychotherapeutic assistance into the comprehensive support system for students with visual impairments, we observed a multifaceted positive impact on their psychological well-being and academic journey. Specifically, psychotherapeutic interventions significantly reduced academic stress levels, as evidenced by

a decrease in reported anxiety during high-pressure periods like exams.

These interventions facilitated adaptation by helping students navigate the unique challenges of higher education, such as inaccessible learning environments and social isolation, thereby fostering a stronger sense of belonging and resilience. Moreover, psychotherapeutic support enhanced self-actualization, empowering students to explore their potential, set personal goals, and develop a clearer sense of identity despite their visual impairments. Interactive communication skills were markedly improved, with students demonstrating greater confidence in initiating conversations, expressing their needs directly, and engaging with diverse peer groups, moving away from their initial tendencies to rely on intermediaries or online communication. Self-organization skills also saw substantial growth, as students learned to better manage their time, finances, and daily routines, reducing the burden of independent living challenges.

The integration of art therapy, such as creating tactile cards, proved particularly effective in addressing underlying emotional barriers, allowing students to process past traumas and build emotional resilience in a safe, creative space. Over the long term, these interventions not only supported immediate academic success but also laid the foundation for sustained psychological growth, equipping students with the tools to face future professional and personal challenges with greater confidence and autonomy.

Conclusions

This study underscores the critical need for a multifaceted support system for blind and visually impaired students during their higher education, encompassing psychological, pedagogical, social, and psychotherapeutic interventions. Our findings demonstrate that academic stress, particularly pronounced among first-year students, significantly impacts their adaptation and overall well-being. While psychological and pedagogical support, such as group consultations and communication training, effectively mitigates stress for many students, a notable proportion continues to experience high levels of academic stress, necessitating more targeted interventions.

The integration of psychotherapeutic assistance into the comprehensive support framework proved to be a pivotal factor in addressing the socio-psychological challenges faced by these students. Specifically, psychotherapeutic approaches, including existential-humanistic, psychodynamic, and cognitive-behavioral methods, alongside art therapy,

have shown considerable promise in reducing academic stress, enhancing self-organization, and fostering interactive communication skills. Art therapy, in particular, emerged as a powerful tool, which not only alleviated stress but also facilitated social integration by encouraging collaboration with sighted peers and volunteers. These activities enabled students to express emotions, recall sensory experiences, and build meaningful connections, thereby supporting their psychological adaptation and self-actualization.

Social support, including volunteer assistance and an inclusive university environment, played a complementary role in reducing stress and improving adaptation, especially during the initial stages of education. Volunteers provided practical help, such as escorting students and formatting educational materials, which alleviated some of the logistical challenges associated with visual impairments. Additionally, the university's accessible architectural environment and staff training further contributed to creating a supportive ecosystem for these students.

However, the persistence of personal challenges, such as fear of the future, low interactive communication, and heightened fatigue, indicates that for students with more complex socio-psychological issues, such as anxiety related to employment prospects or inadequate self-esteem, psychotherapeutic support becomes critical. To further enhance support systems, we recommend the following practical steps:

- incorporating regular psychotherapeutic sessions into the academic support framework, particularly for students exhibiting high stress levels;
- expanding art therapy programs to include a broader range of sensory-based activities tailored to individual needs;
- providing specialized training for educators and volunteers on the psychological needs of blind and visually impaired students; and
- fostering peer mentorship programs to strengthen social bonds and communication skills.

Additionally, future research should explore the long-term effects of psychotherapeutic interventions on academic and professional outcomes for these students, as well as investigate the efficacy of specific methods in addressing stress in this population. By adopting a more integrative and personalized approach, higher education institutions can better support the psychological well-being and academic success of blind and visually impaired students, ultimately empowering them to navigate their educational and professional journeys with greater confidence and resilience.

Declaration of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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