



International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

ISSN Print: 2618-0723
 ISSN Online: 2618-0731
 NAAS Rating (2026): 5.04
 IJAESD 2026; 9(9): 1036-1041
www.extensionjournal.com
 Received: 28-06-2026
 Accepted: 09-08-2026
 Published: 28-09-2026

Mounika L

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community Science, UAS Dharwad, Karnataka, India

Prema B. Patil

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community Science, UAS Dharwad, Karnataka, India

Mental health of commuter and non-commuter married couples

Mounika L¹, Prema B. Patil²

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2026.v9.i9n.4312>

ABSTRACT

The present study assessed the mental health of commuter and non-commuter married couples and examined the association and predictive influence of selected personal, familial and commuting-related factors. An exploratory, differential and correlational design was adopted among 100 married couples, comprising 50 commuter and 50 non-commuter couples, in Dharwad, Karnataka. Mental health was assessed using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). Data was analysed using frequency, percentage, correlation and multiple regression analysis. Commuter couples exhibited comparatively poorer mental health, with 55 per cent reporting moderate depression, 75 per cent moderate anxiety and 36 per cent moderate stress. Among non-commuter couples, 67 per cent were normal, 50 per cent had mild anxiety and 94 per cent were normal. Significant associations were observed between mental health and selected personal and familial factors. Regression analysis identified occupation, duration of commutation, mode of commutation and monthly income as predictors of depression; gender, duration of commutation, mode of commutation and monthly income as predictors of anxiety; and frequency of reunion and monthly income as predictors of stress among commuter couples. Among non-commuter couples, education, occupation, number of children, and gender of children emerged as important predictors.

Keywords: Commuter couples, Non-commuter couples, Mental health, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, DASS-21

Introduction

Marriage is an important social institution that provides emotional companionship, social support and shared responsibility. However, changes in employment patterns, occupational mobility and the increasing need to travel for employment have contributed to the emergence of commuter marriages. In such relationships, spouses may maintain separate residences or spend substantial periods apart because of work-related geographical separation.

Unlike non-commuter couples who generally share the same residence and daily routines, commuter couples need to coordinate marital, family and occupational responsibilities across geographical locations. Physical separation can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction and shared daily experiences and may create additional demands related to communication, household responsibilities, childcare and emotional adjustment.

The psychological implications of commuting have received increasing attention. A systematic review by Liu *et al.* (2022) [1], based on 45 studies, found that commuting characteristics such as duration and mode were associated with experiential and general mental health and that adverse effects of commuting could spill over into home and work life.

Research specifically examining long-distance relationships has also indicated differences in mental health according to relationship proximity. Puranachaikere *et al.* (2021) [2], using data from 7,145 respondents in East Asia, found that participants in proximal relationships reported better overall mental health than those in long-distance relationships.

Further, a review specifically addressing commuting and partnership/family life noted that commuting may have consequences for health, partnership and family life, particularly among dual-career couples and long-distance commuters. Despite these findings, there remains a need to examine mental health among married couples experiencing work-related geographical separation within the Indian context. Therefore, the present study focused on the mental health of commuter and non-commuter married couples in Dharwad city.

Objectives

1. To assess the levels of mental health among commuter and non-commuter married couples.
2. To assess the interrelationship between independent variables and mental health of commuter and non-commuter married couples.

Corresponding Author: Mounika L

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Community Science, UAS Dharwad, Karnataka, India

3. To identify the predictors of mental health among commuter and non-commuter married couples.

Materials and methods

An exploratory, differential and correlational research design was adopted for the study. The study was conducted in Dharwad city, *Karnataka*, during the academic year 2025–2026. The study population comprised married couples residing in Dharwad city. A purposive sample of 100 married couples (200 individuals), consisting of 50 commuter couples and 50 non-commuter couples, was selected. Both partners from each couple were included in the study. The inclusion criteria were married couples in which both partners were working, with commuter couples having experienced work-related geographical separation for at least one year.

A General Information Schedule was used to collect information on selected personal, and family characteristics. Mental health was assessed using the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) developed by *Lovibond et al. (1995)* [3]. The independent variables considered in the study included age, gender, education, occupation, age at marriage, duration of commutation, frequency of reunion,

mode of commutation, number of children, age and gender of children, type of family and monthly income.

The selected tools were pretested before the main data collection to assess their reliability and validity. Data was collected through both physical questionnaires and online Google Forms. Eligible participants were identified through local community networks and workplace contacts and were screened according to the inclusion criteria. The purpose and procedure of the study were explained to the participants, and voluntary participation was ensured. Adequate privacy and sufficient time were provided for completing the questionnaires.

The collected data was coded, tabulated and analysed using appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the sample characteristics. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationships between selected independent variables and depression, anxiety and stress. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to identify significant predictors of depression, anxiety and stress among commuter and non-commuter married couples.

Results

(*N* = 200)

Table 1. Demographic profile of commuter and non-commuter couples

S. No	Characteristics	Category	Commuter (<i>n</i> = 100)		Non-commuter (<i>n</i> = 100)	
			F	%	F	%
1	Age (yrs)	21-30	14	14.00	11	11.00
		31-40	53	53.00	47	47.00
		41-50	22	22.00	23	23.00
		51-60	11	11.00	19	19.00
2	Gender	Male	50	50.00	50	50.00
		Female	50	50.00	50	50.00
3	Education	10 th class pass but < Graduation	5	5.00	8	8.00
		Graduation	57	57.00	64	64.00
		Post graduation (non-technical incl. Ph.D)	20	20.00	23	23.00
		Professional qualification with technical degree or diploma	18	18.00	5	5.00
4	Occupation	Service in private sector or independent business (employing 2-20 persons)	62	62.00	63	63.00
		Service in central/state/public sector	38	38.00	37	37.00
5	Age at marriage (yrs)	21- 25	71	71.00	61	61.00
		26- 30	25	25.00	34	34.00
		31- 35	4	4.00	5	5.00
6	Number of children	1- 2	86	86.00	90	90.00
		3- 4	14	14.00	10	10.00
7	Age of children (yrs)	< 10	50	50.00	46	46.00
		10- 20	38	38.00	28	28.00
		> 20	12	12.00	26	26.00
8	Gender of children	Only Male	32	32.00	26	26.00
		Only Female	10	10.00	18	18.00
		Both Male and Female	58	58.00	56	56.00
9	Type of family	Joint family	32	32.00	40	40.00
		Nuclear family	68	68.00	60	60.00
10	Monthly Income	> 50000	73	73.00	37	37.00
		20000-49999	27	27.00	63	63.00
11	Duration of commutation (Hrs)	< 3	30	30.00	-	-
		3- 6	26	26.00	-	-
		> 6	44	44.00	-	-

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S. No	Characteristics	Category	Commuter (n = 100)		Non-commuter (n = 100)	
			F	%	F	%
12	Frequency of reunion	Twice in a week	16	16.00	-	-
		Once in a week	20	20.00	-	-
		Once in fortnight	22	22.00	-	-
		Once in a month	26	26.00	-	-
		Once in 2 months	16	16.00	-	-
13	Mode of commutation	Own transport	58	58.00	-	-
		Public transport	42	42.00	-	-

Distribution of respondents according to their age, gender, education, occupation, age at marriage, duration of commutation, frequency of reunion, mode of commutation, number of children, age of children, gender of children, type of family and monthly income are presented in Table 1.

With respect to age, more than half (53.00%) of commuter couples were in 31–40 yrs age group, followed by 41–50 yrs (22.00%), 21–30 yrs (14.00%) and 51–60 yrs (11.00%). On the other hand, among non-commuter couples, around 47.00 per cent were in the 31–40 yrs age group followed by 41–50 yrs (23.00%), 51–60 yrs (19.00%) and 21–30 yrs (11.00%). In terms of gender, an equal proportion (50.00%) of commuter couples comprised males and females. Similarly, among non-commuter couples, 50.00 per cent were males and 50.00 per cent were females. Regarding educational qualification, more than half (57.00%) of commuter couples were graduates, followed by 20.00 per cent postgraduates, 18.00 per cent professionally qualified with technical degree or diploma and 5.00 per cent 10th class pass but below graduation. Further, among non-commuter couples, majority were graduates (64.00%), followed by postgraduates (23.00%), 10th class pass but below graduation (8.00%) and professionally qualified with technical degree or diploma (5.00%).

In terms of occupation, more than half (62.00%) of commuter couples were engaged in service in the private sector or independent business, while 38.00 per cent were employed in the central/state/public sector. Similarly, among non-commuter couples, more than half (63.00%) were engaged in service in the private sector or independent business, whereas 37.00 per cent were employed in the central/state/public sector. With respect to age at marriage, about two third (71.00%) of commuter couples were married between 21–25 yrs, followed by 26–30 yrs (25.00%) and 4.00 per cent were between 31–35 yrs. While among non-commuter couples, more than half (61.00%) were married between 21–25 yrs, followed by 26–30 yrs (34.00%) and 31–35 yrs (5.00%). Regarding number of children, majority (86.00%) of commuter couples had 1–2 children, while 14.00 per cent had 3–4 chil-

dren. Likewise, among non-commuter couples, majority (90.00%) had 1–2 children, whereas 10.00 per cent had 3–4 children.

With respect to age of children, half (50.00%) of the commuter couples had children aged below 10 yrs, followed by 10–20 yrs (38.00%) and 12.00 per cent had children above 20 yrs. On the other hand, among non-commuter couples, nearly half (46.00%) had children aged below 10 yrs, followed by 10–20 yrs (28.00%) and above 20 yrs (26.00%). In terms of gender of children, more than half (58.00%) of commuter couples had both male and female children, followed by only male children (32.00%) and only female children (10.00%). Similarly, among non-commuter couples, more than half (56.00%) had both male and female children, followed by only male children (26.00%) and only female children (18.00%).

With respect to type of family, about two third (68.00%) of commuter couples belonged to nuclear families, followed by joint families (32.00%). On the other hand, among non-commuter couples, more than half (60.00%) belonged to nuclear families, while 40.00 per cent belonged to joint families. With regard to monthly income of family, majority (73.00%) of commuter couples had an income of above Rs. 50,000, while 27.00 per cent had an income between Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 49,999. While among non-commuter couples, more than half (63.00%) had an income between Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 49,999, whereas 37.00 per cent had an income of above Rs. 50,000. With respect to duration of commutation, 44.00 per cent reported commuting for 6–9 hrs per day, followed by 30.00 per cent who commuted for less than 3 hrs, while 26.00 per cent reported a commuting duration of more than 6 hrs. In terms of frequency of reunion, one fourth (26.00%) of commuter couples reunited once in a month, followed by once in a fortnight (22.00%), once in a week (20.00%), twice in a week (16.00%) and once in two months (16.00%). Regarding mode of commutation, more than half (58.00%) of commuter couples used their own transport, while 42.00 per cent used public transport.

(N = 200)

Table 2. Classification of commuter and non-commuter couples by levels of mental health

Variables	Category	Commuter (n = 100)		Non-commuter (n = 100)	
		F	%	F	%
Depression	Normal	18	18.00	67	67.00
	Mild	27	27.00	23	23.00
	Moderate	55	55.00	10	10.00
Anxiety	Normal	23	23.00	16	16.00
	Mild	2	2.00	50	50.00
	Moderate	75	75.00	34	34.00
Stress	Normal	35	35.00	94	94.00
	Mild	29	29.00	6	6.00
	Moderate	36	36.00	-	-

Table 2 presents the classification of commuter and non-commuter couples according to their levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. In terms of depression, more than half (55.00%) of commuter couples reported moderate depression followed by mild depression (27.00%) and normal (18.00%). On the other hand, among non-commuter cou-

ples, about two third (67.00%) reported to be normal followed by mild (23.00%) and moderate depression (10.00%). With regard to anxiety, three fourth (75.00%) of commuter couples reported moderate anxiety, followed by 23.00 per cent normal and mild anxiety

(2.00%). In contrast, among non-commuter couples, half of the respondents (50.00%) reported mild anxiety, followed by moderate anxiety (34.00%) and normal (16.00%). Regarding stress, about one third (36.00%) of commuter couples reported moderate stress, followed by

normal (35.00%) and mild stress (29.00%). Likewise, among non-commuter couples, majority reported to be normal (94.00%), followed by mild stress (6.00%), while none of the non-commuter couples reported moderate stress.

Table 3. Correlation between independent variables and mental health among commuter and non-commuter couples

Independent variables	Mental health					
	Commuter couples			Non-commuter couples		
	Depression	Anxiety	Stress	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Age	-0.286**	-0.244*	0.307**	0.073	-0.177	0.228*
Gender	0.036	-0.185	-0.081	-0.135	0.100	-0.084
Education	-0.237*	0.038	0.065	-0.174	-0.037	0.157
Occupation	-0.389**	-0.236*	0.327**	0.065	0.029	-0.019
Age at marriage	0.320**	0.354**	-0.264**	-0.105	-0.218*	0.020
Number of children	-0.129	-0.045	-0.126	-0.163	-0.128	-0.064
Age of children	-0.142	-0.260**	0.273**	0.027	-0.066	0.222*
Gender of children	0.109	0.012	-0.004	0.033	0.238	0.058
Type of family	-0.012	-0.112	0.004	0.062	0.115	0.074
Monthly Income	-0.392**	-0.349**	0.411**	-0.007	-0.016	0.027
Duration of commutation	-0.140	-0.018	-0.084	-	-	-
Frequency of reunion	-0.257**	-0.224*	0.040	-	-	-
Mode of commutation	0.228*	0.211*	-0.047	-	-	-

**Significant at 0.01 level *Significant at 0.05 level

Table 3 presents the correlation between independent variables and mental health among commuter and non-commuter couples. Among commuter couples, age, education, occupation, age at marriage, age of children, monthly income, frequency of reunion and mode of com-

mutation showed significant associations with selected mental health dimensions. Among non-commuter couples, significant associations were observed mainly with age, age at marriage and age of children.

Table 4. Predictor variables of depression among commuter and non-commuter couples

Predictors	Commuter couples				Non-commuter couples			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value
Personal factors								
Age	-0.019	-0.181	-0.137	-0.866	0.135	1.182	0.340	1.735
Gender	0.021	0.243	0.023	0.253	-0.141	-1.307	-0.117	-1.074
Education	-0.132	-1.549	-0.084	-0.978	-0.155	-1.526	-0.184	-1.793*
Occupation	-0.256	-2.677*	-0.300	-3.063*	0.088	0.860	0.092	0.867
Age at marriage	-0.220	-2.000*	-0.127	-1.085	-0.221	-1.884*	-0.307	-2.337*
Duration of commutation	0.319	3.303*	0.327	3.384*	-	-	-	-
Frequency of reunion	-0.188	-2.090*	-0.106	-1.103	-	-	-	-
Mode of commutation	-0.245	-2.871*	-0.235	-2.701*	-	-	-	-
Familial factors								
Number of children			-0.036	-0.343			-0.256	-2.202*
Age of children			0.176	1.250			-0.119	-0.684
Gender of children			0.011	0.120			-0.038	-0.359
Type of family			-0.070	-0.613			-0.044	-0.388
Monthly Income			-0.253	-2.530*			0.058	0.553
F-Value	6.41**		4.86**		2.71*		3.53*	
R Value	0.600		0.651		0.291		0.384	
R ² Value	0.360		0.424		0.085		0.147	

**Significant at 0.01 level *Significant at 0.05 level

Table 4 represents the predictor variables of depression among commuter and non-commuter couples. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that the predictor variables explained 42.4 per cent of the variance in depression among commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.424$), com-

pared with 14.7 per cent among non-commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.147$). In the final model, occupation and duration of commutation significantly predicted depression among commuters, while education, age

at marriage and number of children were significant predictors among non-commuters.

Table 5 presents the predictor variables of anxiety among commuter and non-commuter couples. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that the predictors explained 32.4 per cent of the variance in anxiety among commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.324$) and 32.3 per cent among non-

commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.323$). In the final model, gender, duration and mode of commutation, and monthly income were significant predictors of anxiety among commuter couples, while gender of children was the significant predictor among non-commuter couples.

Table 6. Predictor variables of stress among commuter and non-commuter couples

Table 5. Predictor variables of anxiety among commuter and non-commuter couples

Predictors	Commuter couples				Non-commuter couples			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value
Personal factors								
Age	-0.151	-1.325	-0.047	-0.272	-0.101	-0.877	-0.061	-0.313
Gender	-0.245	-2.596*	-0.199	-2.046*	0.032	0.296	0.038	0.351
Education	-0.111	-1.220	-0.078	-0.847	-0.034	-0.329	-0.021	-0.208
Occupation	0.101	0.986	0.071	0.666	0.095	0.910	0.037	0.345
Age at marriage	-0.169	-1.433	-0.107	-0.843	-0.176	-1.481	-0.156	-1.184
Duration of commutation	0.245	2.373*	0.223	2.131*	-	-	-	-
Frequency of reunion	-0.032	-0.333	0.075	0.717	-	-	-	-
Mode of commutation	-0.211	-2.314*	-0.204	-2.168*	-	-	-	-
Familial factors								
Number of children			-0.026	-0.229			-0.120	-1.027
Age of children			-0.093	-0.609			0.008	0.047
Gender of children			-0.018	-0.176			0.274	2.559*
Type of family			0.004	0.032			0.107	0.948
Monthly Income			-0.278	-2.562*			-0.031	-0.291
F-Value	4.17**		3.17**		2.14*		3.32*	
R Value	0.518		0.570		0.280		0.301	
R ² Value	0.268		0.324		0.380		0.323	

**Significant at 0.01 level *Significant at 0.05 level

Table 6. denotes the predictor variables of stress among commuter and non-commuter couples. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that the predictors explained 28.7 per cent of the variance in stress among commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.287$) and 13.6 per cent among non-commuter couples ($R^2 = 0.136$). In the final model, monthly income was a significant predictor of stress among commuter couples, while no significant predictor was observed among non-commuter couples.

Predictors	Commuter couples				Non-commuter couples			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value
Personal factors								
Age	0.164	1.379	0.017	0.095	0.278	2.460*	0.255	1.294
Gender	0.159	1.613	0.099	0.990	-0.097	-0.903	-0.094	-0.859
Education	0.129	1.354	0.092	0.969	0.180	1.778*	0.168	1.624
Occupation	-0.007	-0.069	0.027	0.244	-0.082	-0.805	-0.118	-1.108
Age at marriage	0.212	1.724	0.135	1.038	-0.144	-1.237	-0.119	-0.897
Duration of commutation	-0.177	-1.641	-0.150	-1.399	-	-	-	-
Frequency of reunion	0.109	1.088*	-0.028	-0.257	-	-	-	-
Mode of commutation	0.037	0.385	0.039	0.400	-	-	-	-
Familial factors								
Number of children			0.022	0.193			-0.157	-1.342
Age of children			0.138	0.882			0.100	0.571
Gender of children			0.065	0.618			0.102	0.948
Type of family			-0.057	-0.443			0.075	0.663
Monthly Income			0.344	3.091*			-0.012	-0.110
F-Value	2.88**		2.66**		2.63*		1.48*	

(continued on next page)

Predictors	Commuter couples				Non-commuter couples			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value	Beta	t- value	Beta	t-value
R Value	0.450		0.536		0.314		0.369	
R ² Value	0.202		0.287		0.299		0.136	

**Significant at 0.01 level *Significant at 0.05 level

Discussion

The present study revealed that commuter couples experienced poorer mental health than non-commuter couples, with comparatively higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress. This may be attributed to prolonged physical separation, reduced opportunities for emotional companionship, difficulties in sharing family responsibilities and the additional demands associated with maintaining family life across locations. The finding is supported by Puranachaikere *et al.* (2021) [2], who reported better overall mental health among individuals in proximal relationships compared with those in long-distance relationships in an East Asian sample. Similarly, Yucel *et al.* (2023) [4] found that individuals in living-apart-together relationships had poorer mental health than married individuals, highlighting the relevance of relationship arrangement to psychological well-being. In the present study, several personal and familial factors were also significantly associated with mental-health dimensions among commuter couples, suggesting that the psychological well-being of commuters may be shaped by both the demands of separation and their individual and family circumstances. Overall, the findings highlight the need for adequate emotional support, regular family interaction and effective management of work and family demands among commuter couples.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that commuter couples experienced comparatively poorer mental health than non-commuter couples, with higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress. The findings suggest that prolonged commuting and physical separation may contribute to psychological distress by limiting emotional companionship, increasing work–family demands and creating difficulties in managing family responsibilities. Significant associations were observed between

mental health and selected personal and familial factors, particularly among commuter couples. Regression analysis further indicated that commuting-related factors, socioeconomic characteristics and family-related variables contributed to variations in depression, anxiety and stress. The findings highlight the need for greater emotional support, effective communication, regular family interaction and appropriate management of work–family demands to promote the mental well-being of commuter couples.

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How to cite this article: L M, Patil PB. Mental health of commuter and non-commuter married couples. *International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development*. 2026;9(9):1036-1041. doi: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2026.v9.i9n.4312>