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The Effects of Stress on the Lives of Emerging Adult College Students: An Exploratory Analysis

Keywords

emerging adulthood, college, stress, mental health, physical health

The Effects of Stress on the Lives of Emerging Adult College Students: An Exploratory Analysis

Justin W. Peer, Stephen B. Hillman, and Emma Van Hoet

This study systematically analyzed the personal reports of 20 emerging adult college students with regard to how stress affects their lives. Qualitative analyses revealed that stress influenced students' lives in both positive and negative ways. Implications of these findings for physical and mental health are discussed. Recommendations for counseling practice are provided.

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Emerging adulthood has been characterized as being full of transitions and challenging demands (Lohman & Jarvis, 2000). For some young men and women, one such challenge is attending college, which has been linked to increased stress for emerging adults (Asberg, Bowers, Renk, & McKinney, 2008; Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012; Conley, Durlak, & Dickson, 2013; Deckro et al., 2002; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Krypel & King, 2010; Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009). Arnett (2000) argued that emerging adults' entrance into higher education includes both opportunities and risks. Opportunity lies in the possibility of finding stable employment once college training is completed; risk exists given the demands placed on emerging adults while in college. These demands, if not managed effectively, may contribute to stress for students.

Stress results from various aspects of the college experience. Bland et al. (2012) found that multiple stressors related to college attendance affected people simultaneously. Examples of the stressors identified by students included feeling pressured by their parents to do well in school, changes in living conditions, beginning their college education, making a career choice, transferring to a new university, having busy academic lifestyles, taking exams, procrastination, coping with a lack of sleep, text messaging, and assignments/papers. Similarly, Dill and Henley (1998) found school performance, parental pressure, and social/peer interactions to be primary sources of stress for emerging adults. Ramya and Parthasarathy (2009) reported that stress is prevalent among college students and stems from various issues related to time management, academic rigor, and financial concerns.

Stress tends to be present throughout students' college careers and, if not successfully managed, can negatively affect their health and well-being. Krypel and King (2010)

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found that stress was particularly high throughout an emerging adult's academic career. Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, and Miller (2009) cited statistics that revealed that 10% to 12% of college students are under extreme stress. The severity and duration of the stress experienced can also have a negative effect on students' health. Previous studies (Asberg et al., 2008; Bailey & Miller, 1998; Chang, 2001; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Edwards, Hershberger, Russell, & Markert, 2001; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007; Rawson, Bloomer, & Kendall, 1994; Soderstrom, Dolbier, Leiferman, & Steinhardt, 2000) have found significant relationships between stress and negative mental/physical health outcomes for college students.

It is important that counseling professionals understand the complexities associated with stress and how to address issues related to stress effectively when working with emerging adult college students. The current base of research offers sufficient evidence related to the kinds of stressors college students face. However, the findings related to the effects of stress are rather general and lack depth of exploration. No known studies have been conducted that have systematically analyzed the personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences of college students related to how stress influences their lives.

Having richer detail that extends beyond general classifications of student stress will inform practice through providing counselors with information that will allow for more thorough clinical assessments and accurate implementation of counseling theory and technique. This knowledge would likely influence the provision of counseling services and lead to better short- and long-term outcomes for students receiving counseling services.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to systematically investigate the self-perceptions of emerging adult college students related to the effects that stress has on their lives. This study aimed to expand upon previous research in three specific ways: (a) by offering first-person conceptualizations of how stress affects the lives of emerging adult college students, (b) by exploring self-perceptions of students' ability to manage stress, and (c) by linking the study's findings with potential avenues for assessment and intervention by counseling and other mental health professionals.

Two specific research questions were of interest for this study: (a) How does stress influence the lives of emerging adult college students? and (b) Do emerging adult college students feel that they are able to manage their stress effectively? Given the exploratory nature of this study, we did not generate hypotheses concerning student responses. We analyzed the personal experiences provided by students for their complexity and detail and then created categories derived from the data we obtained.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty individuals attending a public university in the Midwest took part in this study. Of the sample, 14 were women and six were men. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years ($M = 20$). The sample was ethnically diverse: nine participants were Caucasian, five were Arab American, four were Afri-

can American, one was Asian American, and one was biracial. The sample consisted predominantly of sophomores at the university ($n = 9$), followed by juniors ($n = 5$), seniors ($n = 3$), and freshmen ($n = 3$). Fourteen participants reported that they worked part time, whereas only one worked full time. Five were unemployed.

Procedure

Upon receiving approval from the university’s internal review board, we recruited students through the university’s research participation system. Prior to their participation and the provision of a study packet, students were provided with information regarding this study.

Each participant was given written directions, a demographic survey form, and the research questions to complete. Students provided answers through an open-response, narrative format and were guided by the following questions—Question 1: In your life currently, what are the situations and/or issues that cause you the most stress? Question 2: Are the coping strategies you use generally effective in managing the stress in your life? Why or why not? and Question 3: When you do experience stress, what impact does it have on you? Students were strongly encouraged to answer openly and honestly and to use enough detail to thoroughly express their thoughts and feelings. Questions were structured in a way to allow for an open, detailed expression of participants’ self-perceptions of stress in their lives. Questions 2 and 3 were of direct interest to this study. Question 1 was used as a validity measure to ensure that students in the study were experiencing stress in the same manner or a similar manner as those in previous studies. The students gave their completed packets directly to a member of the research team.

Data Analysis

Transcript review was guided by the general inductive approach and coding technique suggested by Creswell (2002). This method involves five specific steps to data analysis: (a) the initial read through of data, (b) identifying segments of information, (c) identifying categories from the segments previously identified, (d) reducing overlap and redundancy among categories, and (e) creating a model of the most relevant categories. We began analyzing transcripts immediately after they were received. Categories began to emerge from the data and were adjusted and streamlined as more data were gathered. These refined categories were then applied to later transcripts as they were reviewed. Once all transcripts were reviewed, we developed a general model. To ensure proper rigor of the analysis, we brought in one outside researcher for a peer debriefing. Additionally, multiple investigators reviewed and categorized the transcripts we obtained. We used qualitative analysis because this method allowed for students’ personal thoughts, feelings, and perceptions to be obtained. These data are valuable in identifying trends within findings as well as important areas of exploration and intervention for counseling professionals.

RESULTS

We identified categories within the context of two primary focus areas: effectiveness of stress management (Question 2) and the effects of stress on students' lives (Question 3). Results from the validity question posed about the stressors experienced (Question 1) are also included.

Sources of Stress

Four categories were identified for this area: school, finances, family relationships, and personal relationships. Participants described school as causing stress in multiple ways. Grades and career concerns caused significant stress. Other aspects of the academic experience noted as stressful included achieving a certain grade point average, taking exams, and working to achieve deadlines. Several students stated that debt and their inability to pay bills triggered significant stress. Parental expectations for exceptional grades and conflict with parents regarding career direction were also reported to trigger stress for students. Finally, effectively maintaining romantic emotional closeness in relationships and feeling supported by their partners were reported as stressful for participants in the study.

Effectiveness of Stress Management Efforts

Sixty percent ($n = 12$) of participants believed that their ability to manage stress was either effective or mostly effective. However, 40% of respondents ($n = 8$) reported that their ability to cope was not effective, or only partially effective, in managing the stress in their lives. Students elaborated on why they felt their stress management efforts were either effective or not effective.

For students who managed stress effectively, a common theme reported was their ability to think proactively and identify and eliminate stressors before they become an issue. Many participants reported that maintaining contact with people within their social support network allowed for active communication about potential stressors, which they felt lessened the intensity of the stress they experienced. Also, many students wrote about healthy self-care behaviors (eating appropriately, exercising, mindfulness activities) to prevent stress from occurring.

Conversely, for individuals who reported that their stress management efforts were not effective, a common theme was how stress was unexpected and they were unprepared to manage it effectively. One student stated that stress "creeps up" on her while another reported that stress occurs "in waves," leaving both of them vulnerable to its effects. Worry was also a common theme. Multiple students reported that their constant worrying predisposes them to stress and, once they experience it, they are unable to manage it effectively.

Effects of Stress

Participants were asked to list the effects that stress has on their well-being. Through the analysis, three categories were identified, which covered both the positive and negative effects of stress: (a) positive mental health effects, (b) negative mental health effects, and (c) negative physical health effects.

Positive mental health effects. As previously stated, multiple students reported that they managed stress effectively. Among this group, multiple participants identified stress as a motivational factor in their lives. One student reported that stress enhanced his ability to perform and that he was not negatively affected by stress. There was a small group of participants who felt “driven to excel” when under stress. One student stated, “One thing about stress for me is it really drives me to get the task handled and on to the next problem.” Another participants said, “I am a firm believer in the idea that struggles and stress build character, and with individual success coming nearer, I am beginning to appreciate the rough times I have overcome.” Participants in this group were all able to identify the positive aspects of stress and use these to their advantage.

Negative mental health effects. Other individuals reported that their mental health was negatively affected by stress. Collectively, the following descriptors were used by this group to describe the effects of stress on their mental health: irritability/anger management difficulties, depressed mood, anxiousness/nervousness, hopelessness, concentration difficulties, and social isolation. One participant in this group noted,

When I experience stress, I often feel that a huge weight has been added to my brain and my mood and focus decreases . . . and I often go on a rant and even over think the situation, creating even more discomfort for myself.

Similarly, another student said, “When I’m stressed, my anxiety goes up; I tend to not speak or want to be around anyone.” Another student said that stress made “[me] think way too much and it often makes me feel as if my mind is running away from me. . . . Thinking too much makes me feel angry, depressed, or anxious.” For one individual, stress was significant enough that it triggered an anxiety reaction, as she said she needed to “get outside and get some fresh air.” Another stated, “I often let it [stress] build up until I cannot handle it anymore and it tends to make me an unhappy person. I get irritable.” The words “depressed” and “hopeless” were used to express one participant’s feelings. Finally, an individual stated that “stress has a negative impact on several aspects of my life.”

Negative physical health effects. Many of the students noted that they had negative physical symptoms stemming from the stress that they experience. The physical descriptors reported included increased heart rate, tremors, appetite changes, gastrointestinal complaints, and sleeping problems. One student reported experiencing a “loss of sleep and loss of appetite” when under stress. This student elaborated by saying, “I just can’t get to sleep no matter what and the exhaustion and sleeplessness makes it worse for me the day after. Also, I lose complete interest in eating and feel as though I’ll be sick if I do.” These feelings were echoed in the words of another student, who wrote that “Often when stressed, I will lose sleep.” Another student stated the opposite: “Stress often makes me hungry, which pushes me to heavy- and large-proportioned meals, only to regret how much I ate later.” Stomach cramping and pain was a recurrent theme. Another student stated that when under stress her heart rate increases and her legs start trembling.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the current literature through its systematic exploration of emerging adult college students' self-perceptions related to the stress they experience and the effects it has on their lives. The findings support previous research while also offering new insight into the lives of college students, which is likely to be of benefit to counseling professionals.

Consistent with previous studies (Bland et al., 2012; Brougham et al., 2009; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Krypel & King, 2010; Ramya & Parthasarathy, 2009), students reported experiencing multiple stressors associated with going to college. Issues related to academics, financial obligations, and both family and personal relationships were reported as sources of stress. This supports Arnett's (2012) conceptualization of emerging adulthood as an "age of instability" and also speaks to the complex, compounded nature of stress in students' lives. These stressors do not exist in isolation from one another, thus forcing individuals to manage multiple demands simultaneously. Given the instability of emerging adulthood, students may lack the material, physical, and mental resources to conquer the demands placed upon them on a daily basis. This may create an imbalance between the demands and personal resources available to meet these demands, resulting in the multiple stresses reported by those in the study. This finding was important as it was consistent with previous research. Thus, it offered validity for the current findings given that students experienced stress in the same manner as those from previous studies.

The key contributions of the present study lie in college students' personal reports of (a) the effectiveness of their stress management efforts and (b) the effect that stress has on their lives. Within the sample, 60% of students indicated that their coping efforts were effective in reducing and/or eliminating the stress they experience. This is positive and hopeful given the ongoing demands revolving around school, finances, and family/personal relationships, among other things that students contend with regularly. However, 40% of students identified their coping efforts as either ineffective or only partially effective in managing stress. Of interest is how students in this group described stress as unpredictable and unmanageable. The reports of students in this study highlight the recent American Psychological Association's (2013) Stress in America survey, which found that 49% of respondents ages 18 to 33 did not think they were doing enough to manage stress or were unsure of their ability to manage stress effectively.

Stress affected the lives of participants in multiple ways. For some, stress helped them focus, motivated them to do well academically, and helped them "build character." This seems to be reflective of students' ability to see the positive contributions of stress in their lives. However, a large proportion of participants reported various negative effects of stress on their lives. Students in this group reported feelings of anxiety, mood disruption, and some somatic issues resulting from the stress they experience. Stress seems to predict concurrent disruptions in students' lives (Asberg et al., 2008; Bailey & Miller, 1998; Chang, 2001; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Edwards et al., 2001; Lumley &

Provenzano, 2003; Pritchard et al., 2007; Rawson et al., 1994; Soderstrom et al., 2000) and may also predict more severe disruptions in the future. The available research abounds with findings linking chronic stress to various health conditions (for a comprehensive review, see Lyon, 2012). This study advances the literature by providing depth and texture to previous findings through the systematic analysis of personal accounts provided by students. Doing so allows for a deeper understanding of how stress affects the lives of this group.

Implications for Counseling Practice

Given the importance of emerging adulthood as a period of life in which decisions are made about the future, the result of not being able to manage stress effectively could be very costly for emerging adult college students’ mental and physical health. Opportunities related to academic achievement and career development may be impaired or lost if stress is left unaddressed. Emerging adult college students need both a sound mind and body to navigate through this time of opportunity and risk. Also, students may experience health problems if stress becomes chronic in nature. Thus, it is of great importance that resources be provided to students that will aid in effective stress management.

It is also critical for counseling professionals to fully acknowledge stress as an important issue among college students. Exploring the common stressors among emerging adult college students should be a routine aspect of clinical assessment. Doing so may provide valuable clinical insight into students’ presenting concerns. Furthermore, counselors should directly ask questions related to how students manage their stress. Counselors should normalize stress by describing it as a typical aspect of college life. Doing so in a welcoming, nonjudgmental manner may aid students in experiencing a sense of relief while also developing comfort in disclosing personal information within the therapeutic relationship. Given the prevalence of stress and the negative effects experienced by some college students, we suggest that stress be explored regardless of the presenting issue.

These findings should also inform counseling intervention strategies. Students within this study reported that they cognitively approach stress in different ways. Their reports suggest that their thoughts about stress influence their reaction to it. Students’ “stress cognitions” seemed to influence their ability to manage stress effectively. We recommend that counselors utilize cognitive techniques that explore student thoughts and identify those that are maladaptive in nature. Furthermore, we recommend that counselors teach students adaptive ways to self-monitor their stress cognitions and replace maladaptive thoughts with more adaptive ways of thinking. Beck (2011) offers a review of the fundamentals of cognitive therapy as well as techniques for the effective implementation of cognitive therapy.

Mindfulness-based techniques are another avenue through which counseling professionals can actively address stress cognitions among college students. Mindfulness is the ability to cultivate awareness in the present moment without judging experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003), and mindfulness-based stress reduction has been found to be very effective for improving psychological well-being

(Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Mindfulness-based meditation techniques have been successfully applied to the college population (Byrne, Bond, & London, 2013; Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014). Increasing mindfulness among college students has been found to decrease stress reactivity and improve students' overall sense of well-being (Greeson et al., 2014).

Additionally, students in our study stated that exercise and social connect- edness positively influenced their ability to manage stress. Behavioral-based counseling techniques that help individuals build social support and encourage productive activity and exercise may greatly benefit those experiencing stress. Psychoeducation regarding stress and its effects on mental and physical health also would likely increase students' awareness and may increase their motivation to use positive health behaviors to avert stress.

Previous studies (Bland et al., 2012; Brougham et al., 2009; Pritchard et al., 2007) offer other suggestions for counseling practice based on their findings related to stress among college student samples. Conley, Durlak, and Dickson (2013) also offer a comprehensive review of effective mental health prevention and promotion programs for use with college students.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative data-gathering methods offer in-depth, personalized narratives that allow for the exploration of thoughts and feelings not attainable through quantitative means. However, in doing so, certain limitations are created. The small number of participants and convenience sampling method we used to gather data limited the ability to generalize the findings to a broader, more representative group of people. Given self-reporting, the potential for participants responding in a socially desirable manner also cannot be ruled out.

Areas for Future Research

This study provides a solid foundation of knowledge from which new questions emerge and subsequent lines of research may be created. Future research should consider exploring the differences between students who manage stress well and those who do not to determine what specific factors may facilitate resilience and prevent the negative effects of stress. New research should also compare the intensity of stress for those who experience negative life influences versus those who do not. Identification of the point at which stress becomes counterproductive may provide a focal point for both student psychoeducational efforts and clinical practice.

CONCLUSION

Attending college can be a very exciting and stressful time. It is important that students possess both mental and physical wellness as they attend school and make decisions that will affect their future. As was found in this study, some students struggle with stress management and feel the negative effects of stress, whereas others seem to thrive under stressful situations. For those who struggle

with stress, having information about stress and stress management techniques may buffer the effects of stress and help them successfully emerge into adulthood. Counselors who work with college students can play an important role in providing such information, and, just as important, helping them to contend with the various stressors they face.

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