

The Impact of Depression and Anxiety on College Transition Stress

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Abstract

This study investigated whether students who had a previous diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety would have higher levels of stress related to the college transition than students who did not have such diagnoses. Fifty-seven participants took an online survey on the level of stress in various college life domains. The results revealed that there were significantly higher stress levels in dorm stress and social life stress among students with a diagnosis than among those with no diagnosis. There was no significant difference between students with a diagnosis and those without a diagnosis in overall stress, financial stress and academic stress. Implications, suggestions, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Depression, anxiety, stress levels, college transition, first semester experience.

The Impact of Depression and Anxiety on College Transition Stress

Depression and Anxiety on the College Transition:

The transition to college can be very stressful due to the changes that are occurring at that time. Kitzrow (2003) found that students can experience emotional and psychological distress while adapting to college. Students can feel stress because of the different expectations that come with transitioning to college such as new social and academic environments and increased responsibility (Larose, Bernier, & Tarabulsy, 2005). Having a pre-existing mental health condition such as depression and anxiety can make the transition to college more stressful (Hadley, 2007). For example, research has shown that depression and anxiety impact academic performance among college students (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; National College Health Assessment

[NCHA], 2012). Additionally, a link has been found between academic performance and stress levels (Stewart, Lam, Betson, Wong & Wong, 1999). These studies suggest an interconnection exists between these areas which may exacerbate academic stress.

The impact of depression and anxiety on stress in the transition to college has not been investigated adequately. Therefore, this study investigated whether a previous diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety could lead to a more stressful adjustment to college.

Depression and Anxiety in College

Depression is one of the most common mental health disorders in the United States. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH; n.d.), 6.7 percent of U.S. adults experience a major depressive disorder in a given year. The NIMH states that symptoms of depression are, but not limited to, continuing feelings of sadness or anxiousness, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of guilt, irritability, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities and hobbies, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, insomnia, overeating or loss of appetite, suicidal thoughts or attempts, aches, and pains. More specifically, the National College Health Assessment, conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA) for the fall of 2012 showed that of the 28,237 college student respondents, 10.6 percent reported being diagnosed or treated for depression by a professional.

Anxiety is another common mental health disorder in the United States. Anxiety is also known to accompany depression (NIMH, n.d.). According to the NIMH, anxiety disorders affect nearly 40 million adults in the United States. The NIMH says that while there are several different types of anxiety disorders, all the symptoms revolve around irrational and unnecessary fear(s). The NCHA for the fall of 2012 reported that 12.1 percent of the college student respondents stated being diagnosed or treated for anxiety by a professional and seven percent reported being diagnosed or treated for both anxiety and depression by a professional.

Depression/Anxiety on College Transition Stress

Research shows that students experience emotional and psychological distress in adjusting to college (Kitzrow, 2003).

This can happen because of the newer and greater expectations while attempting to navigate new social and academic settings (Larose et al., 2005). According to Dusselier and colleagues (2005), college transition-related stress could include academics, relationships, finances, moving, death of a family member, and sex, with many of these challenges specially pertaining to college life.

The transition to college can be especially difficult for those who have underlying mental health disorders (Hadley, 2007). The NCHA (2012) found that 11.3 percent of college student respondents reported that depression affected their academic performance and 19.3 percent reported that anxiety affected their academic performance, which could lead to additional stress in those students.

The preexisting condition of depression and anxiety could increase the reaction to stressors in college thereby making the transition to college more difficult. A study done by Andrews and Wilding (2004) looked at student anxiety and depression and if it increased after entering college and how anxiety and depression can impact exam performance in college students. They found that by mid-course, 9 percent of students that had been originally symptom free now were depressed and 20 percent were anxious. In addition, they found that depression and financial issues did predict a drop in exam performance (Andrews & Wilding, 2004).

Another aspect in which preexisting depression and/or anxiety can make the college transition more difficult is the risk of rejection or finding a place to belong in the college setting. Having a group to belong to is essential for support. It is also important in establishing one's identity and having the opportunity to socialize when entering college (Paul & Brier, 2001). Further, it is important for students to adjust personally, emotionally, and academically to continue in their college career (Kitzrow, 2003). Students with psychological disorders may face challenges when it comes to adjusting to college and finding a group to belong to.

Rationale of the Study

Understanding how depression and anxiety can increase stress in the first semester of college is important to college faculty, counselors, and administrators so they can work with incoming students to make the transition as smooth as possible. Despite its significance, it appears that not much scholarly

research has been made on this topic. Therefore, the current study investigated whether depression and anxiety could increase stress in various domains during the college transition. Specifically, the study hypothesis was that those previously diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety would have higher stress levels in the domains of dorm life, social life, academics, and finances during the first semester of college than those who have no such previous diagnosis.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted at a predominantly white Midwestern university in the United States with an enrollment of approximately 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Participants were contacted through professors and by requesting a random sample of 2,000 students from the university research office. The study had 57 participants, with 27 females, 11 males, and 19 participants choosing not to respond (Table 1). The age range of participants was 18 to 39 ($M = 20.08$, $SD = 3.93$). The sample had 6 (10.5%) freshmen, 27 (47.4%) sophomores, and 20 (35.1%) juniors. Seniors were not recruited and 4 (7%) participants chose to not respond. Out of all participants, 3 were diagnosed with depression only, 5 with anxiety only, 3 with both depression and anxiety, 42 reported having no diagnosis, and 4 did not report whether they had either diagnosis (Table 1). It was not checked to see if the participant had been diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety before entering college. After completing the survey, participants earned research credits or were able to enter a drawing to win a \$10 gift card.

Materials

The survey consisted of 47 questions. The questions included demographic information, questions about current or previous clinical diagnoses of depression and/or anxiety, and questions to assess stress level in areas that were deemed important to the first semester of college (i.e., academics, finances, social life, and dorm life). The questions on the survey used Likert-type scale questions or free response format questions (Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants viewed the informed consent form prior to completing an anonymous online survey. Filling out the survey implied the participant's consent. The order of questions asked were demographic information, clinical diagnoses of depression and/or anxiety, and stress level in academics, finances, social life and dorm life. The data collected were then analyzed using SPSS software 20.0.

Results

Average stress scores were calculated so scores could be compared across domains. An overall average stress score was calculated as well as an average score for each of the domains (dorm life, social life, finances, and academics).

The study hypothesis, students with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety would have higher stress levels than those without a diagnosis, was partially supported (Table 2). Overall stress level was not different between the two groups, $t(48) = 1.64$, $p = .107$, Cohen's $d = .67$. However, there was a significant difference in dorm life stress between the two groups, $t(48) = 3.78$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.28$. Students with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .54$) had higher levels of dorm-related stress than students without a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety ($M = 1.91$, $SD = .46$; Table 2).

There also was a significant difference in social life stress between the two groups, $t(48) = 2.62$, $p = .012$, Cohen's $d = .85$. Students who had a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .67$) had higher levels of social life stress than students who did not have a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .50$).

There were no significant differences between the two groups in the other domains of finances, $t(48) = -.21$, $p = .831$, Cohen's $d = -.08$, and academics $t(48) = .00$, $p = 1.000$, Cohen's $d = 0$.

Discussion

A series of independent samples t-tests were used to compare participants' average stress scores between the group with depression and/or anxiety diagnoses and the group with no diagnosis. In the domains of finances and academics, the means of the two groups were very similar. This might indicate that finances and academics are stressful to all college students and does not cause additional stress for those with a diagnosis

of depression and/or anxiety. Ross, Niebling and Heckert (1999) found that 71% of the college students they surveyed reported finances as being a source of stress for the average college student. Perhaps it is just an area that is stressful to most college students.

The current study did find significantly higher stress levels among participants with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety in the domains of dorm life and social life than those participants without a diagnosis. One possible explanation is that aspects of dorm and social life create a more stressful environment for those with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety. Another possible explanation is that for students without a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety, dorm life and social life become a source of support. Hence, they would not feel higher stress levels in these domains. Consistent with this speculation, Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) found that social support was very important in assisting students with the transition to college. The group with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety did have higher stress levels about dorm and social life which might indicate that these parts of college life are a source of stress. Perhaps, they may struggle with finding a group of friends or fitting in with the other students. The overall stress level for those with a previous diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety was not significantly higher than those without a previous diagnosis. However, despite being nonsignificant, the effect size for overall stress was medium (Cohen's $D = 0.67$, Cohen, 1985).

There are several limitations in this study. One limitation is the small sample size. There were only 57 participants that took the survey, with 4 choosing to not respond who were excluded from the results. Within the sample size, there was also a small sample size of participants that reported being previously diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. Out of the 53 participants who responded to the survey, only 11 reported being diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety and 42 did not report a diagnosis. Further research could include recruiting a larger sample size to confirm the current result.

Additionally, a potential reason for the small sample size is that the study was done over the summer term and many students are not on campus during the summer. Also, it was not specified in the survey if the participant was or was not currently

enrolled in summer courses. Conducting the same study during the fall or spring semester could potentially get a larger sample group.

Another limitation is that when comparing both groups, depression and anxiety were put into the same group to allow for better comparison due to small sample size. Future research could expand on this by looking at depression and anxiety separately to see if there would still be a significant difference between groups. Further research could also include students that have not been clinically diagnosed with depression or anxiety, but do meet the criteria for being clinically depressed or suffer from anxiety.

A final limitation is that seniors were excluded from the sample. This was due to the potentially larger recall bias in seniors because of the length of time that has passed since a senior would have gone through the college transition. However, such bias could exist at all academic levels because of the time passed from when transitioning to college to the time the survey was taken. One way to further research this would be to survey only freshmen and conduct the study shortly after the beginning of the semester to limit the chance of recall bias.

Despite these limitations, the results of the current study do indicate that students with a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety do retrospectively report greater levels of stress related to dorm life and social life than students without a diagnosis. These findings may be useful to college counselors and other faculty to design better programs about coping strategies and to offer more support for students with depression and/or anxiety that are adapting to dorm life and social life on campus. This may include designing and providing a peer mentor program between freshmen and upperclassmen or finding ways to help those students with mental health issues fit into the college scene, to overcome interpersonal stress that arises when meeting new people or roommates, or adjusting to the dorm life.

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Table 1

Survey Demographics for Participants.

Demographic Variable			Frequency (Percentage)
Age	<i>M</i> = 17.0	<i>SD</i> = 2.46	Range = 18-39
Gender	Male		11 (19.3%)
	Female		27 (47.4%)
	Missing		19 (33.3%)
Ethnicity	White/European American		35 (61.4%)
	Latino/a		1 (1.8%)
	Asian/Asian American		2 (3.5%)
	Missing		19 (33.3%)
Year in School	Freshmen		6 (10.5%)
	Sophomore		27 (47.4%)
	Junior		20 (35.1%)
	Missing		4 (7%)
Diagnosed w/ Depression & Anxiety			3 (5.3%)
Diagnosed w/ Only Depression			3 (5.3%)
Diagnosed w/ Only Anxiety			5 (8.8%)
No Diagnosis			42 (73.7%)
Missing			4 (7%)

Note. *n* = 57

Table 2

Level of Reported Stress within Different Domains for Student with a Diagnosis of Depression and/or Anxiety and Students without a Diagnosis of Depression and/or Anxiety.

Stress Domain	Diagnosis (<i>n</i> = 10)		No Diagnosis (<i>n</i> = 40)		<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Overall	2.55	0.29	2.32	0.41	0.107	0.67
Dorm life	2.55 ^a	0.54	1.91 ^b	0.46	0.001*	1.28
Social life	2.54 ^a	0.67	2.04 ^b	0.50	0.012*	0.85
Finances	2.60	0.71	2.66	0.73	0.831	-0.08
Academics	2.51	0.39	2.51	0.52	1.000	0.00

Note. a > b, **p* < .05.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Please rate the following statements based on your level of stress regarding your first semester at UW-Stout.

Please rate the following statements based on your level of stress regarding dorm life.

	No Stress (1)	Mild Stress (2)	Moderate Stress (3)	Severe Stress (4)
Having a random roommate.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of privacy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having to use a communal bathroom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having to eat campus food.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please rate the following statements based on your level of stress regarding social life.

	No Stress (1)	Mild Stress (2)	Moderate Stress (3)	Severe Stress (4)
Meeting new people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Deciding or joining a club or sport.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not having old friends around.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Partying/going out.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Safe sexual behavior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Appendix A continued

Please rate the following statements based on your level of stress regarding finances.

	No Stress (1)	Mild Stress (2)	Moderate Stress (3)	Severe Stress (4)
Paying for school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Paying for basic living expenses.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being able to afford entertainment/social activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding a job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Being able to balance work and school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please rate the following statements based on your level of stress regarding academics.

	No Stress (1)	Mild Stress (2)	Moderate Stress (3)	Severe Stress (4)
The first day of class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Having a (good or bad) professor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
New classes.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Homework load.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Testing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Choosing a major.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Maintaining a good GPA.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>