College Stress and Strategies to Reduce it

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ABSTRACT

The college years can be a stressful time, contributing to the manifestation of physical and emotional concerns among students. While stress cannot be completely avoided, using the proper stress management techniques will help reduce it. Through meta-analysis, this paper summarizes the main types of stress college students experience, as well as what can be done both individually and as a society to reduce this stress. By learning to manage stress, students will be able to persevere through college and prepare for a healthy future.

Keywords: stress, management, wellbeing, decrease, reduce

INTRODUCTION

One’s college years are often said to be the best years of an individual's life, but is that truly the case? Stress, a term coined by Hans Selye 50 years ago, seems to be at the forefront of many students’ minds (Rosch, 2013). Selye was the first to study the feelings of stress; some may consider him the father of stress. Various stressors are constantly affecting students’ daily lives, and being stress-free is unheard of. Stress is inevitable. Fortunately, by learning how to cope with stress properly, individuals can reduce the effects.

Source of Stress

“Stress” is an all-encompassing word used to describe anything that might be affecting one’s wellbeing or mental health. Stress is prevalent in our society. According to Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan, “The sources of social stress can be traced to the very boundaries of societies, their structures and cultures” (1981, p. 338). In the United States, the constant drive to work harder, be better, and achieve more is likely part of the reason individuals are feeling stressed. While socioenvironmental conditions differ in the capacity to evoke stress, some conditions threaten virtually everyone, regardless of the society they live in.

On an individual basis, stress stems from both the occurrence of discrete events and the presence of relatively continuous problems. While individuals are almost always trying to protect and improve themselves, they often experience a lack of success as they fail to meet a specific goal in their
life. Mastery, the feeling of being in control of forces that affect one's life, and self-esteem are linked to stress. When mastery and self-esteem decrease, stress increases (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). Rather than damaged self-concepts being indicative of stress, they actually show to be sources of it.

The main stressor that research emphasizes is a life-changing event. These changes may leave individuals feeling defeated due to the amount of worry, strain, or tension placed on them. Of course, leaving home and going off to college is a life-changing event. Other examples include divorce or new marriage, a close friend or relative passing away, or a lay-off from work. Even in college, students may be faced with these particular stressors, along with a variety of others. It has been concluded that “life events may create new strains or intensify preexisting strains, and it is these new or intensified strains, in turn, that eventuate in stress” (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981, p. 339). Though life-changing events cause significant impact, any change can be stress provoking. It is not surprising that “undesirable events are most psychologically distressing, and other dimensions such as whether events can be controlled or predicted are of secondary importance” (Ross & Mirowsky, 1979, Thoits, 1983). Stress surfaces because the organism is fundamentally intolerant of change. During the college years, many changes take place. The initial transition from high school to college can be especially anxiety provoking, so can studying for big exams, meeting new people, and taking on new responsibilities.

It is known that college students suffer from stress, but what level of stress do students typically have? As Makrides, Veinot, and Richard (1998) discovered in their study on cardiovascular health among college students, nearly 60% of participants reported high or very high stress. Though the amount of stress that individuals consider “high” may differ, this reflects that a significant percentage of college students are impacted by feelings of stress. All this stress during the college years tends to arise from a few specific sources, as compared to general stress. According to Misra and McKean (2000), the sources of stress that students face can be categorized into five groups: academics, financial, time-related, health-related, and self-imposed (p. 41).

**Academics**

A student’s perception of the extensive knowledge base required and the perception of inadequate time to develop it leads to academic stress. Academic stress usually occurs at predictable times each semester, such as studying for exams because of the large amount of content to master in a small amount of time (Misra & McKean, 2000, p. 41).
Effects on Wellbeing

It is important that students understand how to manage their stress, as it has an effect on their overall wellbeing. In a study of 24,234 university students, results showed that although depression can occur, college is predominately an anxiety-provoking time (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010, p. 643). The psychological wellbeing of undergraduate students decreased over the course of their study; this shows the importance of using proper strategies to stay healthy. In addition to stress, other factors shown to affect wellbeing are finances, socioeconomic status, life goals, and social support. When a student’s wellbeing decreases, it is likely that his/her self-esteem will decrease as well. This can cause more stress and repeat the vicious cycle. By maintaining a healthy wellbeing, students are more likely to manage their stress, which will help them succeed. As Thoits (2006) states, “Individuals who are in good mental health presumably are better able to set goals, initiate and persevere in desired lines of action, and engage in problem-solving efforts intended to alter their stressful circumstances for the better” (p. 312). These tools will likely help them improve their college performance overall.

Gender Differences

Gender brings an interesting dynamic to college stress. It is difficult to make general conclusions about stress among college students because males and females tend to have different habits and patterns. Overall, females typically have higher stress levels than males. Li and Lindsey (2008) determined 52 health-promoting behaviors or ways of thinking and used them to determine the differences between male and female habits. Of 52 behaviors, 10 of the items have at least a 10% difference between males and females. These behaviors are:

1. Take part in recreational physical activity, such as swimming, dancing, and bicycling
   \[ F = 23.7\% \quad M = 37.8\% \]
2. Choose a diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol
   \[ F = 13.1\% \quad M = 25.2\% \]
3. Discuss my problems and concerns with people close to me
   \[ F = 34.1\% \quad M = 22.1\% \]
4. Maintain meaningful and fulfilling relationships with others
   \[ F = 58.7\% \quad M = 43.3\% \]
5. Find it easy to show concern, love, and warmth to others
   \[ F = 48.4\% \quad M = 32.5\% \]
6. Find ways to meet my needs for intimacy  
   F= 19.5%  M= 31.1%
7. Get support from a network of caring people  
   F= 44.0%  M= 23.0%
8. Take some time for relaxation each day  
   F= 38.0%  M= 57.0%
9. Use specific methods to control my stress  
   F= 8.0%  M= 19.7%
10. Balance time between work and play  
   F= 19.5%  M= 30.3%

These 10 behaviors alone reinforce the fact that females are drawn toward other people easier than males are. Of course, this statement is not representative of the entire female population, but it is more typical for females to put others first, leaving little time for themselves in their eyes. It may seem that the female tendency to open up to others and have close relationships would decrease their levels of stress, since they have others to support them. However, according to Li and Lindsey, women may actually need to spend more time for themselves rather than devoting so much time and energy toward others. As females grow and progress through life, it is common that they spend the majority of their time meeting the needs of their family and friends, helping in whatever ways they can. Developing personal relaxation habits at the college level will be especially beneficial if the female can carry them on throughout her lifetime.

Males also need to integrate these health-promoting behaviors into their lifestyle. Research shows that male students typically participate in more recreational activities than females, but they would benefit from stronger interpersonal relationships as well. Misra and McKean (2000) state, “lower reaction to stressors for male college students may result from their socialization, which teaches them that emotional expression is an admission of weakness and not masculine” (pp. 48-49). Because of this feeling of weakness, males often repress their emotions, which can add to their stress level. However, it is not to say that males are incapable of having strong connections with others.

Other major differences between male and female students were determined by Misra and McKean (2000).
Despite the gender differences, trait anxiety is said to be the strongest predictor of academic stressors among all students. Trait anxiety is described as a characteristic of personality that endures over time and is manifest across a variety of situations. Though different people experience varying levels of trait anxiety, females typically experience it more, which is likely due to their higher self-imposed stress.

A study was completed at Western Washington University to gain understanding of health promotion practices among college students. The relationship of stress and the practice of various health behaviors was also studied (Li & Lindsey, 2008). For both genders, establishing a lifestyle of routine health behaviors is important. Some examples of these behaviors are: get enough sleep, accept those things in my life which I cannot change, balance time between work and play, believe that my life has purpose, and spend time with close friends. While some are specific behaviors, others are certain ways of thinking. It is important to take the right actions to limit stress, but it also takes a positive mind. Although the study completed only examined the habits at one mid-size university and cannot be representative of the entire student population, it reported that male students engaged in physical activities, stress management, and spiritual growth activities more than females. This mirrors the fact that males tend to be less stressed; they usually take more time for themselves.
Managing Stress

Because various forms of stress impact students on a daily basis, individuals must learn how to manage them. As with most challenges, certain strategies work best for certain people. Stress can be understood in terms of a person’s unique characteristics, experiences, and history, so all individuals must be evaluated separately. Misra and McKean found that “academic stress was lower for those college students with higher perceived control of time, low anxiety, who used their leisure time to learn and increase their knowledge, used an organizational approach to tasks, and preferred a well-organized workplace” (p. 47). Although college students are guaranteed to experience some type of stress, they can aim to reduce its effects by deliberately investing their time in roles or activities that are personally satisfying. This helps individuals counteract the continuing distress that they experience when an important area of life is filled with strain. In addition, withdrawing as much as possible from the source of problematic stress will be helpful.

One particularly helpful factor in modifying the impact of one’s stress is social support. However, there is some inconsistency in exactly what this term means. Support generally comes when people’s engagement with one another extends to a level of involvement and concern, rather than when individuals simply touch at the surface of each other’s lives. Social supports nurture stress reduction when quality relationships are made and intimate communications, solidarity, and trust are formed (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). When experiencing stress, college students need assurance that others are willing to listen and talk. Although there is a long list of benefits, social support is actually decreasing (Chao, 2012, p. 6). According to Chao, “students with low social support were found more likely to engage in less healthy activities, such as sedentary behavior, alcohol use, and too much or too little sleep. These students are more vulnerable to stress than those who perceive high social support.

Another essential means of dealing with stress is coping. As Chao states, coping is effortful or purposeful thoughts and actions to manage or overcome stressful situations (Chao, 2012, p. 7). It is important to practice proper coping strategies in order to be effective. Some students do not want to reduce their stressors; in this case, it is vital that they increase their coping. Unfortunately, students often engage in dysfunctional coping, which typically results in one still feeling anxious because the stress has not been resolved. As Sideridis found, the five most frequent coping strategies among students to reduce stress are browsing the Internet, sleeping and resting, using instant messaging, complaining, and watching TV or movies (2008). These methods provide little or no effectiveness. Perceived stress and dysfunctional coping
are negatively related to psychological well-being. Research shows that even with high social supports, dysfunctional coping may deteriorate one's well-being.

A variety of other strategies are shown to help manage stress. Of course, some may work better for certain individuals than others.

- Physical activity
- Spiritual growth
- Positive thinking practices
- Problem solving
- Effective time management
- Engagement in leisure pursuit

Universities should also be implementing stress management techniques to help reduce stress overall. Seminars on time management could foster an improvement in academic success. Though certain colleges may already provide such opportunities, the events should be publicized and participation should be emphasized, or even required. Recreation centers could also participate in the stress-free movement by encouraging leisure activities for students. Having a planned, scheduled activity is generally easier for an individual to justify versus finding time for leisure on his or her own. VanKim and Nelson state that “college campus health services should integrate mental, physical, and social health components in order to encourage more holistic health among students” (2013, p. 14). This holistic health is significant, as it will provide balance to students’ lives, decreasing stress in the process, and preparing them for a healthy future.

**Limitations**

Since each individual is unique, the research completed does pose limitations. The studies discussed in this essay were taken at small universities; therefore, they are not representative of college students at large.

**CONCLUSION**

College is a new and significant milestone in one's life. Along with this change, new or different sources of stress may also surface. Although completely preventing stress is unrealistic, many steps can be taken to minimize the frequency and effects of it. By discovering the methods of stress reduction that are most successful on an individual basis, students will find the college years more manageable and hopefully more enjoyable as well. Learning how to persevere through stress as a college student will also be beneficial as an individual enters the workforce. Whether it is the end of the day as a student, or the end of the day as an employee, we all want to be able to say, “I feel good.”
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